

**THE BLUE OF
YOUR EYES**

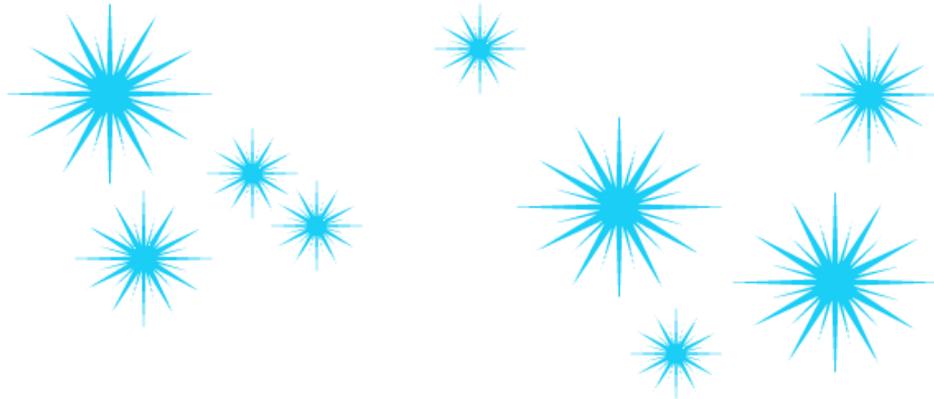
Jamila Mafra

mafraeditorial.com

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without prior permission of the copyright owner. Violation of the conditions may constitute a crime against intellectual property.

This is a work of fiction based on free artistic expression and without commitment to reality. Names, characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to real events, places, or people, whether alive or dead, would have been mere coincidence.

ANDRADAS SQUARE



Strolling through the squares of the city of Santos was like going back to the past, reliving the story in a unique and exciting way. That was why Ana Lucia Vasconcelos loved the place so much. The Andradas Square was her favorite; the Portuguese mosaic floor and the lighting of the thirty-four double poles were the perfect setting for that special night.

Sitting on the wooden bench, between the two small alleys open to facilitate the movement of the people, she waited anxiously for the arrival of Gabriel, a boy with whom she had been flirting for some time. It was a thing, one of those passions that might become love. The date was set by him in a hurry the day before.

The people moved almost without looking to the sides, mechanically, accustomed to the landscape around, some sitting on the benches, but for Ana Lucia all the beauty of her hometown never tired her.

Anxiously, she would not stop looking at her watch, she was sure Gabriel would ask her to date. Even though she was leaving for the United States of America, she was sure she could sustain a relationship at a distance. Ana Lucia just wanted a love.

Everything involving stars, planets, the universe enchanted her so much that at thirteen she bought her first telescope to observe the stars in the sky.

She became an orphan at the age of fifteen and became accustomed to her solitary life in the beautiful city of Santos. She lived in the house of her cousin

Alice, worked as a nanny, waitress and learned to speak English fluently. Some passions passed through her life, but not to stay.

The clock showed exactly 8pm when he finally appeared. Ana Lucia got up from the bench, he approached and she smiled as sincerely as never before.

“Gabriel, I'm glad you're here. You're late. It almost kills me with anxiety.”

“Sorry for the delay. Today I stayed late at work, the movement in the store was intense, bigger than usual.”

“It's all right. No problem.”

“I really need to talk to you, Ana Lucia. It's important. It can't pass from tonight.”

“So tell me, I'm here to hear you.”

“I really like you, you are a smart girl, loves to observe the stars, got a scholarship to study astronomy in the United States... You deserve to follow your destiny and be happy doing what you love so much.”

“Wait, I already know where you're going. I understand... by your tone of voice you're trying to tell me you will not stay with me because I'm leaving for the United States and you do not want a relationship at a distance. But think about it, it might work, even if you're so far away from each other. If we love each other, we can at least try.”

“Ana Lucia, I'm sorry, but it's nothing like that. I do not love you!”

“What?”

“Yeah, I do not love you.”

“Explain this better, because I never expected you to love me. We're still getting to know each other.” She said without understanding.

“I know you'll never forgive me, I'm sorry for what I'm going to tell you now, but I need to tell the truth. I already have a girlfriend. I am engaged!”

“What? What absurd is this that you are telling me? How come you already have a girlfriend and you're engaged?”

“I messed up. I know we went out together several times, we flirted, I find you a very interesting woman, you're wonderful, but unfortunately I can't have anything else with you, I'm going to marry another woman.” Gabriel nodded in the cruelest way.

Ana Lucia felt a quick dizziness; she could hardly believe the rude and dreadful words that had just come from the boy's mouth that she believed could be her great love.

“Gabriel, why did you do this to me? How could you be engaged to another woman if you stayed with me? We went out together several times, you gave me affection, and we dated! I fell in love with you! How can you have another woman? Explain it to me.”

“I know, I was a coward, I made a mistake. But I'm here while there's still time to tell you that you must go your way in peace. Go to the United States to fulfill your dream and be happy.”

“Yes, of course I will. I don't need you! You know what? I hate you, I hate you! And does your fiancée know that you date other women?”

“No, she doesn't!”

“You're no good! Why did you deceive me?”

“I could not resist. You're such a beautiful, intelligent, fascinating girl. But I love my fiancée; I want to stay with her.”

“Then stay with her and leave me alone!” She shouted. She was trembling with rage and she could not stop crying.

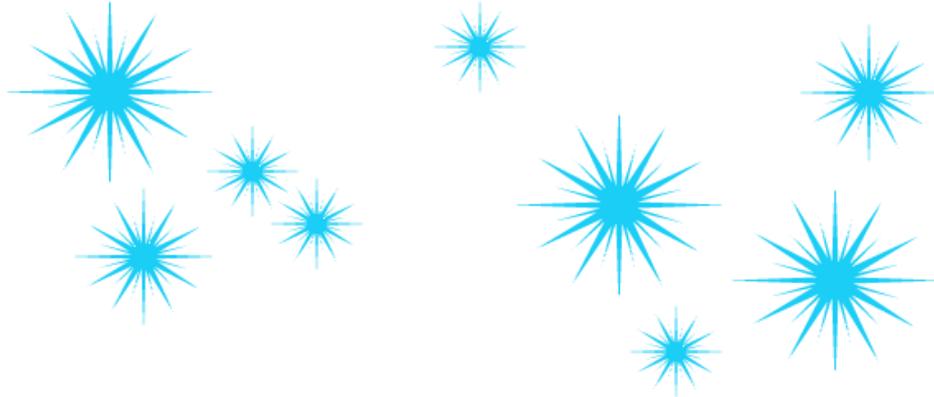
Ana Lucia left in a hurry. He ran after her.

“Wait, Ana Lucia! You're very nervous. I'll give you a ride home.” Gabriel took her arm.

“Let me go! Stay away from me! I do not want your pity. I'm going to my house alone. I despise you. You made me be your lover. I've never been so humiliated in my entire life. Get out of my way. I do not want to see you again. Get out of here!” She cried in bewilderment.

She ran out of there. She ran like never before. She went to Ponta da Praia do Gonzaga and went straight to the sand where, on her knees, wept even more, lamented her fate, and threw into the sea the bracelet Gabriel gave her as a gift in their second date.”

OGDEN



Ana Lucia left the bags ready for her departure that would happen the next day. She was full of expectations with her new life coming. She would leave for the United States of America, exactly for the city of Ogden. At last she would fulfill her greatest dream: to study astronomy at Weber State University!

She fought hard to earn that scholarship, spoke fluent English, and had always been an exemplary student at school.

On the day of embarkation, toward a new destination, her heart raced with anxiety. She got into the plane and was all shivering, as if she sensed something special was going to happen. She could not wait to get to Ogden.

Ogden-Hinckley Municipal Airport was busy that winter afternoon, more than usual. Ana Lucia took a taxi and went directly to the university housing. The surrounding mountains covered with snow made the landscape even more admirable.

“This is my new home. Now I'll be happy studying what I love so much.” she exclaimed as she entered the room she would share with another college student. Shelly Parker was her new roommate.

A week had passed since college began. Ana Lucia was delighted with everything she was learning and knowing. That new culture was slowly becoming part of her life.

On another weekend night, roommates dined at Applebee's, a popular, cozy restaurant in the Riverdale. As they retired, the Brazilian watched closely a newspaper fall on the floor before her, after a sober gentleman got up from the table and left the tabloid on the cold floor.

Ana Lucia crouched down, picked up the paper and read it curiously. The open page was just the ads and jobs section. With attentive eyes, she went through the statements, thinking that perhaps she could find a job that fit his profile.

"Ana Lucia, I've never seen anyone as interested in a local newspaper as you, unlike that gentleman who, in a rude way, threw it to the ground."

"I just thought maybe I could find a job in the ad session. You never know where our great opportunity will be..."

"Find anything interesting? Too bad I do not have a seat in the university cafeteria; otherwise you could work there with me."

"Do not worry; I'm seeing a job here, something not unlike anything I've ever done."

"What is?"

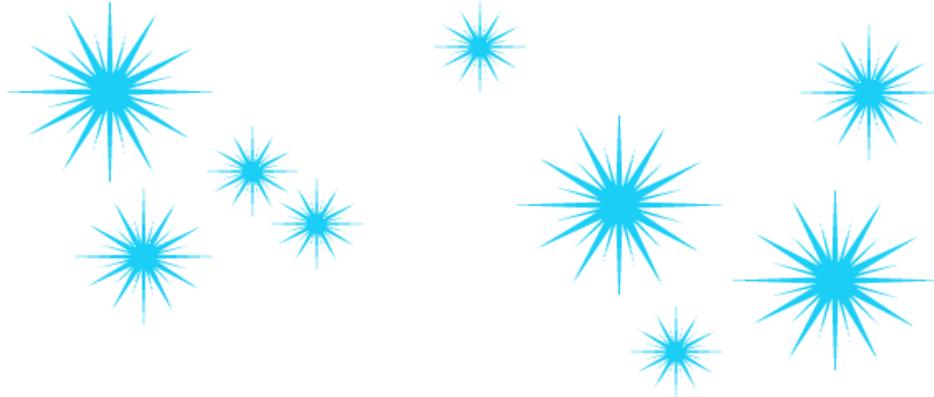
"A Bennett family urgently needs a maid on their farm. From what I see they are very rich. This would be a great opportunity to meet new people, to acquire more knowledge, to have new experiences."

"Call and schedule the interview."

"Yes, I'll do it right now."

She took the phone from her pocket and called the farm trying to find more information about the job she had just seen in the newspaper ad.

BENNETT FAMILY



“Ana Lucia Vasconcelos, so you are Brazilian and astronomy student here in Ogden!” Annette started the interview on the living room sofa.

“Yes, I study astronomy, which is what I love most in this life.”

“Very interesting. You mean you really like watching the stars? Want to know the mysteries of the universe?”

“Not just the stars, but everything out there. The cosmos fascinates me.”

“Splendid! I see that you are a cultured, hard-working girl. I like people like you. Know that here on the farm there is a hill with a beautiful view of the night sky.”

“I think so. This place is incredible!”

“Well, from what you told me on the phone, you have experience in domestic service.”

“Yes I have. I've done everything in my life. I know how to cook, I take care of the house, and I'm a nanny too. I'm in Ogden on a student visa, but I got the consulate's authorization to work part-time every day.”

“Great. We need a general service assistant in the afternoon and Saturday mornings.”

“It's fine by me. I am available in these shifts; I study in the morning only on weekdays.”

“I liked you. You can work in the afternoon and already stay here at the farm to make your observations at the telescope during the night. We have a maid's room available. If you want to live here, I think it might be best for you.”

"Thank you! I'll think about it."

Annette Bennett was particularly sympathetic to her new maid, who had charmed her by demonstrating knowledge and at the same time simplicity. The Brazilian inspired her with confidence.

Albert appeared in the living room just as his mother finished the interview with the new maid of the mansion

"Albert, my son. Come here."

"Yes mom."

"This is Ana Lucia, our new housekeeper. If you need anything, just talk to her. She's a pretty girl. She studies astronomy at Ogden University. Is not that incredible? I told her that here on the farm we have a hill with a splendid view of the night sky, where she can make her observations to the telescope."

"It's fascinating to study the stars in the sky. At last we have an intellectual employee in the mansion. Congratulations, Ana Lucia. Welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Albert."

"Please do not call me sir. I am only twenty years old and single. Just call me Albert."

"All right, Albert. I will be at your disposal for anything you need."

"And I need. Since the other maid has resigned, my room is a commotion. Do not look, please."

"Do not worry, I'll always leave it tidy."

"Mom, I'm leaving, I just came by to give you a kiss. I'm going to a party with Brianna."

"Be careful, my son! The driver takes you. I do not want you driving after drinking."

"All right, Mother, do not worry. Josh will take me and bring me back."

"That's better. Good bye."

He left the room.

"Albert's still a little immature, just wants to know about parties and his girlfriend, Brianna. He lives by saying that he intends to marry, but I doubt very much."

"But he's still so young. You should not marry so early if you do not have maturity."

“You're right, girl. Tomorrow you will meet my youngest daughter, our little Meg. My husband is traveling, as always on business, but he will be with us for the weekend.” Annette said with a smile.

The future astronomer was very much glimpsed by the beauty of the farm. The Bennett family grew mainly potatoes, as well as owning a canning factory in the state capital.

The road leading to the farm was completely lit. Albert loved driving on dirt roads. He tried to pretend that he was responsible, he promised to get married, to enter college, but he was completely indecisive, without a certain course, like a leaf in the wind. He helped his parents' company in the administrative sector, but nothing that required specialized knowledge. However, he was full of dreams, life, attending the parties of his millionaire friends, always surrounded by beautiful girls, and dating New Yorker Brianna Willis.

That was the second night of observations on the farm hill. Ana Lucia had positioned her computerized telescope at the top. The view of the night sky was indeed marvelous; there could be no better place for her to pursue what she learned in college.

Albert approached the hill. He was extremely curious.

“Good evening.”

“Albert. You here! I'm surprised.”

“I was curious to see you watching the stars. Beautiful telescope! Great, huh!”

“Yeah, it's a computerized cassegrain reflector.”

“What does that mean? I do not understand anything about astronomy.”

“It means that it is the most suitable telescope for professional observations, even for the night of deep space. I do not usually make daytime observations.” she clarified.

“I imagine that at night, with the presence of the stars, it must be even more exciting to contemplate this beautiful sky.”

“The images he captures are sent directly to my computer. I use a special astronomy program.”

“Amazing! I noticed your notebook is here. Can I see through the telescope?”

“But of course! I will help you. I was admiring the planet Mars right now.”

Albert positioned his left eye in the telescope's monocle. For the first time he was observing a planet through the instrument.

“Ana Lucia, I'm delighted with what I saw.”

“No wonder, nature is very beautiful.”

“Now I have to go, my bride is waiting for us to dine together.”

“Yes good night.”

“Good evening.”

Brianna was waiting for him in the living room.

“Albert, what were you doing with that girl up there on the hill? I drove by and saw you. Who is she?”

“She's the mansion's new maid. Ana Lucia is an astronomy student. My mother encouraged her to make the observations on the hill.”

“Very interesting ... So now your family has an intellectual maid. I'm surprised at the news. And tell me, did she show you the stars?”

“Not exactly. I watched the planet Mars, I was curious. I had never seen a telescope up close. And it's not any telescope! It is a professional computerized telescope, a cassegrain reflector.”

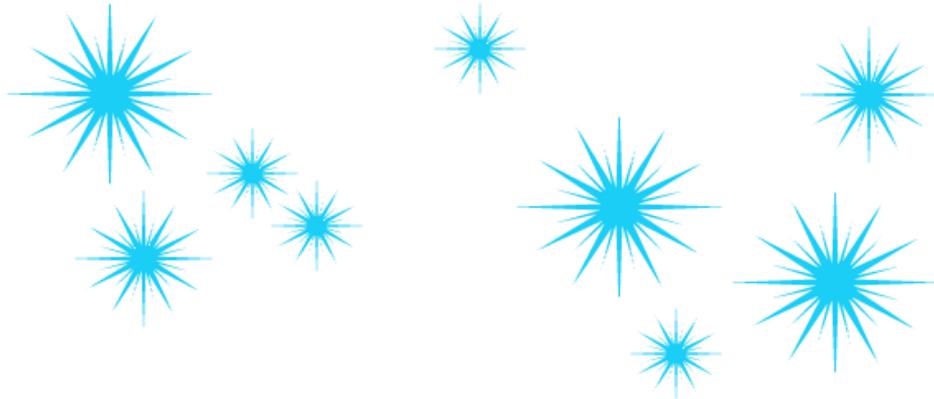
“I see you learned a lot in class today. I just hope you do not go up the hill every night with that girl.”

“Are you jealous?”

“Of course not! I just do not think you're all right with the maid.”

“My love, what nonsense. Now forget that and kiss me.” Albert took her by the waist and kissed her.

NEW YEAR



At New Year's Eve, Albert was amused by his friends and girlfriend in the indoor heated pool inside the mansion.

Ana Lucia went to serve champagne. As the ground was wet, she slipped and fell. The glasses and the bottle broke.

Soon Albert left the pool and went to help her.

“Are you alright? Did you hurt yourself?” He asked, lifting her off the floor.

“My God! I'm sorry! The floor is very wet. I am fine. Thank you, Mr. Albert. Do not worry. I'll get another tray with new glasses of champagne.”

“Are you sure you're okay? If you are not, you can rest.” He was kind again.

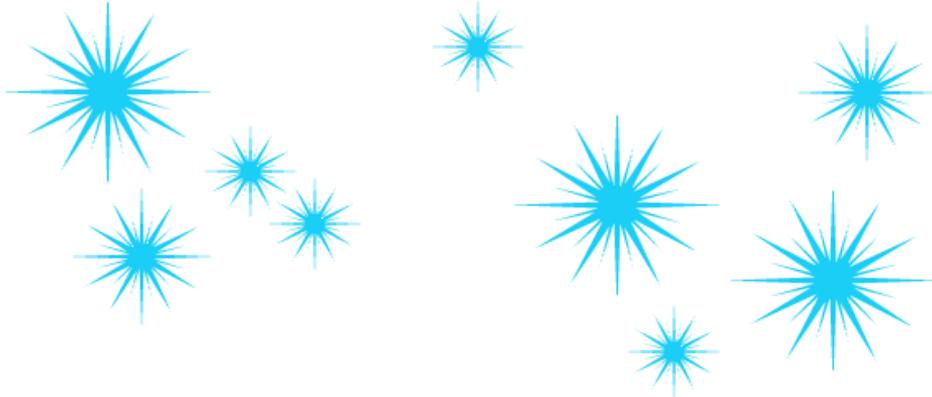
“I'm fine, you can leave. Thank you for your concern. Excuse me.” She withdrew.

Brianna commented in a low voice with her friend in the pool:

“Cherry, I do not like this maid. I'm sure she always takes advantage of the situation to charm Albert. I do not like the friendship between the two. I always see her staring at him from afar. He's too nice to her. And, most of all, he admires her because she studies astronomy.”

“Don't worry about it, Brianna. She's just the maid. It does not make Albert's type of girl”

UNIVERSITY



Winter was coming to an end. The cold remained freezing, though there was no snow, but nothing to stop Ana Lucia from continuing her observations of the night sky at the top of the hill. The college had left her more and more in love with the universe and its mysteries. That night She had a surprise under the sky full of stars: Albert appeared suddenly.

“Albert! You are here. Again?” She asked him in surprise.

“I loved that time you showed me the planet Mars. A few months ago, but I felt like coming here again.”

“I improvised these mats on the floor to lie down and admire the stars before studying them. Don’t mind. I’m a little romantic.”

“Great idea. After all, where could the greatest source of inspiration come from, other than nature, which is so beautiful?”

“I want to show you something. Look here on the computer for the image I made of the Horsehead Nebula.”

He approached the computer and stared at the screen.

“What a beautiful picture! It really looks like the head of a horse. That’s really something wonderful! It even seems that the universe was painted, designed by someone.” He commented smiling after glimpsing the beautiful image.

“Yes you are right. I do not know if we’ll ever find out the truth, but it does look like the universe was designed by someone.”

“Not just anyone, but a great artist. Explain me better, what exactly is a Nebula?”

“Nebula is a cloud of interstellar dust, hydrogen, helium and plasma.”

“I understand a little bit. They’re beautiful! And I even find this nebula to be so much like the head of a horse. If you will allow me, I would like to lay here for a moment and admire the stars, and this wonderful sky that I only now realized existed.”

“Yes, of course, the hill is yours. Make yourself comfortable.” she consented, trying to disguise her embarrassment.

“If I’m not asking too much, I’d like you to keep me company and explain more about the universe. If you do not mind, could you lie down here by my side?” He asked, already settled into one of the mattresses.

“If you think it’s okay, I’m glad to have that moment. Few people like to hear about astronomy.” Her heart pounded with anxiety.

“Then come, Ana Lucia. I long for your words. Lie down, ”he begged, smiling.

“That’s right. I’ll keep talking about the Horsehead Nebula.” She lay down next to him. “Well, it’s a dark nebula, located in the constellation of Orion, and it’s far from us 1,500 light-years away.”

“Light-years? Sorry, I’m used to distances in miles.” He took her hand, which made her nervous and trembling.

“The light year is the distance traveled by light in a year. That distance is 9.5 trillion miles,” she replied, her nervousness tightening with difficulty.

“That means that this value multiplied by 1500 is very large. It hurts me to the head just thinking of calculating.”

He went on:

“Another thing that fascinates me is how your telescope managed to capture the image of something that is so far away!”

“Optics really seems like something magical, hard to understand.”

“Suddenly, I even have the will to study astronomy like you,” he confessed.

“And why not? I’m sure you will not regret it.” she assured him.

Albert remained holding Ana Lucia's hand for as long as he admired the stellar blue.

“Ana Lucia.”

“Yes.”

“Could you put on some special music to listen to as we admire the sky?”

“What music?”

“‘Miss You Love’ by Silverchair.”

“I’m going to take my smartphone out of my pocket and I’ll put on some music. I love that song! It’s one of my favorite bands.”

She felt as if she were floating in the immensity of space.

Everyone gathered around the coffee table. Matthew comes from vacation an hour earlier. Meg smiled and said good morning to her parents. Albert was the last to sit down.

“Albert, you look so excited today. Did something special happen that you have not told us yet?” Matthew questioned his son for an atypical joy.

“My love, our son is always excited, especially when he has a company with his obligations as an administrator.”

“Mom, this time daddy’s right. I’m happy for another reason. Yesterday I finally decided to go to college.”

“What good news, Albert! And where do you intend to study Business Administration, Economics or International Relations?”

“Tell me, son, where will you go to college?”

“I do not intend to do any of these courses, Father.”

“No? And what is left to study?”

“Last night, after looking in a unique way at the night sky and the beautiful images of space, I decided to study Astronomy. I want to be a scientist. I even ordered a computerized telescope. It will start to observe the cosmos in the hills.

“Cosmos? What are you talking about?” Matthew was startled by an answer from his son.

“Yesterday Albert spent the night looking at the sky with Ana Lucia.” Meg betrayed his brother.

“What is this astronomy story? Who is Ana Lucia? But what is going on here?”

“Honey, Ana Lucia is one of our maids. She worked here a few months ago. She is a student of astronomy at Weber University, and is a very good employee, an extremely intelligent girl. I offered a hill from our farm so that she can make

her observations on the telescope. Isn't it amazing?" Annette tried to soften a disappointment from her husband.

"But what do you, Albert, have to do with all this? Are you a friend of the maid?"

"Yes, I am. Any problem with that?"

"Of course not. I just understand that the faculty of Astronomy is neither useful nor appropriate for a man who will be the future president of a company. I would be proud if you graduated first in Economics or Business Administration, then you could do this astronomy as a hobby."

"I do not want it to be just a hobby. I want it to be my profession. As for the company, I already manage it. The high school vocational course was enough. I understand everything about business."

"I confess that I am disappointed in you, my son. And your bride, what does she think about it?"

"I have not even spoken to Brianna yet. I have not even seen her in days. As a matter of fact she went to New York for master's classes in business administration. No need to worry, Dad. My future wife will be an excellent administrator of our business."

"I hope so. At least your fiancée is a real woman." Matthew demonstrated conformation.

"Excuse me, I'm going to town. I have something important to do." Albert left.

"Ana Lucia! Ana Lucia!" Her colleague almost screamed in the university library.

"Shelly! I'm sorry; I was distracted in my thoughts."

"I noticed. We are doing important work now on the Theory of the Inflationary Universe and you need to pay attention. It is not such a simple matter."

"I'm sorry, my friend. I promise I'll be careful."

"And your distraction has a name? Is it a young farmer by the name of Albert?"

"It is him. You won't believe what happened last night."

"I really do want to know, but only in a moment, after we finish the job and go back to the lodge."

"All right, let's go back to the Inflationary Universe Theory."

The friends were already in the lodge. Shelly lay on the bed. She hoped Ana Lucia would make lunch.

“Friend, I can’t take it anymore. I need to tell you what happened last night on the farm hill.”

“I know you can’t take it any longer, you’re in love with Albert. I already know. Tell me what happened! I’m crazy to know!”

“Yesterday he went up the hill.”

“And?”

“And he was fascinated by the explanations I gave about the nebulae, light years... And there’s more.”

“Say it then, bluntly.”

“He asked me to lie down next to him so we could admire the stars together. He held my hand.”

“Are you kidding!”

“I’m not joking, I’m telling the truth! I did not say anything, I just did his bidding. I’m very much in love. I do not stop thinking about Albert and what happened yesterday.”

“Girl, this is not going to work, it’s crazy! You hold hands with him on the hill! Admiring the stars with the boss’ son. And he’s engaged! Oh my God! This will not end well. Sorry, but it’s not correct. If his fiancée saw this scene, she would have killed you.”

“But nothing happened. I just wanted to please him. I do not know I just fell in love with the moment. It was awesome. If I could go back in time, I would live that moment again, several times. He even asked me to play a song on my smartphone.”

“And what was the soundtrack of your great moment with him?”

“Miss You Love”

“Look, I’m very much a fan of the Silverchair band, but something tells me this is all crazy! Stop it, he’s committed to another woman and does not want anything serious with you. You’re going to get hurt. Stop making observations on that hill. Here at the university we have an open field with a wonderful view.”

“On second thought, I think you're right. At the end of this story I'm going to suffer. I'm not going to the hill anymore. I will follow your advice and begin today to make my observations in the open field of the university.”

“That's better, do not risk it.”

“And there's more: Albert told me he decided to study astronomy. He is enchanted with the mysteries of the universe.”

“Oh! Ana Lucia. Strong emotions.” Shelly sighed as if all this confusion of feelings was happening to her.

“I've never been lucky in love, my friend. I already told you that I was deceived in Brazil. A few days before coming to the United States, I discovered that my boyfriend already had another girlfriend; he was engaged to another woman. And I did not know anything, it was horrible.”

“Well... Do you want to be just the mistress again? The difference is that now you know very well that he has a bride.”

“Yes, I know that perfectly. How unlucky I am ... I have no luck with anyone.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Are you expecting a visit, Shelly?”

“I'm not. I have no idea who it is.”

“Let me open the door.”

Ana got up and headed for the door. She was surprised to see that Albert was standing there in front of her with a beautiful smile.

“Albert! What a surprise!”

“I am here to know information about the admission process in the astronomy course.”

“Great! C'mon in! Meet my roommate, Shelly.”

“Nice to meet you Shelly.” He held out his hand to greet her.

“The pleasure is mine. Ana Lucia talks a lot about you, Albert.”

“I hope she speaks well.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Very well.”

“Shelly, I'm going for a walk with Albert, I want to show him the university and the community observatory. I'll be back later.”

“Do not worry, my friend. You can go easy; I guess I'll leave later too.”

“See you later.”

“See you later. Be wise. That may not end well.” Shelly whispered softly at her ear. She was more nervous than her friend.

Albert and Ana Lucia were breaking into Weber's campus as two excited teenagers on the first day of class.

“Why did your friend tell you to be wise?” I heard her whisper at your ear.

“Don't worry about what Shelly says, she's exaggerated. Come here, tell me one thing: what was your dad's reaction when you said you decided to be the next Stephen Hawking of Physics?” She stared at him, her face close at hand.

Albert smiled before replying.

“My father was disappointed. I promised him that I would be a great scientist, but I did not convince him. At the end of it all he had to be content with the fact that I will not be a graduate in business administration nor a great economist. But I comforted him by reminding me that my future wife, Brianna, is a graduate in finance and will masterfully manage the family business.”

“Your bride?”

“Yeah, she's amazing.”

“Sorry for the comment, but you two seem so distant to two people who intend to get married.”

“Imagine! Turns out she's a very busy woman; she's taking her Master's degree in New York. Speaking of which, tomorrow I'm traveling to meet her there. I am sure she will support my decision to study astronomy.”

“Yes, she'll definitely support you. If she really loves you, she will not be against you.”

“I've changed a lot for months. I just wanted to know about parties and fun, I was confused about a professional path, nothing interested me. And then I met you, astronomy, and the wonders of life.”

“I'm glad to know I made a difference in a friend's life.”

“I will forever be grateful to you for opening my eyes to something as beautiful as the universe. I discovered what I love.”

“Discovered?”

“Yes.” He brought his face to her lips.

“And what do you love?”

“I love...” Albert stammered, almost kissing her.

Ana Lucia turned her face to the side and coughed to disguise what almost happened.

“Albert, make yourself at home on campus. I gotta go.” She left.

In the lodge she threw herself on the bed to reflect on the course of that passion and cried, as was usual at all times when she felt the burden of disillusionment invade her soul.

Shelly came in. Seeing her disconsolate friend, she soon deduced the cause of such sadness.

“Ana, get up from this bed because today is Saturday and let's have fun!”

“I'm not in the mood.”

“How long are you going to whine about your aspiring Stephen Hawking?” Stop this!”

“He talked about his fiancée. Tomorrow Albert will go to New York to see her. Brianna is an administrator. But what upset me was the fact that he almost kissed me after thanking my friendship and swears love for the bride. I do not understand men.”

“Ah, my friend, this is the dilemma of every woman in the world. This is a problem that even science can't solve.” Shelly tried to comfort her by stroking Ana's shoulders.

“I would rather spend days in a row locked in a room by solving the more difficult calculation of Schrödinger's Equation than having that feeling inside me. I will not go up the hill anymore. I'll make my observations right here on campus, as you advised me.”

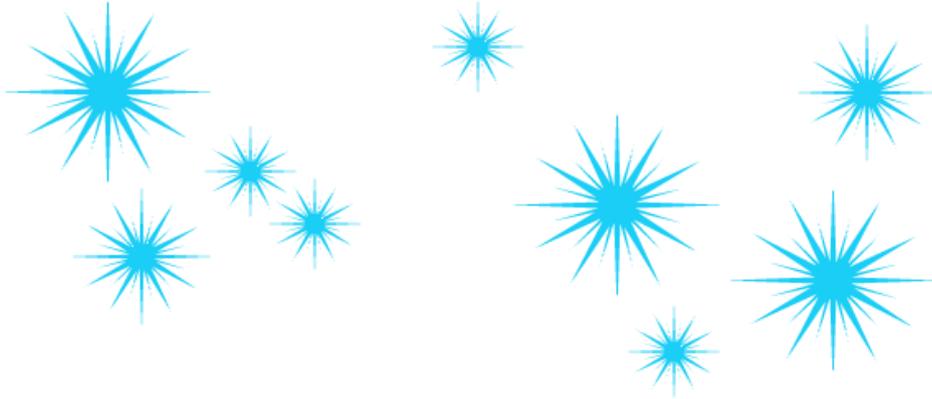
“You are doing very well. Be cold with it from now on, nothing to admire the stars hand in hand with Albert.”

“I assure you this will never happen again, Shelly.”

“Get up out of this bed and let's have some fun! My head needs to relax a bit; I'm dizzy from all the calculations and theories we studied during the week.”

“I'm really not in the mood to leave today, but you go, I know you have a special company. Besides, I do not want to disturb your flirtation.” Ana Lucia tried to convince her.

TRIBUTE



Albert noticed that Ana was not going to the hill after work and understood that she wanted distance. Out of dignity, he restrained himself, but he did not know until when she could stay away from her best friend. He enrolled in the faculty of astronomy and his classes would begin in two months. He purposely chose the morning, for he knew she would be around.

The new astronomy student's birthday was approaching; the party would take place that weekend. Annette approached Ana Lucia as she left the mansion at the end of the file:

"Ana Lucia," he called to her.

"Yes, Mrs. Annette. Do you need anything else? I am already going home."

"I realize you're not on the hill anymore."

"Yes, I decided to leave the hill for Albert, since now he will start to study and need a space to make the observations. I'm using the open field there at the university. The night sky view of the campus is also wonderful. Besides, it was too tiring and dangerous for me to be late for home. Now I'm near the lodge and everything is fine."

"I understand." And she went on. "I mean, you're invited to Albert's party tomorrow evening."

"I do not know if it's a good idea for me to come to this party. It's only for his friends. I honestly do not know if I should."

"But you and he are friends, are not you?"

Ana was nervous, almost choked, felt a lump in her throat. She replied bitterly:
“Yes, we are friends, but I am also employed in this mansion and will not be nice to the other guests.”

“You're the one who knows, but you're invited.”

“Thank you for the invitation, but I can't guarantee my presence.” she said, smiling and retreating.

Deep in the soul Ana Lucia loved the invitation to the party, only feared to hurt her heart even more. The man she was passionate about would complete another year of life and she did not want to regret not taking part in that moment. Lying in her bed she ventured with Shelly:

“Tomorrow's Albert's birthday, I was invited to the party. He's so handsome, so kind, and so generous. How can he date a person as arrogant as Brianna? She looks at me in disgust, that's when she looks at me, most of the time she ignores me. I do not know if I should go to this party.”

“I'm not going to say anything this time; you're old enough to make your own decisions. Just be strong. Do what your heart desires. You have to do what will make you happy. Good night, I'm very tired.”

“I'll keep that in mind, Shelly.”

There was a war inside Ana Lucia, a disturbing indecision. At the same time that she wanted to be close to Albert, she was afraid she would get hurt even more. Gently decided to invite Shelly to accompany her.

“I'd better regret something I did than I did not do. I'll go. We will.”

“I'm only going because you're my friend and to stop you from messing around at that party.”

“Thank you, Shelly.”

Ana Lucia looked beautiful. It was necessary for that special occasion.

“You look beautiful, Ana. I'd say too pretty for someone going to a simple birthday party.”

“Come on, I'm anxious. I bought him a special gift. I hope he enjoys it.”

The party started at eight o'clock. When Shelly and Ana Lucia arrived, they were not even noticed by the other young guests. There were many, the mansion was crowded.

From a distance, Albert noticed the presence of the friends and approached them to welcome them:

"Ana Lucia, Shelly, how nice of you to come."

"Albert, I brought your gift. Here it is, I hope you enjoy it."

"Thank you. I'll open it now." He said excitedly unwrapping the package.

"Your university classes are going to start, so I've decided to give you a subject you need to know a lot." Ana Lucia smiled.

"That Cool! It is a copy of Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Thank you a lot, Ana Lucia! I loved it!" He said, hugging her.

"Albert, I'm sorry, I could not bring this gift because I decided to come to the party in the last minute."

"No problem, your friendship is already a gift, Shelly." He kissed his friend's face.

"Thank you, Albert. I wish you many years to live." Shelly wished him.

"And where is your bride?" Ana Lucia asked curiously.

"She's here talking to her friends."

"I'll go find your mother. I have to talk to her, who made sure I came to this party."

"You're welcome, you're already at home. Excuse me I'm going to greet the other guests."

"Yes, of course," Ana Lucia replied, watching the birthday boy carefully.

Everyone gathered around the huge table. The cake was in the center, the candles marked Albert's 21st birthday. Brianna was beside him, exuberant, did not lose in elegance for the guests.

They sang their congratulations, the birthday boy blew out the candles, they turned on the lights, and Albert said:

"Thank you for the presence of all of you, my dear friends. I know the first piece of the cake is mine, but in other cultures the birthday boy offers the first piece of

the cake for someone very special. You all know that I decided to be an astronomer; I discovered that I love the stars, the universe, and tomorrow I start my studies at the university. And all thanks to a wonderful person who made me realize what I really love. That's why I offer the first piece of this cake to my great friend Ana Lucia, the person who made me discover what I love the most.

The guests were amazed. They believed that the birthday boy would offer the tribute to the bride, but no; he paid homage to his maid friend. Everyone clapped to disguise the embarrassment. Brianna felt a lump in her throat. Shelly put her hands on her head and said dazedly,

"I can't believe he did it. It was taking time for this guy to hesitate."

"Oh, my friend, I'm feeling dizzy. What does Albert think he's doing? Let me get this freaking piece of cake and leave right away." Ana Lucia went to the table where she picked up the plate with the cake, but hardly looked at Albert's face.

Brianna left, feeling very humiliated. She went into the garden to get some fresh air. She noticed that Ana Lucia was leaving and approached her. Shelly saw everything.

"Ana Lucia."

"Brianna!" She exclaimed, startled to see her there. "I'm sorry about what happened at the party. Your fiancée is going crazy. It was not cool for him to have honored me and ignored your presence beside him. I'm leaving already. I am sorry" Ana Lucia justified herself, showing empathy.

- Ana Lucia, tell me one thing: how long will you continue to flirt with my future husband?

- I? Flirting with him? You are wrong! It's the Albert who lives running after me, encircling me in every way. And you know why?

- Because?

- Because he feels alone. You live traveling, obsessed with your studies, master's degree in New York ... Look, why do not you participate more in the life of your fiancé? You can go up the hill with him, admire the stars next to him... Ask him to show you the university campus. He's so excited about the beginning of class. Go with him; be interested in the life of the man who will be your husband." She advised her.

"You're absolutely right! That's what I'll do, because I'm not going to let you steal the love of my life."

“Do it then. Excuse me, Brianna. I’ll go home.”

“You’re going late.”

Brianna went back to the party. Albert searched for his friends and through the window he saw them walking away. He ran to catch up.

“Shelly, Ana Lucia! Why are you leaving? The party is just beginning.”

“I’ll wait for you in the car,” Shelly said to Ana, pulling away.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

“What happened, Ana? Why are you leaving?” He asked again.

“I have to go to my house. How can I continue at this party after the embarrassment you put me through?” She snapped.

“What embarrassment?”

“Albert, you paid tribute for me, offering me the first piece of cake that should be for your bride, and not for me, I’m just the housekeeper. You humiliated your girlfriend, she looked terrible, and everyone saw it. She was just here and she asked for an explanation.

“Dang it! I did not realize that something so simple could cause so much trouble. But, Ana Lucia, answer me, why would I have to honor my fiancée by offering her the first piece of cake if she did not make me discover what I really love? You were the one who made me discover that. How could I lie saying Brianna did something she did not do? She does not even know the difference between a comet and a shooting star” Albert tried to justify himself.

“You should have pretended, if you omitted, I do not know, done anything but hurt the woman who will be your wife. You’re so insensitive. You did not even look for her to know how she’s doing. I’m tired of it. I’m going to my house. Goodbye.” Se left in a hurry.

“Goodbye.”

Head down, Albert went back to the party. He called Brianna in the corner and apologized:

“My love, I’m sorry if I hurt you. It was not my intention. I just wanted to be nice to Ana.”

“I felt so humiliated that you honored your maid and forgotten me. But I understand that in fact it was she who brought astronomy into your life. And I decided that from today I want to stay closer to you, I want to participate in your future astronomer life. In the next few nights I’ll be with you on the hill,

participating in your observations. In fact, in your first days of school, I insist on accompanying you as a listener. What about that?"

"What you're telling me is wonderful! My love, I'm going to love having your company on the hill. I love you so much! Let's get married soon, I promise. He approached her, stroked her cheek and kissed her."

"Before that, we have to have a beautiful engagement party."

"Of course, whatever you want." Albert kissed her once more.

After that Ana Lucia and Albert were distant from each other. In the following days they even met in the hallways of the university, but only greeted each other with a simple "hi". Brianna was always together and gave no room for a third person.

In the mansion, the Brazilian maid avoided him to the maximum. He, on the other hand, seemed to have understood that it would no longer be possible to continue such an affectionate friendship with Ana Lucia.

Early one evening, at the end of her expedition, Ana Lucia saw, more or less closely, Albert and Brianna on the hill. He would show her the night sky and teach her to look through the telescope. The poor maid collapsed in tears at the moment when Albert kissed the bride after they lay side by side on that hill that had once been so special to her.

Ana Lucia could not help herself. She burst into tears in the room.

"I thought you were making your observations in the open field. What's the matter? Why are you crying, my friend?" Shelly questioned her worriedly.

"I saw Brianna with Albert on the hill."

"Yes, you've told me that she keeps him company almost every night. She has followed your advice; she is taking part in his life so she won't lose him."

"But this time it was worse: I saw them kissing. He seemed to really love her."

"And should not he love the woman who will be his wife? They will get married."

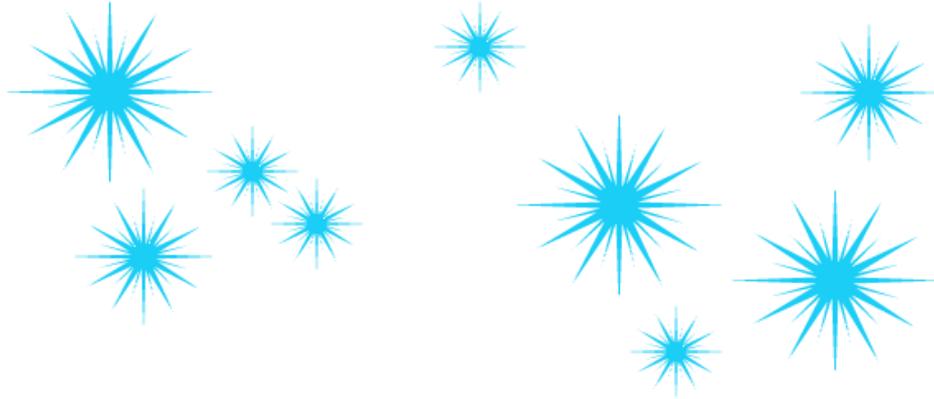
"I know."

"Want to know something? It's time for you to get out of that mansion and get another job!"

"You're quite right, Shelly. I can't bear to keep seeing that."

“At last you woke up.”

THE TRUTH



Brianna needed to talk to someone. That afternoon she received a visit from her best friend, Cherry, in her apartment.

“Brie, I loved your invitation! And what's new?” She asked after kissing her friend's face.

“Oh, Cherry, I have to tell you... I can't bear to hear about astronomy, stars, the universe...”

“Why? It is so beautiful the sky full of stars. Nature is wonderful!”

“Yes, I do not doubt that. But I do not care at all for what's out there, do you understand? What good is it to know about other planets, about galaxies, if it's here in this world that I'm living in and from within it I can't leave?” Brianna tried to be as rational as possible.

“Friend, do not be insensitive.”

“I feel sad to see my fiancé waste time studying such nonsense! I'm participating in everything just to please him. At least until the wedding, then I will not care.”

“You do that well, because Albert was everywhere with that maid and it was not cool. But do not be so radical with him, my friend. I am also fascinated by the mysteries of the universe. Do not discourage your fiancée.”

“I'm just being honest. I can't wait to get married soon and convince Albert to drop all this astronomy nonsense.”

“Be careful not to lose your future husband by taking what he loves so much! At the birthday party, Albert's eyes flashed when he said he loved astronomy.”

“Do not even remember that dang party. I was so humiliated.”

“Yes, I agree, you were really humiliated. In your place I would have made a great scandal! I would take that piece of cake and throw it in his face. Where has it been to pay homage to the maid and not honor the bride herself? Even so, do not take away what he loves so much.” Cherry emphasized.

Ana Lucia made her observations in the university's open field on another one of those lonely nights. Other students were also there with their telescopes. However, the loneliness she felt was not the lack of people around her, but the absence of the man she loved.

Albert was entangled with his new college classmates. That evening he was invited by a group of veterans to attend a detailed observation of the Moon. Brianna was not with him this time, for she had made a last-minute trip to the state capital; her parents needed her.

Surrounded by friends, Albert smiled every moment that he glimpsed the Moon through the telescope. They made notes and the lunar craters made him more impressed than before. He looked the other way, realized that Ana Lucia was there and could not contain himself, he approached her.

“Ana Lucia!”

“Albert! You here?”

“Yeah. I'm right there with my friends watching the moon.”

“And I'm watching Venus the Morning Star.” She smiled uneasily.

“A planet so hot it could even be hell.”

“True. But it's beautiful from here, it tricks right, it looks like a big star.”

“These first few months of classes have been wonderful to me, I'm learning so much incredible things! I am loving introduction to astronomy, and even attending an astronomical instrumentation workshop. Gradually I begin to master those computer programs to edit the images captured by the telescope.”

“Great! I'm glad you're so excited and have new friends. I realized that you were all excited there with them.”

“Yes, but I will never forget that it was you who showed me all this.”

“Albert, do not exaggerate. What I did was no big deal; anyone could have introduced astronomy to you.”

“It turns out you're not just anyone. It was not something simple. My life changed completely after that night we were together on the hill. The night sky seems to have been painted with fluorescent blue paint; the brightness of the stars moved me at that moment”

“The glow of the stars is like the blue of your eyes, Albert,” she declared, smiling as she admired his face.

“It's the first time anyone notices that my eyes are blue as starlight.”

“Looking at this sky full of light reminds me of my hometown, Santos. I miss Brazil so much.” she said as she looked up at the sky.

“Santos must be a beautiful city,” he agreed, also admiring the stars.

“Yes, the beaches there are wonderful.”

“I got to see on the internet the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. They are divine! I would like to know your country.”

“I'm sure you will not regret this trip.”

There was a small moment of silence. Suddenly, Albert called again for his friend:

“Ana Lucia!”

“Yes.”

“I finished reading the book you gave me as a gift.”

“Did you like it?”

“I'm just obsessed with science, physics, astronomy. How about we go out for dinner now? It can be right here at the university, the diner is very good.” He invited her, holding her by the arm.

“I do not know if that's a good idea.”

“Why not? Have you had dinner?”

“No, I have not had dinner yet.”

“Well, I'm hungry, too. Let's go! What does it cost? How bad is it? I always see my colleagues snacking together. I'm even tired of eating snacks with all of them that are there.”

“All right, you convinced me. But it's just a snack!”

“Sure, it's just a snack.”

The cafeteria was crowded with hungry students who chatted endlessly, friends around the lively tables with all the vigor of their youth. Seated at the table, Albert and Ana Lucia talked.

“Brianna's giving me a lot of support. She keeps me company almost every night on the hill. It's great to know that the woman I love likes what I do. Did you know that I even applied for an internship at the astronomical department observatory?”

“Good news! It is essential that you acquire practice and experience from the beginning of the course”. She pretended not to be disturbed to hear that Albert loved the bride.

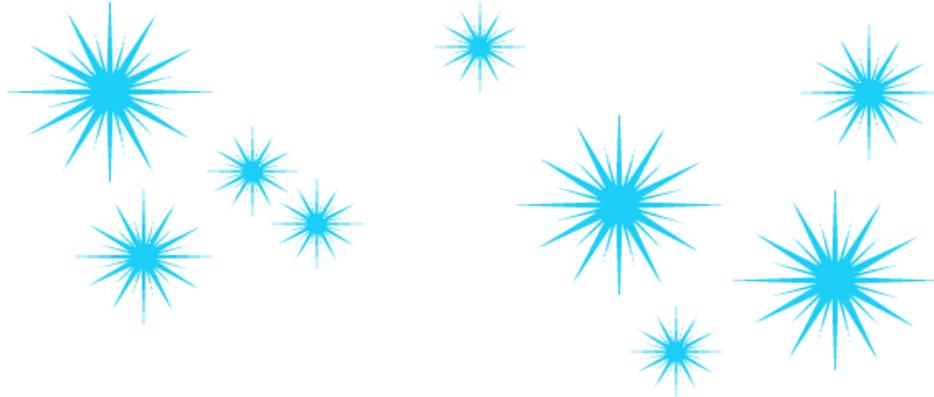
“That's why I love you so much, Ana Lucia. You are the one who made me discover what I love.” Albert took her hand.

Ana Lucia was embarrassed to realize that she loved him right now.

“I'm tired; I've worked and studied all day. I'm going to the lodge. I need to rest. Thanks for the snack. Good evening.” She got up and left.

“Hang on.” The boy tried to bring her back with no success.

THE INTERPRETER



Matthew organized a dinner with French investors in his house, but there was a problem: he himself had not arrived in time to welcome the guests. Annette was unhappy because she spoke little of the language. She risked a few words, but she could not handle the whole situation alone.

It was late, and Ana Lucia was still in the kitchen helping prepare dinner, which had a varied menu that night. Albert hung up the phone and was nervous when he learned that his father might not even show up. He should be responsible for leading the big negotiation in Matthew's absence.

“Ana Lucia!” Albert called as soon as he saw her leave the kitchen.

“What's it? Do you want anything? You look nervous” she said formally.

“French investors are already here, but my father will not be in time for this dinner. It is an important moment of negotiation.”

“What's the problem?”

“The problem is that neither I nor anyone here speaks French fluently, much less French for business.”

“Not even your mother?”

“My mother does not speak fluently, she risked a few words to welcome them, but it takes someone who really knows the language, because in the negotiations we use technical language terms.”

“I understand. If that's the case, I can help.”

“Can you?”

“Yes!

“And how?”

“I speak French fluently. But look, I did not even bring me clothes suitable for a business dinner.”

“Ana Lucia, I thank you too much for this! You can wear my mother's clothes, you two have the same height. It will fit. I don't want them to think that my father did not bother to at least bring in an interpreter. In fact, he speaks French, but did not arrive on time.”

“I'm going up to your mother's room to change my clothes.”

“After you come down, introduce yourself to the investors as an interpreter of the company. I will conduct the negotiations.”

“Yes I'll do it. It will be a pleasure to help. Where is your mom?”

“She is in the living room, with the investors.”

“I'll go upstairs to get ready then. Let her know I'll be right back.”

“Yes, I will let her know. Thank you very much. You're saving the night!”

“Excuse me.”

Ten minutes later, Ana Lucia, elegantly dressed, descended the stairs. Annette smiled at her with a thankful expression. Putting her hands on the maid's shoulder, she showed gratitude:

“Thank you for your help tonight, Ana Lucia. We have a very important negotiation. You will get an extra allowance for this job.”

“What are you talking about, Mrs. Annette? I'm doing it from heart, you do not have to pay me for it. We're friends, I'm here to help.”

“Let's go to the dinner table, then.” Albert led everyone to the table.

“Yes, come on” Annette agreed, smiling again.

Dinner was a success. Ana Lucia was the best interpreter the Bennett family could have. Albert did not stop to look at her and smile at her all the time. He was delighted with all the qualities his best friend showed. She even made friends with the businessmen! The deal was agreed, the contracts were signed, and everything happened in a wonderful way.

“Ana Lucia!” Albert called for her as she walked out the door.

“Yes.”

“You were amazing! I do not even know how to thank you. My dad will be happy to know what you did for our company.”

"No need to thank me, what I did was no big deal. I just translated a conversation."

"You did more than that!" You've closed the best deal for my family company! You have conducted the negotiations very well. Astronomer, you'd be a great businesswoman."

"Thank you for your compliments, Albert. See you later."

"Hang on.

"What?"

"You look very pretty dressed like that."

"Thanks."

"I'll take you to the lodge."

"No need, I'm going alone in my car. It's not an expensive car like yours, but it works just fine and takes me wherever I want to go."

"Well, if that's how it is, see you tomorrow." He kissed her cheek.

"See you." She left.

It was about one in the morning when Matthew arrived at the farm. Desperate, he entered his room. Annette was waiting for him on the bed. He was sure he had lost the big deal of his life.

"Matthew, I was worried about your flight. What happened? You did not answer my calls."

"Do not even ask me... The flights were canceled due to bad weather. My cell phone was out of service. You have no idea how I regret not having arrived in time to receive the French investors. We needed that society."

"Well, I have news: we got the partnership with them! The dinner was wonderful! The contracts were signed."

"What incredible news! So Albert was able to drive everything by himself?"

"Not alone. Our foreign maid, Ana Lucia, speaks French and conducted the dinner flawlessly. She was the one who closed the deal. My love, she was not only an excellent interpreter but also a great dealer."

"I'm surprised! But this girl is very clever! She studies astronomy and managed to negotiate my best contracts. She deserves to be promoted."

"Promoted?"

"Instead of a maid, she'll be my secretary here at the farm. We need someone like that to take care of my business right here."

"That's a great idea! Ana Lucia deserves this promotion. I'm going to ask Albert to talk to her."

"No, I'll talk to her about it tomorrow, after work."

"I'm sure Ana will be very happy. My love, you are such a generous man. That's why I love you so much!"

"And you're a wonderful woman who knows how to choose our employees very well." He kissed his wife after a good smile.

The next day Ana Lucia was apprehensive at the call of her boss, not even imagining what could be, or what he would have been so important to tell her.

"Mr. Bennett, excuse me." She walked into the office.

"Ana Lucia, come in, sit down."

"Thanks." She sat down at his desk.

"I knew what happened last night. My wife and son told me everything."

"I apologize if I was meddling in your business, but I just wanted to help."

"Not at all, I am very grateful for what you did and I called you here to say that from today you will be my personal secretary here at the farm. You can use this office to take care of my business. I'm sure you'll learn the work fast. I'll explain everything. I believe that you will have no difficulty; after all, you did a great negotiation yesterday, besides having been an impeccable interpreter."

"Thank you for your compliments, but I did everything for friendship. You do not have to feel compelled to promote me."

"I'm not doing it out of obligation; I'm promoting you because I believe in your competence. In fact, I really need someone competent to take care of my business on this farm, which, incidentally, has increased with your help. Unless you do not want to be my secretary and you do not want to earn a higher salary..."

"Yes I want it, I want it very much. I'll be eternally grateful for that, Mr. Bennett."

"I'm glad you accepted. You can start your work here at the office tomorrow. I'll explain everything you need to know."

"I'm very happy with this opportunity." She expressed her joy by greeting him with a handshake and a broad smile.

In the corridor, late afternoon, Albert questioned Ana Lucia with curiosity. He wanted to know what the conversation with her father had been, what had happened:

“Ana Lucia.”

“Albert.”

“So, how was the conversation?”

“Your father promoted me. Now I'm the new secretary of the farm and I'm going to earn a bigger salary. From today my work is there in his office.”

“I'm happy for your success. Not that being a maid is a bad thing, but you have so much capacity that you always deserved a position more to your potential.”

“Tomorrow I'll come with a more elegant outfit.”

“You're beautiful anyway.”

“Don't say that.”

“I'm serious. This new achievement deserves a celebration!”

“What kind of celebration?”

“An astronomical celebration.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The sun is setting. Come with me up the hill.”

“Up the hill?” She asked in surprise.

“Yes, my telescope is already there waiting for us.” He reinforced the invitation.

“I do not know if that's a good idea, Albert.”

“That's the best idea! I have a surprise for you.”

“You have a surprise for me?”

“Yes let's go.” He took her hand.

Ana Lucia's heart beat faster than ever. Inevitably, her body shuddered as she felt Albert's hand touch her. At the top of the hill the breeze was soft. Ana Lucia's black hair was fluttering in the wind. The sky that night was a gift to the lovers of the stars.

“The sky is beautiful today. It had been a while since I had come up the hill” she said, looking up.

“You did not come any more because you did not want to,” Albert said, also looking up at the sky.

"You know why."

"Ana Lucia, the darkness of space reminds me of your black hair."

"I have compared starlight to the blue color of your eyes, and do you compare my hair to darkness?"

"Yes, the darkness of space is fascinating. Is beautiful! Think about it: it is because of this darkness that the brightness of the stars stands out in the cosmos. Without it, there would be no contrast with the light of the stars. It makes the sky beautiful." Albert stroked Ana Lucia's hair.

"You're absolutely right."

"I have a surprise."

"I'm curious to know what it is."

"Come here, look at the computer what I did to you."

She crouched down with him on the mat on which the notebook sat.

"What a beautiful image!"

"I did it on the university telescope."

"I loved that image you made of the Horsehead Nebula." She smiled in delight.

"And on my telescope I made that image here especially for you."

"It's beautiful! Jupiter my favorite planet. Thank you so much, Albert."

"Close your eyes," he said.

"For what?"

"Ana Lucia, close your eyes," he said again.

"All right, I'll close."

"Open your hands."

She opened her hands.

"Now you can open your eyes."

She opened it.

"How beautiful! You printed the pictures and put them in frames. I'm delighted! Thanks. She hugged him tightly."

Albert hugged her even more tightly. His smile revealed that he felt something more for Ana Lucia, but he still did not fully understand what that meant.

"Stay here with me until later. Let's do what we did the first time we lay here."

"And what did we do so special?"

"We watched this wonderful sky together for hours."

"I'll stay, but not for long. Let's look at this wonderful sky together and then I'll go home."

They lay down on the mat and, hand in hand, they admired the celestial stars once more.

A few minutes later, Albert sat down and, looking at Ana Lucia's face, uttered the following words:

"It was one of the most important moments of my life when I first met you on the hill this way. That's when I discovered what I really love."

"You did?"

"Yes. I've discovered that I love astronomy. I've been in college for a few months, but I already feel like a real scientist. All thanks to you. But it's not just astronomy that I love." he said, staring at Ana Lucia with her face ever closer to her eyes.

"And what else do you love?"

"I love you, Ana Lucia." he declared, about to kiss her.

"You love me?"

"Yes I love. I do not know how it happened, but the truth is that I love you. I can't imagine my life without you." He confessed, stroking her hair.

"No, Albert, you can't love me because you're going to marry another woman. You're engaged, remember?"

"I did not forget it. I think my story with Brianna is long gone. I know she does not even like astronomy. She pretends to like it just to please me."

"At least she's trying not to lose you."

"Ana Lucia, do you love me?"

"And you still ask me? I'm crazy for you. I love you so much, and it's been a long time."

"So, since it's like this, let's get together once and for all." He stroked her face and tried to kiss her.

"No! No, Albert! You're not going to kiss me. As long as you do not end your relationship with Brianna there can be nothing between us, no kissing or anything. I better go to my place now. Listen to me; I've been through this in Brazil. I was with a boy who was already engaged and it was horrible. I did not know anything, he deceived me. But now I do not want to go through this again. I'm sorry, but you can't." she expressed her indignation.

"I get it. You are right. I'm going to break up with Brianna as soon as she gets back from New York."

"I'll wait for you to do it, and then we'll talk about both of us again. Excuse me; I'm going to my place now." She got up and hurried away.

The farm cook, Anastasia, watched the scene from the distance, by the telescope. Brianna had commissioned her to watch over Albert's footsteps. Anastasia picked up the phone and tried to warn Brianna immediately about what had happened that night on the hill.

"Anastasia." Brianna answered the phone.

"It's me, Mrs. Brianna. You asked me to watch over your fiancée and I watched."

"Did something different happen? Did he meet with Ana Lucia?"

"Yes, they met. You fiancée and Ana Lucia spent a long time together on the hill, holding hands, hugging, and almost kissing. I saw everything right through the telescope you gave me. I think he'll end the engagement with you as soon as you get back here."

"And why did not they kiss?" The bride asked curiously.

"From what I understand from the scene, she's gone a little furious; I think she might not have agreed to kiss your fiancée because he's engaged. But it had everything to roll."

"Thank you for telling me, Anastasia. You will be rewarded. I already know very well what I'm going to do so I will not lose it. First, I'm going to delay my return. I'm going to be here for a couple of days. After I get back Albert will have the biggest surprise of his life." Brianna said, then hung up the phone.

Ana Lucia ran into the university lodge. Shelly was already lying down, ready for bed.

"Girl, what happened? Why are you crying like that?" Shelly asked her worriedly.

"Something good and bad happened at the same time!"

"Tell me what it was! I'm sure and bet my own life that your Stephen Hawking has everything to do with your tears.

"My boss promoted me. Now I'm the farm secretary."

"I understand. It's a form of gratification for what you did yesterday."

"Yes."

"AND? Is that a reason to cry like this?"

"And then, at the end of the day, Albert invited me to go up the hill with him."

"Oh no! On the hill? Dang it! I did! I won the bet! I told you not to go up the hill with him."

"Yes. But I went, he insisted so much."

"You should not have gone. And what happened on that hill?"

"He made me a surprise. He gave me these pictures. Look."

"How beautiful! He made images of Jupiter and the Horsehead Nebula." Shelly was astonished to see the portraits of the planets.

"Then he asked me to lay down next to him so we could observe the stars together, like the first time he was there with me."

"And did you lie down?"

"I did. After a few minutes, he thanked me for showing him astronomy."

"It was very nice of him to thank you in such a romantic way."

"Albert declared to me. He said he loves me and wants to be with me. He tried to kiss me."

"And did you kiss him?"

"No! I did not kiss him. I refused to do this while he was still engaged to another woman."

"And you did very well not to have kissed Albert."

"I do not want to be the mistress again."

"You are right. First, he has to end the engagement with that woman, and then you can get together in a decent way.

"I do not know.

"What you do not know?"

"Shelly, he hesitated."

"What do you mean?"

"I feel that he will not have the courage to finish everything with her and take over."

"When will he talk to her?"

"I do not know. I guess only after she gets back from the trip."

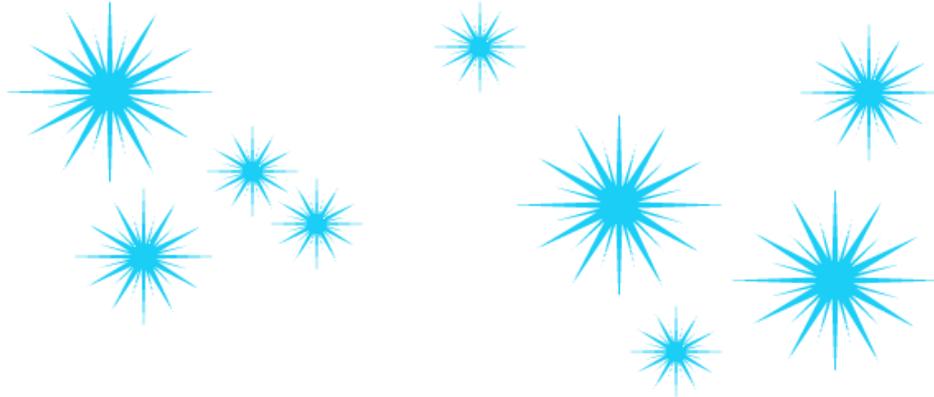
"Then, until that day comes, you have to stay away from him, for your own good. Run away from him."

"Yes, I'll stay away."

"I know it will be difficult to run from him, because you see each other here at the university and on the farm, but, my friend, whatever happens, do not let him kiss you."

"I will do that. I will avoid talking to him until the situation is resolved."

HIDDEN TRUTH



“Ana Lucia! Ana Lucia!” Albert called for her on the way out of the university, but she ignored him, pretended not to have listened.

“Albert, I think your astronomer does not want to hear from you, huh,” Richard commented, slapping him on the back. He had been his colleague since the beginning of the semester in college.

“Richard, my friend, she's been ignoring me since that night. I do not know what to do.”

“No wonder you're engaged to another woman. How do you think Ana Lucia feels?”

“The worst of it is Brianna's going to take another couple of days to get back.”

“Are you sure of what you're going to do? Do you think your father will accept Ana Lucia?”

“Of course! She was already proficient in business, she was promoted by him.”

“It's one thing for your father to admire her as an employee, and quite another to accept you as a daughter-in-law.”

“Do not make me more nervous than I already am. I'm going home; maybe I can talk to her there.”

“Good luck buddy!” Richard patted him on the back.

Albert hurried to the farm. He did not conceive the idea of being ignored by the woman he loved.

"Good morning, Mrs. Annette!"

"Good morning, Ana Lucia! You are beautiful today. You can go to your office. Everything is ready for you to start your first official day as a secretary."

"Thank you. Excuse me." She went to her room.

In the middle of the day Albert came into the office. She left with Ana Lucia some contracts that she should translate into French. He was so beautifully dressed in his navy blue suit! The secretary's heart sank.

"My father asked me to leave those contracts with you."

"Oh, yes, he warned me. You can leave it here at my table. Thank you." she said, her eyes on the computer. Albert left.

The next days were the same. Ana Lucia avoided Albert at all costs. He needed to understand that it would not be so simple to have her in his arms.

At the end of another week, she was on her way to her car after work when Albert approached her:

"Ana Lucia, wait."

"What do you want?"

"How long will you keep treating me like this, huh?"

"Until the day you become a free man."

"But I'm a free man!"

"Have you gone mad? There's a woman in New York believing you're still going to marry her."

"I told you, as soon as she returns, I'll finish it."

"As long as you do not break up with her, there will be nothing between us."

"No friendship?"

"No friendship."

"Ouch!" Albert felt a weakness in his legs and lost his balance for a moment.

"What is it, Albert? Aren't you feeling good? You should go to the doctor, this is not the first time you feel weakness in your legs."

"It was nothing, I think I stumbled. I am fine. Ana Lucia, I will not wait for Brianna to come back. I'm going to New York to talk to her today. I'll set up a conversation for tomorrow morning in a bar."

"Perfect. Have a good trip." Ana Lucia said in a tone of suspicion. She got into her car and headed for the lodge.

Anastasia heard everything, telephoned Brianna, and told her what would happen the next day.

"My son, why are you leaving with this bag?"

"Mom, I've decided to travel to New York now. I have to talk to Brianna."

"I see, the name of it is love. That's how it is. You can't stay away from her, can you? But you're right. Look, enjoy and mark the date of your wedding with her."

"I'm leaving, Mother. Goodbye." He kissed Annette's face and hurried out.

In the lodging, the friends talked once more:

"Shelly, you can't imagine what happened."

"Tell me."

"Albert went to New York to talk to Brianna."

"Wow! So he really wants to be with you. I'm surprised. I thought he was going to curl you up a bit more."

"I'm surprised too."

The meeting in New York took place in the restaurant of the Hotel The London NYC, where Brianna was staying. It was about nine o'clock in the morning. She was already waiting at the table when Albert appeared.

"Albert my love. What a surprise! Why didn't you go straight to my room? We could have met there."

"I decided to hurry up, and I ended up staying at another hotel, I did not want to bother you early. Brianna, I did not want to wait for you to come back because I have something very important to tell you."

"It must be important even to make you travel here so suddenly."

"Brianna..."

"Hang on. I also have something very important to tell you. This is the most important news of your life, Albert." She stepped forward, taking a sip of coffee.

"What's so important to tell me?"

"You are going to be a father!"

"What?"

"That's right. I'm Pregnant. We must mark the date of our wedding soon."

"No! That can't be true."

"Why not?"

"Because... Because we're not married yet. Look, are you sure about this?"

"Here's the exam I did at the best New York clinic."

"Let me see." He took the exam from her hands.

"Oh my God! You really are pregnant!"

"Yes I am."

"That means we have to set the date of our wedding soon."

"Yes, we have. But please keep it a secret; do not tell your family anything. I am very ashamed."

"I will not tell anyone. That must be a secret. They'll only know after we get married."

"Albert, what's so important to you to tell me?" What made you travel all this way all of a sudden?"

"That's what I meant, Brianna. I came here to tell you that we have to set the date of our wedding as soon as possible."

"I'm happy, my love. You can start to prepare everything. Go back to Ogden and give this wonderful news to your family. I need to stay here for a few more days. I'll be right back."

"Is not it dangerous for you to be traveling?"

"Of course not. Albert, pregnancy is not disease."

He let the coffee cup fall to the floor. He felt a weakness in his fingers.

"Careful, Albert. Are you alright?"

"Yes I am. Suddenly my fingers lost their firmness. It must be the thrill of the news. So I'm going back to Ogden right now and preparing everything for our wedding. Goodbye, my love."

"See you later."

He kissed her strenuously. He managed not to cry with disappointment. While he was in the taxi on the way to the hotel where he would pick up his things, he whispered to himself,

"This is not happening; this is not happening."

Arriving at his hotel room, Albert could not restrain his anger and shouted:

- Dang it! What have I done with my life? I'll call Richard." He picked up his cell phone and dialed his friend's number.

"Hello."

"Richard, it's me, Albert."

"Albert. So, did you get to New York? How was it? Is your engagement to Brianna over?"

"My friend, I'm desperate, I do not know what to do. My God, a terrible thing has happened! I do not know what I do, Richard, I do not know what I do! I'm going to lose forever the woman I love. Ana Lucia will be devastated when she finds out."

"Albert, stay calm. Tell me exactly what's going on."

"I'm not done with Brianna."

"Why aren't you?"

"Before I said I meant to end it all, she told me she's pregnant. I'm going to be a father!"

"But wait a minute, are you sure about that? She may be inventing this pregnancy just so you do not end it.

"I sure do! She showed me the exam. I have no way out; I'm bound to marry her."

"Listen, Albert. Do not make any decisions now. Do not call Ana Lucia yet, do not tell her anything at the moment. Is Brianna coming with you?"

"No, she's going to stay here for a few more days in New York."

"Great. You get your flight back and come straight to my house, do not go to the farm. Let's talk calmly. Do not make a decision like that. Look, my friend, pregnancy does not force a man to marry someone he does not love."

"You're right, Richard, I'm going to the airport, take the first flight to Ogden, and I'm going straight to your house. I'm bewildered. I do not want to lose Ana Lucia."

"And you do not have to lose it. I'm waiting, my friend." Richard hung up the phone.

"Ana Lucia, what's up? Has Albert called you yet?"

"No, he has not said anything yet. I'm pretty sure he did not break up with Brianna."

"Do not look like that, my friend. Come to think of it, you better forget this guy."

"Shelly, I don't know if I can forget him."

"But you'll have to."

"I've never loved anyone that way."

"I understand... How about taking a walk from the mall? So you get distracted a little. We spent the morning studying and solving absurd calculations. We deserve a few minutes of distraction."

"I am not in the mood."

"Girlfriend, I do not know what to do to cheer you up."

The doorbell of Richard's house rang.

"Albert, come in. I was waiting for you."

"Excuse me."

"Sit down, my friend. We are alone here. Tell me everything that happened. Calmly."

"I am desperate. I do not know what to do. Even before I said I did not want to get married, Brianna announced the pregnancy and asked me to keep it a secret until after the wedding. I did not dare finish everything with her." he said, already sitting on the couch with his hands on his head.

"Albert, listen to me. Did you check the exam she showed you right?"

"Yes, Brianna would not be able to invent such a serious thing. She did not even know I intended to leave her."

"Think about it, you're not required to marry her just because of the pregnancy."

"And you think Ana Lucia will accept that? I'm sure Brianna would ruin my life forever. She has the strong genius and would not forgive my rejection."

"Whether Ana Lucia will accept it or not, that's another story." What I mean is you should not marry Brianna if you do not love her. The time when men were married out of obligation is over. Albert, we are already in the 21st century. Wake up! Do not ruin your life."

"I'll think about what you're telling me. Tonight I'm looking for Ana Lucia to talk. I think I'm going to my house now. Worst of all, I promised Brianna that I would begin preparations for our marriage."

"Do not worry about that. Preparations can be postponed. For God's sake, if you do not love Brianna, do not marry her; otherwise you will be unhappy for the rest of your life, as well as hurting her."

"You're absolutely right. I just need the courage to leave a pregnant woman and let her be a single mother."

"She'd better be a single mom now and in the future find someone who really loves her than you make her unhappy after she finds out you do not love her."

"I go to my house to refresh my mind, to reflect, and at night I talk to Ana Lucia."

"Learn at once: love is a war, soldier. Welcome to the battlefield. Richard patted his friend on the back."

It was already night. Ana Lucia was in the open field of the university doing her usual observations in the telescope.

"Ana Lucia."

She turned.

"Albert."

"Need to talk to you."

She moved closer to him.

"You do not have to tell me anything, Albert. By your silence, I presume you have not finished your engagement to Brianna, and to make matters worse you may have the nonsense to invite me to be the godmother of your marriage!" Ana Lucia exclaimed indignantly.

"That's not what you're thinking. I did not finish the engagement with her for a very serious reason. I am obliged to marry Brianna."

"And what is that?"

"She asked me to keep it a secret. But I love you, Ana Lucia! I love you to the moon and back. I confess that I am lost; I am not sure what to do. I'm feeling a blind man lost in a maze."

"You think I'm a fool? I know very well why you feel obligated to marry her."

"My love, she's pregnant."

"I know."

- Ana Lucia, listen to me. If you accept my fatherhood, I give up marrying her. I face everything bad that will come just to stay with you."

"You know what, Albert? I do not accept being with you knowing that you will have a child with that woman! Our life will be an infinite torment as a periodic tithe. Brianna is going to disturb my life forever. We will not have peace. Do you know what it means for her to be abandoned by her son's father? Do you know what it means to her, a noble woman, to be a single mother? Do you really think she's going to accept being rejected by you like this in a good way? Look, Albert, do whatever you want out of your life. If you do not want to marry her, do not marry, but I will not stay with you knowing you have a child with another woman. No, I do not accept your condition as a father, I have already explained my motives." she condemned aggressively.

"Think better. I love you; it's you I want to stay with. For God's sake, give me one more chance."

"Chance? During all these months we lived together, we had beautiful moments and you have not had the courage to end your relationship with another woman so far! Come to think of it, you do not love me. If you really loved me, she would not be pregnant. All this time you did not have the courage to stay with me. It's too late now. Albert, you let me down a lot.

"So you do not love me?"

"I love you, but I can't sacrifice my right to have a man just for me because of my feelings for you. As a future scientist, you should know that reason has to come first. Do you really think I'd be happy on your side with that woman chasing me for the rest of my life?"

"Forgive me if I was not the man you expected ... And the worst thing is that I could not even give you a kiss... A kiss to remember this love I have for you. I need so much to kiss you. I need so much to have you in my arms."

"Enough! I'm tired of all this. Unfortunately, this kiss you will never have. Forget this dream of yours. Forget your madness. And do me a favor: when you walk past me through the aisles of the university and the mansion, do not look at my face. Pretend you do not know me, because I make sure you do not look at your face any more. Excuse me!" She left ruthlessly, furious, her eyes red with anger. She was about to collapse in tears. She even left her telescope behind.

"Ana Lucia, you can't do this to me! Come back here! Ana Lucia! Ana Lucia!" He dropped to his knees on the floor after stumbling again due to weakness in his legs.

Ana Lucia ran into the lodge and slammed the door. She cried without stopping.

"My friend, what happened?" But deep down, Shelly knew. "I'm not even going to ask you what the reason for your crying is. Since every time you come in here crying the reason is Albert! Oh my God! This man only makes you suffer." Shelly told the truth.

"Shelly, he did not break up with Brianna because she's pregnant."

"I already suspected."

"Albert proposed that I accept his father's condition and said he'd find a way to end it all. But I did not accept it, I know Brianna well and my life would become hell hotter than the planet Venus. She would torment me forever."

"You're absolutely right about that. That woman would not settle for being a single parent because of you."

"I told Albert that even if he does not marry her, I still do not get him at all."

"Girl, you're covered in reason. You're young and deserve to have a man just for you. Besides, if he loved you like he says, the other would not be pregnant."

"Men are all the same. And you can't imagine what hurt the most."

"What's it?"

"Albert had the gall to ask me for a kiss."

"No!"

"Yes. He said that he wanted a kiss from me to keep from memory."

"And you kissed him?"

"Of course not! I have my dignity. Shelly, you can't imagine how hard it was not to kiss him, I held myself so I would not hug him."

"You'd better quit your job at the mansion."

"I can't, I really need the money. I told Albert that I do not want him to look at my face."

"You did the right thing. It would not be good to go down to that point. I hope you support seeing him there every day on the farm."

"I'll stand for my salary. I'm going to pretend he's a stranger, a stranger."

"Good luck my friend. Honestly, I would not want to be in your place."

Brianna came into the mansion with her head held high. She found Ana Lucia entering the office. She was surprised to see her without a maid's uniform, all elegant.

"Albert."

"Yes my love."

"Why did Ana Lucia come into your father's office? Why is not she wearing a maid's uniform?"

"Because she's no longer a maid. It was promoted by my father. Ana Lucia has been our secretary for a month."

"You did not even tell me. Things have changed around here."

"They changed. They have changed a lot."

"Albert, you do not seem to be happy about our marriage."

"Your impression. I already talked to my parents about our marriage. They want to have a great engagement party next month and then get married. We can't take too long, can we? Soon your belly will grow."

"Do not worry about it. I can wait another month and a half. I wear wider clothes to disguise."

"I have to work now. You can feel at home. I asked the maid to prepare the guest room for you to rest."

"You do not have to. I'll stay in my apartment myself. But every night I'll be here with you to watch the stars on the hill together."

"It's all right. So I'll ask my driver to leave you at home now and at night I'll pick you up to be together on the hill. I really have a lot of work around here this afternoon. I'm going to my office."

"All right, go to your office. Before I go home, I'd like to talk to Ana Lucia. I want to congratulate her for being promoted. She is amazing! We should invite her to be our maid of honor, after all, she's your best friend, is not she?"

"Yeah, she's my best friend. You can go talk to her. Now I have to go, excuse me." He left.

Brianna whispered to herself before heading for Ana Lucia's office:

"Liar. You think you can lie to me. You did not even kiss me."

She entered without knocking.

"Is that you? Next time, knock on the door and ask to come in" Ana Lucia warned her.

"Ana Lucia, my dear, I do not need to ask permission to enter the farm's office that will one day be mine. Albert and I are getting married. All that is his will be mine."

"Lucky you Brianna. Why do not you get out of here, huh?"

"Don't be so rude! I came here to invite you to be the godmother of my marriage, after all, you and Albert are such friends. Or you are no longer friends?"

"You can only be going crazy or making fun of me! I would never be your maid of honor. I'm no longer Albert's friend, I hate cowardly men."

"You tried to steal my fiancée, but I was faster."

"True. I noticed his speed. But you don't have to worry about; I never meant to stay with a man committed to another woman."

"And it did well. The dangerous style does not suit you, who is so intellectual."

"Brianna, if you'll excuse me, I've got a lot of work to do. I'm tired of your ironies."

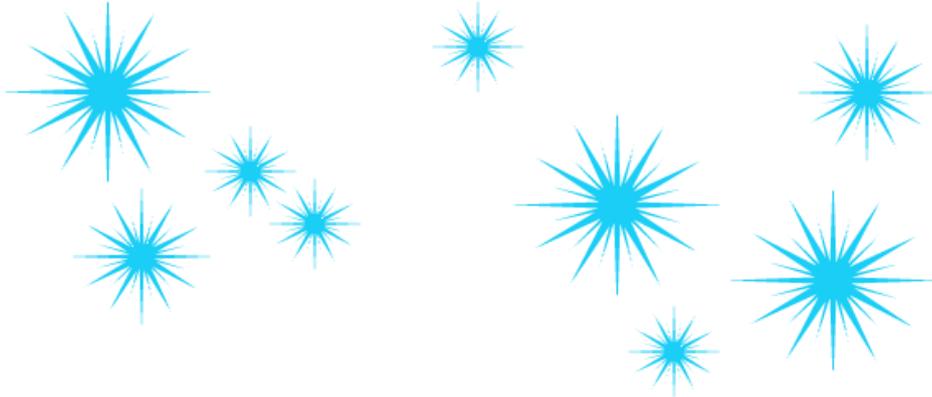
"Yeah, I'll be right there. I have so many wedding things to solve. I love shopping! I've worked and studied so much, I deserve a rest."

"Good shopping! And please do not come back here to bother me."

"Excuse me." Brianna left.

"I can't believe I'm going to have to put up with this woman teasing me here at work," Ana Lucia muttered to herself.

THE HUG



"Aunt Margareth, you need not have bothered to come here just to talk to me. You were having fun with Uncle Freddy in Los Angeles. I'll be fine." Ana Lucia tried to reassure her.

"I made a point of coming. Los Angeles is so close to here. Ana Lucia, your uncle is well settled in the hotel. This city is beautiful. Do not worry, Freddy and I are walking."

"Thanks aunt. You are the most important person I have in my life."

"After everything you told me over the phone, I felt compelled to come here and advise you. I feel responsible for you; after all, you are the daughter of my late sister. You're my only niece. I have to take care of you. Tell me, so now you're the secretary in the mansion and no longer a simple maid?"

"Yes, I was promoted because I could speak French. You and Uncle Freddy encouraged me to learn before you left with him for France. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember, and you learned quickly. You were very interested."

"Yes, it's a fascinating language. You started teaching me."

"But you do not look very happy here, which is strange for a girl who is studying what she loves and a good job. What else is going on besides your platonic passion for your boss's son? Do not hide anything from me, I'm your aunt, I love you. Trust me. I know something important is happening, you told me yourself."

"The truth is, I'm just on the job for the money. If it only depended on my will, I would leave here at once."

"Does your bitterness have anything to do with Albert?"

"Yes, it has to do with Albert."

"What happened? You told me he's going to marry another woman."

"Yes, he'd always been engaged to another woman, but he'd shelved the marriage."

"If he's delayed so much, it's because he does not really love her." And from what you told me, it was you who awakened in him the love of astronomy. I'm sorry you're living platonic love."

"No, I'm not living love at all. I am deeply disappointed in my life, in reality, especially with Albert. He hurt me a lot."

"But what did he do?" If he does not love you then he'd better take the other."

"Auntie, Albert said that he loves me, he declared to me, asked me to kiss, he was willing to end everything with the other just to be with me."

"Then why aren't you together?"

"Because I did not take him."

"And why didn't you?"

"Because he found out the bride is pregnant. And this I can never accept! Yes, he intended to end everything with her to stay with me. But I did not accept the situation. He did not even dare finish it all off when he went to talk to me about the pregnancy. I could not bear to be with Albert knowing that he has a child with another woman."

"Ana Lucia, if you love him so much you should at least have given him a chance, just to see if it would work."

"I do not feed illusions. I'm sure it would not work. That woman would never accept being abandoned, being a single mother. It would make my life hell. I would never have peace with Albert. Their son would always be a motive for emotional threats."

"I understand, but I still think he deserves a chance."

"I can't deny it, I'm in love with him, but it's no use, he has a girlfriend. She's arrogant, she's a snob. Auntie, I do not know how a guy as cool and loving as Albert can like and date a woman as bland as Brianna."

"Passion is blind."

"Then I can only be blind. I have lived with him unforgettable moments. But it's over; I do not accept a man who has a child from another woman. Much less in

this situation. I'm tired of war; I want peace in my heart. I cannot stand more complicated relationships, Auntie!"

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"You're scared to love. Do not have the courage to face whatever it is to be happy."

"Honestly, I'm not willing to fight hell to maybe win paradise. I've had enough of all this. Thanks for coming, but I do not want to talk about it anymore." She closed the subject with her aunt.

"Ana Lucia, you're late. How was it at the consulate?" Shelly asked yawning.

"I do not even want tell you, Shelly. I could not renew my student visa. The consulate has demanded that I return to Brazil and renew it there. There was no way. I have few days to return to Brazil. I already bought my ticket. I'm leaving the day after tomorrow.

"Bad news my friend. But you're coming back, are not you?"

"I hope so. I have twenty days of holidays. It will be good for me to spend some time in Brazil. I really want to see my cousins, my relatives."

"You're quite right there. It will be good for you to forget Albert for a while. I'm just surprised, because I thought you were staying for Christmas with me.

"I cannot stay. You know what? I'm loving my departure back to Brazil."

"And have you warned your bosses?"

"Yes, I did. They wanted to interfere, but I did not let them. I want to go back to Brazil. I need to see my family. I fought so hard to get here and now I count the hours to go."

"I wish you luck and come back soon, my friend."

"Shelly, I beg you to take good care of my telescope."

"Of course, I'm going to use it a lot."

Albert noticed Ana Lucia's absence that late afternoon. The sun was setting and he felt an uncontrollable urge to take Ana Lucia up the hill.

"Mother, Ana Lucia did not come to work today, something very unusual. Do you know anything?"

"Yes I know. I thought you knew too. Ana Lucia will be back in Brazil tomorrow. Her visa has expired and she will have to return to Brazil to renew it."

"How did it expire?"

"Well, my son, the consulate demands that she return to her country. After all, Ana Lucia didn't have an immigrant visa or a visa to work here. I offered to help, but she said that she really wanted to go back to Brazil to see the family. And I agree."

"I need to talk to her. I'm going to the campus right now."

Albert drove like crazy to the university campus. Ana Lucia made her farewell remark in the open field.

"Ana Lucia."

"Albert."

"Then you're leaving leave, and you did not tell me!"

"I did not see any reason to let you know I'm leaving. My life is not about you," she replied angrily.

"And the love you feel for me is not worth anything?"

"Love?"

"Yes, I love you more than anything in the universe. And I'm just sorry you do not want to be with me."

"Albert, tell me one thing. How dare you tell to me that, when you are about to marry another woman who is expecting your child? And you're mistaken; I wish I did stay with you. What I do not want is to have to accept an unbearable ex-bride and a son who is not mine. I deserve more than that. I do not want to be the second, the one that arrived after; I will not carry your destiny on my back. Understand this once and for all!"

"I cannot understand your cruelty to me. I'm willing to face everything to be with you, but you're not willing to do anything for me."

"Yes you are right. I'm not willing to do anything to stay with you. Cruelty? Your bride is a snake. She went to my office to laugh at my face. She mocked me and

celebrated her victory. She celebrated the wedding with you. Just imagine if you leave her pregnant! Do you have any idea what Brianna would do to destroy me?"

"You are right. It's all my fault. If I had finished with her as soon as I discovered that I loved you, that pregnancy would not have happened. I'm going to marry her, yes, because if I cannot have you, then nothing else matter. But can I at least give you a good-bye hug? A friend's hug?" He asked, his eyes filled with tears.

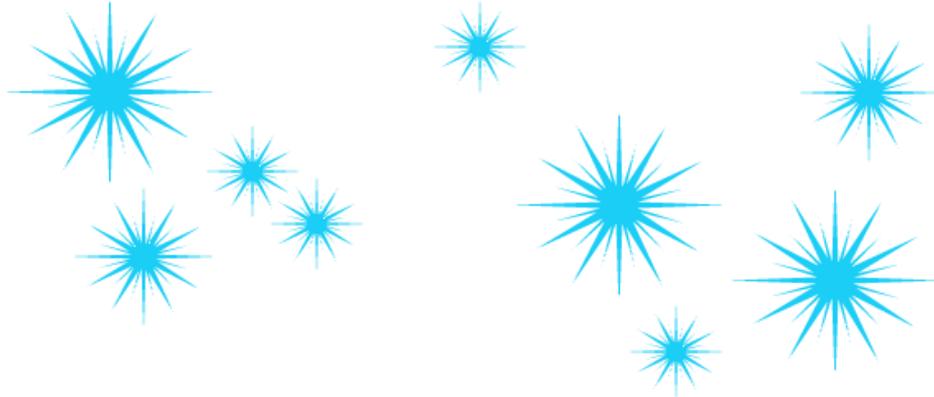
Ana Lucia's heart raced. Her body shook inside.

"Albert, you do not know how I am suffering from all this. I'm destroyed inside. Once again I have to say goodbye to a great love." She took a deep breath. "Okay, hold me." She held out her arms to him.

Albert cried and hugged her with all his strength, as if he wanted to trap her inside him.

"Ana Lucia, I love you so much. Stay with me. We can be happy together, we can be great astronomers and build our observatory as you have both dreamed. My God! I swear if I could I'd hold you inside me so I'd never lose you. I would go back in time and end it all with Brianna, so I would stay with you in peace" Albert declared, pressing Ana Lucia against his chest. He needed that hug a lot at the time of the farewell.

SANTOS ROAD



In an intense storm, Ana Lucia landed back to Brazil at Guarulhos airport. Margaret went to greet her. She embraced her warmly, but the heart of the newcomer was like the cold, stormy sky.

The astronomy student breathed deeply to feel in her lungs the relief that São Paulo airs brought her. She hardly saw the time to kill the homesickness of his relatives, the beaches, and the moments she had lived there, even her old loves that gave less pain.

Nothing would be able to draw from Ana Lucia's mind the frisson that Albert's embrace had left on her body.

They talked in the car on the way to the coast.

"How good it is to be back, Auntie. Thank you so much for coming to pick me up at the airport."

"No need to thank me, I would never let you take a bus to the coast after a tiring trip like this. Now that you're staying at my house, we'll have plenty of time to talk. The airs of the beach will do you very well. You need to let go of everything that happened to you in the United States."

"I miss the Enseada beach. I spent all my childhood in Guarujá with my parents, before they passed away. It will be wonderful to touch my feet back on those sands. Before, I'd like to spend two days in Santos with Alice. I also miss talking to my dear cousin. We were always confidant."

"Sure, I'll drop you off at Boqueirão, but I'll wait for you in Enseada. You'll love my new apartment. Freddy and I arrived a few days from France. As we lived in the interior of the country, he is still getting used to living on the beach in a busy city. To tell you the truth, he is worshiping life on the coast."

"I'm glad Uncle Freddy's adjusting. It was because of you that I became interested in learning French.

"And so you were promoted at your former job in the United States."

"Do not even remember me."

"We'll have time to talk about it."

"Sometimes I think it would have been better if I had moved in with you in France. I think America was not the right decision."

"Are you going to give up being an astronomer? Will you give up graduating from an American university?"

"I fought so hard to be accepted at Weber University. I worked my whole adolescence by collecting money, I learned English, and I learned French. Aunt, the greatest dream of my life is to graduate in astronomy!"

"Then you cannot give up on your goal because of a mere lack of love."

"I'm not going to give up; I just do not know if I'm going back to Ogden."

Two hours later they arrived at their destination, the city of Santos.

"How good it is to be back breathing that air, the air of Santos. Now I feel at home."

"Welcome back home, Ana Lucia."

"We're just getting to Alice's apartment. I'm going upstairs with you to give her a hug.

"Of course auntie. Come with me."

Margareth parked in front of the San Rafael Building, on Avenida Conselheiro Nébias.

"Ana Lucia! I missed you, cousin!" Alice received her with a strong hug.

"I'm glad to be back. I asked Aunt Margareth to leave me here to see you before I went to Guarujá."

"You did very well; we have to get our conversation up to date. I want to know everything in the smallest details."

"And where is Gustavo?"

"He has not come yet from work. Aunt Margareth, sit down. I know you're tired. Especially you Ana Lucia who made an exhaustive trip. You sat on that plane for fourteen hours."

"Thank you, cousin."

"Thank you for the invitation, Alice, but I have to get on the ferry just before rush hour. The traffic in Guarujá is terrible at this time. My husband should be home by now. Ana Lucia, call me whenever you want and I'll come to get you." Margaret said, getting up to leave.

"Alright, Auntie. I'll be here for two days. I'll call you soon. But do not worry, I can probably take a cab.

"Alright. I'm going. Goodbye, girls."

"See you later, Auntie."

"Come to visit me more often" Alice said, smiling.

"Of course." Margaret stepped back.

"Ana Lucia, you look tired. Take a shower and later in the evening we can go for a walk on the beach and you'll tell me everything. My daughter is on vacation at grandmas' house. You can sleep in her room."

"Thanks. I really need to rest. I'm going to take a shower."

"Feel at home."

At nightfall, the city of Santos once again lit up with the classic car headlights and public fixtures. The edge and the boardwalk of Gonzaga beach were especially the most beautiful view of the paulista coast. The lights on the buildings, the summer tourists that circulated there, all excited, enjoying the end of the year, the young people playing volleyball in the sand, all that was what Ana Lucia most wanted and needed to experience at that moment.

"Cousin, thank you for the invitation to walk on the beach. How I missed this sea, this beach, and this nocturnal landscape of buildings illuminated, tourists and vacationers playing volleyball in the sand... This year-end climate is all I needed. I missed this Brazilian heat, that energy".

"I thought your great dream was to live in the United States."

"I really enjoyed living in the United States, but here is my place."

"And the faculty of astronomy you wanted to attend, you've given up?"

"Astronomy is my passion. I was forced to return to Brazil on the consulate's request. They want me to renew my student visa here."

"Does that mean you'll soon return to the United States to resume your studies?"

"Yes. I'll for sure. The two semesters I studied there were the most incredible in my life. Do you know..."

"I know, you told me a little message of what happened. It was a beautiful love story that you lived with that American. It could have had a happy ending."

"Nothing very different from what I lived here on the roads of Santos. Walking through this sand I remembered right now the day Gabriel finished with me after confessing that he already had a bride. I ran to this same beach, and I threw the bracelet he gave me as a gift into the sea. That night I cried so much kneeling in these sands..."

"Ana, your love affairs would make a fine book."

"I do not know if people would like to read a book about my failures."

"Tell me one thing: did you finally kiss the American at the farewell hour?"

"No! I did not kiss Albert."

"But why not? If you had at least kissed him, you might have discovered a stronger feeling of love than all the obstacles and impediments. A kiss makes all the difference at the time of a choice as important as the one you had to make."

"He begged for a kiss of mine, but I resisted. I did not want to go through what I spent here in my beloved city. I'd rather believe that I made the right choice."

"Is his fiancée really pregnant, or did she come up with all this just to keep you from being with him?"

"She showed him an examination done at a highly respected clinic in New York."

"Ana Lucia, frankly, I would not stop being with the one I love just because he has a child of another woman."

"Cousin, you do not know what you're saying. That woman is unbearable, she would never leave me alone with Albert, torment me forever. I want a man just for me, and not for sharing with another woman, much less for a child that is not mine."

- I understand ... How about we continue our gossip making a snack from São Paulo in the Shopping Motoburger? I have some news that will keep your mouth open. And it interests you a lot." Alice sharpened her curiosity.

"Now you got me super curious."

"Let's go to the mall and I'll tell you all about it while we have dinner."

"Immediately."

They got in the car and headed to the Shopping Center.

"How I missed the stirrings of the shopping malls. This fun atmosphere is contagious."

They made the request and sat at the table.

"Alice, tell me now, I'm very curious to know about this news you have to tell me."

"There you go! Gabriel did not get married!"

"What? He did not get married? Are you kidding me?"

"I'm not kidding, that's the truth. He didn't get married!"

"But why? He was so in love when he let me out. I'm puzzled. What happened?"

"His fiancée gave up the wedding two days before the ceremony."

"No?"

"Yes."

"Wow! He must have been devastated."

"He was."

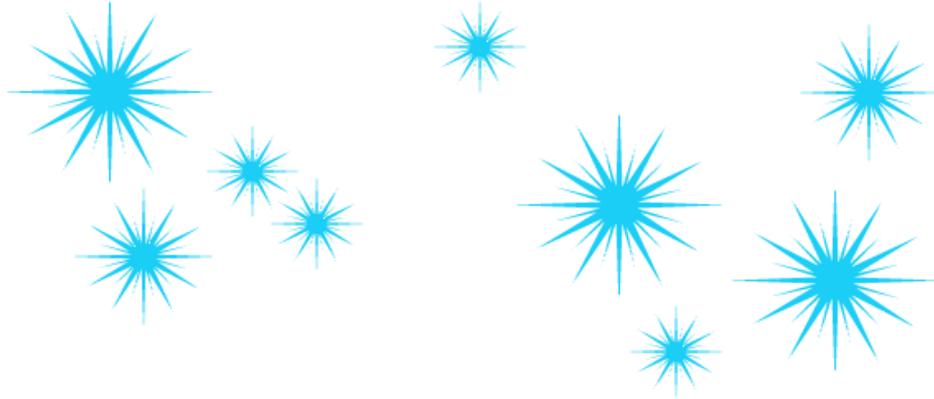
"Everyone has what they deserve. Look at the music that is playing: samba and pagode, the preferred rhythms of us, paulistas. How I missed hearing the samba playing in public places! I feel avenged now." Ana sighed with relief.

"From what I see, you were content with the tragedy in Gabriel's life."

"I do not desire anyone's suffering. But what Gabriel did to me is almost unforgivable. Alice, back in the States I stopped kissing the man I love in the name of my dignity! And Gabriel deceived me, made me go through a lover, made me kiss him and I did not even love him that much. He deserved to be abandoned. Surely she discovered he cheated on her."

"I don't know why. But I kept the news to tell you now that you came back."

ENSEADA BEACH



For the first time since arriving in Guarujá, Ana Lucia spent a few hours in the morning at Enseada Beach. Sitting on those sands with so much meaning, she reflected on the last events of her life.

Without waiting, he spotted a tall man dressed as an athlete. He ran along the beachfront. The seashore was calm on that beach still empty of tourists. It was very early; it was seven o'clock in the morning. The man approached Ana Lucia, who stared at him in surprise.

"Gabriel!" She got up and smiled.

"Ana Lucia! You are here?" He looked even more surprised.

"I should say: you here!"

"I thought you were still in the States."

"I was, but I had to return to Brazil to renew my student visa. I am staying at my aunt Margareth's house, two blocks from the beach, in the Acapulco Beach Building, Rua São Paulo."

"Yeah, I know the building. But you did not tell me the floor and the apartment number."

"You're still silly!"

"I meant it."

"I took advantage of it to enjoy the beach a little early, before the summer vacationers arrive and fill these sands. I like to reflect on life admiring this sea."

"To reflect, I understand... But what a coincidence we meet again here! I've been on the beach for the past few months every morning."

"I did not know that athlete side of you."

"Now I worry more about my health and I keep this exercise routine. I am a manager of a building materials store, on the Estrada de Pernambuco, not too far from here, like four blocks from here. Before work I make my run."

"It does very well."

"How long will you stay in Brazil?"

"Just until my visa comes. I love being here again. This is my first day at this beach where I spent my childhood. Being able to breathe this air is something unique. Soon after I arrived, I stayed in Santos for three days at Alice's house. I missed her a lot."

"It was good to see you, Ana Lucia."

"I say the same, Gabriel."

"Says the same? There's something. What do you think about having lunch together today at Il Faro restaurant? Think about it: it will be your first lunch facing the sea."

"We just met again and you're already inviting me to have lunch with you?"

"And why waste time? We already know each other, you were my girlfriend. Not officially, but you were."

"Your invitation surprised me. You're right, why waste time? Yes, I do, and I do not need to think too much. I still think we have a lot to talk about."

"I see you still have the habit of listening to music as you meditate."

"Yes, I don't leave this cell phone for nothing. It came from America. My aunt doesn't like it. She tells me not to leave the house with a cell phone, because of the robberies, but I'm not afraid. If the thief wants to take my cell phone, take it. I'll work and I can buy another one."

"I know your romantic view of things. But I believe your aunt is right."

"So we have date, at noon tomorrow, at Il Faro. My first lunch facing the ocean. I'll arrive a little early to get a table by the glass window."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I need to get ready."

"All right, I'll meet you there tomorrow. See you later." Gabriel kissed her cheek.

"See you." She smiled as she watched her athlete run up and down the beachfront.

Ana Lucia stumbled into her aunt's apartment.

"Honey, where were you?"

"Auntie, I'm sorry, I did not tell you. I woke up early to go for a walk on the beach; I wanted to enjoy it while the tourists weren't there, enjoy the tranquility of having the sea just for me."

"Do not worry honey. Just do not leave the house by displaying your imported smartphone. Here the robberies happen all the time. It's dangerous."

"I already said I'm not afraid of a thief."

"Well, you should be. And what is that face?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're smiling. You even seem to have found the Prince Charming on the beach."

"And I did."

"What? Who did you find?"

"I happened to meet Gabriel. He was doing the morning run"

"Is this Gabriel the one who left you there in Santos? Days before you left for the United States?"

"Yes aunt. It's him. Gabriel is now manager of a store nearby. He invited me to have lunch tomorrow at Il Faro."

"And you accepted?"

"I accepted."

"How? This guy deceived you, humiliated you. Is not he married now?"

"No, he's not. His fiancée gave up the wedding two days before the ceremony. I know it seems strange that I accept this lunch after what Gabriel did to me, but when I saw him there on the beach, so beautiful, smiling at me, I felt a frisson."

"Frisson?"

"Yeah! Frisson, you know? Heat in the chest. Moreover, there remain words that have not yet been said."

"Unsaid words! I understand. I just hope this guy does not make you suffer again."

"Do not worry, now I'm already armored against deception."

"I hope so."

Ana Lucia admired the crowded beach of tourists and vacationers through the glass window of the restaurant Il Faro. Fifteen minutes after her arrival, Gabriel emerged all elegant. He approached the table and kissed her hand.

"Ana Lucia, you came!" He sat down.

"And why shouldn't I? This restaurant is one of the best here on the beach. I could not miss this opportunity."

"I loved your argument. I'll call the waiter. Have you chosen the dish yet?"

"Yes, I chose, I was just waiting for you to arrive to ask. How about Seafood Toss with the accompaniments?" She suggested.

"Perfect. Waiter please, Seafood Gamela!"

"Yes sir. The waiter noted the request."

"I pay half." Ana Lucia wanted to be fair.

"Not at all. I asked you out, I paid for everything." He made a point.

"You're being a gentleman, Gabriel."

"While we wait, we can begin our conversation."

"Yeah, that's what I'm here for."

"I thought you would never agree to meet me after all the harm I did to you."

"You hurt me bad. But nothing like an old hurt to forget another hurt worse."

"What are you talking about, Ana Lucia? Who hurt you so much after me?"

"It's a long, exhausting story, worse than ours. A lot worse."

"Now I'm curious."

"Contain your curiosity. Alice told me you were not married."

"It is true. I did not get married. My ex-fiancée gave up the wedding two days before the ceremony.

"Surely she discovered you dated other girls."

"Maybe, but she did not want to tell me. And you? Did not you get a boyfriend back there in the States?"

"Almost did."

"What do you mean, almost did?"

"I've tried to focus more on my studies. I went to the United States to study and not to date. And you? Did not you get another girlfriend?"

"No."

"Why?"

"After my marriage went wrong, I discovered that it was you I liked. But I did not have the courage to look for you or even to call. I felt unworthy. After all, I misled you. I regret much of what I did. When I have a new girlfriend, I will not make those mistakes any more."

"I'm happy with your change of attitude. You know, that night you abandoned me, I ran to Gonzaga's beach and cried on my knees in the sand. I threw that bracelet you gave me as a gift. I regretted it was an expensive bracelet, I should have sold it."

"I assure you someone found it and did it."

"That night the songs on my smartphone saved me. Whenever I'm depressed I already put a song to play."

"And what song did you choose to mourn that night?"

"As Curvas de Santos", in the voice of Lulu."

"Perfect. But we had another song, remember? The one we danced at my niece's prom... I forgot the name. It was even the remix of a flashback."

"The song was 'Sorry, Marin' from Magic Box."

"That's it!" He agreed."

"Young people today do not like classical dance music very much. But this remix was from 2008. I never forget: DJ Robbie. A delight to dance to."

The waiter served the Seafood Gamela with the accompaniments.

"Ana Lucia, I'm thinking here... we can spend the turn of the year together here in the Enseada beach, what do you think about that?"

"I'll be right here on the beach. Sure we can. But first let's talk more. There are still ten days to New Year's Eve. Speaking of which, I have to pick a cool dress for the turn of the year. In my last New Year's Eve, in the United States, I was dressed in a maid's uniform. Not glamorous at all. Now in this new phase I want to be beautiful here on this wonderful beach."

"Speaking like that looks like you do not want to go back to the States. What happened there to leave you like this? Gave up being an astronomer and proving the existence of extraterrestrial life?"

"No, I did not give up. It's just that this situation of my visa annoyed me. That's it"

"I understand. But you will be able to renew it. I'm sure. You did not do anything wrong there, did you?"

"I did not do anything wrong, I was an exemplary student."

"Then it'll be all right. Do not worry. Enjoy summer here on the coast of São Paulo."

"You're right. How did I miss coming to a bar or a restaurant on the beach and listening to a samba, a pagode, Belo, SPC, Alexandre Pires, MPB..."

"I missed you, Ana Lucia. Too much. An avalanche of memories made me see that you would be the right woman for me. It's amazing to be here with you. I never imagined that this moment would happen. Speaking of pagode, there is a song that reminded me a lot of you. By the way, two."

"Which are?"

"After you left for the United States, everywhere I went I played the songs 'Misterios do Coração, and 'Amor Verdadeiro'. "

"Finding you now is a surprise to me, just as it is for you," she said, smiling.

"What's it? Suddenly you looked sad."

"Nothing. Lunch was great. But now I need to go."

"I need to get back to work, too."

"Thank you, Gabriel. You were a real gentleman."

"Can I get your WhatsApp number? We can talk..." He continued.

"Of course! I'll write it down for you." She took a pen and a piece of paper from her purse and wrote down the number. "Here it is, this is my WhatsApp number." She handed him the piece of paper.

"I'll add your number as soon as I get to the store. I do not usually walk with a cell phone in my hand. See you later. I'm heading out." He stood up.

"I'll go to the bathroom before I go. Excuse me. Goodbye." She stood up, kissed his cheek, and then hugged each other. He left.

Ana Lucia entered the bathroom of the restaurant, started to cry and washed her face several times. Gabriel's words reminded her of his love for Albert.

"Ana Lucia. How was the lunch?"

"It was good, Auntie."

"You look so serious. What's it? The food was not good?"

"It's not that. The food was delicious. Seafood platter could not have been better."

"And then?"

"It's just that Gabriel treated me so well, he says he's sorry he left me. We remember our good moments from the past. He told me that I would have been the ideal woman for him."

"Does that mean you've forgotten the American already?"

"No, not at all. Indeed Gabriel's words made me cry just because I remembered Albert."

"And tell me one thing: are you going to use Gabriel to make you forget Albert?"

"No, Auntie. I'm not going to use him! I just want to take this opportunity. I'll keep going out with him."

"You do not even know if he's really sorry."

"But I can find out in time."

"Okay, but take it easy on this relationship."

It was past one o'clock in the morning. Ana Lucia was already in bed. She used to surf in the internet on her smartphone before bed. That was how she fell asleep. WhatsApp signaled for new messages. One of them was Gabriel wishing her a good night and expressing sincere feelings for having found her again.

But the other message was worse; it was a message from Albert, not written exactly in words. He sent Ana Lucia a video. It was the music video "Miss You Love" by SilverChair, just the song they listened to on one of the nights they stared at the stars and marked their feelings. Ana Lucia's body trembled as she watched the video. Without delay, she collapsed in sincere tears of dismay. She did not answer any of the messages. She got up from the bed.

With the smartphone in hand, Ana Lucia stepped down the elevator and left the building. She headed toward the beach. That woman with a broken heart could not stop crying and sobbing. She crossed the long strip of sand, the beach was empty. She entered that dark sea, went deep into the background. She threw the smartphone into the depths of the sea. She did not want anything that could remind her of the love she'd given up. In tears, she spoke to herself as she contemplated the dark sea:

"I avoided for so long to approach and love someone I could not have. So you came into my life and left me memories of what happiness really is. And if a picture of you is all I have now to move on, I'll have to settle for it. I do not know about the future, but even so I wanted you here so much with me, by my side, so that I could contemplate your beautiful smile and the sincerity that emanated from your blue eyes. I need you so much. I wanted so much to share the days of my life with you. I tried, but I cannot forget you. The brightness of your eyes is still in me. Here, alone, every day without hearing your voice calling me, it is a real torture; it is the torture of silence. When you got to my house, everything changed. My life will never be the same with you away from me. Why can't we be together? This is just another day without you. I try, I swear I try to forget you, but your image and your memory torment my dreams every night."

For Ana Lucia, love was, in fact, a deadly poison that killed little by little. How can one understand why one's absence causes so much suffering? This is the question that all those who love do when they suffer.

Margareth stood up for a glass of water. He noticed that the door to Ana Lucia's room was open. She looked for her all over the apartment, but did not find the niece.

"Where did this girl go at this time?" She asked worriedly.

Suddenly the door opened. Ana Lucia was back.

"Ana Lucia, where were you at this hour? My God! It's too dangerous for you to walk around by yourself at dawn. You're all wet! What happened?"

"I'm fine, Auntie. It was nothing."

"What's going on here? I just woke up scared of your conversation at this time." Freddy questioned them after entering the room.

"Uncle Freddy, nothing happened. I was just going for a walk. I'm going to my room. Excuse me." She withdrew and locked herself in the bedroom.

"At this time?"

"Freddy, go back to bed. I'm going to talk to her right now."

"Alright then. Talk to your niece. She cannot walk around alone by dawn." He left to his room.

Margareth knocked on the door.

"Ana Lucia, open the door. I want to talk to you."

The niece opened the door.

"I want you to tell me exactly what happened. What is this story about the early morning walk? And why are you wet? I know you're an adult already, but I'm your aunt and you live in my house, so you owe me satisfactions.

"Auntie, I apologize for disturbing your sleep. It's just that I had to go to the beach."

"Are you crazy? Going to the beach at dawn, alone? You were in danger. You entered the sea. Why did you do that?"

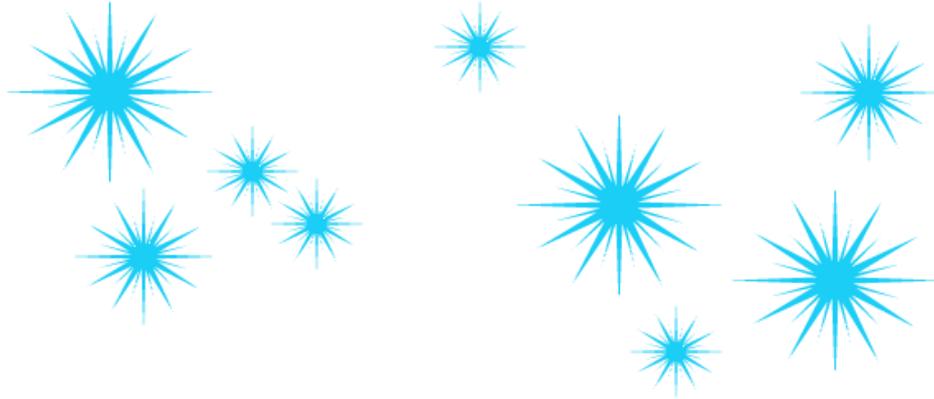
"I got a message from Albert. He sent me a video clip of the music he and I listened to while watching the stars. He meant that he loves me and that he misses me. I did not support it, I started to cry and went to the beach, I went into the sea and I threw my smartphone in the ocean. I cannot stand any remembrance of the man I loved."

"You and the habit of throwing expensive things in the sea."

"I could not stand it. It's like a rite of detachment."

"My dear, I know you're suffering, but it was your decision not to give Albert a chance. Now you have to suffer the consequences and the pain of distance. It will soon pass. Now take off your wet clothes and try to sleep. You need to get back together. Life goes on."

THE ENGAGEMENT



Brianna arrived at the mansion at 8pm. She was exuberant for the occasion when her marriage to Albert would be officially announced to friends and family.

"Mr. Matthew, what about Albert? He should be here to greet the guests with me." Brianna questioned her future father-in-law.

"I'm looking for my son, too. I arrived today for the engagement and I have not yet spoken to him."

"He's in the room getting ready. He will be down soon. Do not get anxious, Brianna." Annette tried to explain.

"I hope he won't take too long."

"Do not be anxious. Today is the day of your engagement. Relax. Look there, your friend Cherry has arrived."

"I will talk to her."

"I've never seen the groom take so long to get dressed." Matthew expressed concern about his son's delay.

"I think it's strange, too. It was already for Albert to have come down. I'm going to the bedroom to see if everything's okay with it."

Albert remained locked in his room, not daring to go down. Sitting on the bed, he stared intently at a photo of Ana Lucia that was saved on his cell phone.

Annette knocked on the door. He hid his cell phone.

"My son, it's me!"

"Come in, Mother."

"Albert, what's going on?" Why have not you come down yet? You're not even ready."

"Mother, I'm desperate."

"But what is happening, my son?"

"I did not want this party. I did not want this engagement."

"Albert, what are you saying?" Do not you love Brianna? Do not you want to marry her?"

"I do not want to get married, Mother. But I will."

"Why? Tell me, why do you feel obligated to marry Brianna?"

"Mother, I cannot tell you why I'm being forced to marry the woman I do not love."

"My God! Albert, my son, you do not trust your mother anymore?"

"I trust, but I promised not to tell anyone. It's a secret."

"It must be something serious, you're even crying." She stroked Albert's head, stroked his face. "Who do you love? Tell your mother."

"It does not matter."

"You love Ana Lucia, do not you?"

"Forget it, Mother. I'll get dressed, I'll be downstairs soon. I'm going to marry Brianna. She is my fiancée. I cannot disappoint her. And I can't abandon her in this situation." He wiped away his tears.

"I'll go down with you. I want to be by your side at this moment that seems so difficult. I respect your desire not to want to tell me anything. But when you want, you can be sure that I'll be here to support you, no matter what your decision will be"

"Thank you mom; I know I can count on you."

"Son, if you do not want to get married, you should not go ahead with this engagement."

"Do not worry. I'm getting married, yes. It was only momentary confusion. But it's over. Wait for me outside the room. I'm going."

"It's all right. I'll wait for you outside."

Albert put on his best suit and convinced himself that he should move on with his commitment to marry the woman he did not love.

"Matthew, I'm already getting nervous about your son's delay. What's going on in that room, huh? I'm distressed. Did he give up on being engaged?" The bride asked, distressed.

"Calm down, Brianna. Albert would never do that to you. Look, there he is."

Albert was about to go downstairs. Annette was beside him. He suddenly felt a weakness in his legs. He fell off the stairs. He rolled the steps to the floor and fainted.

"Albert! My God! Son!" Annette ran down the stairs.

The guests crowded around Albert.

"My love! Albert, wake up! What happened to him? Why did he fall off the stairs?"

"He must have slipped," Cherry suggested.

"I'll call the ambulance. Annette, he was not he feeling well?" Matthew asked nervously.

"He was a little strange in the bedroom. But it looked great. I did not see him slip into anything."

"Albert, wake up, my love!" Brianna cried out in despair.

"Accidents like that happen very quickly and we hardly ever realize what actually happened," Richard said, approaching his friend lying on the ground.

"The ambulance is on its way. Do not touch him, Brianna. It could be worse. With the fall he may have bruised his spine." Matthew warned her.

"My husband is right, Brianna. We can't change his position until the rescue arrives."

"The ambulance arrived," Cherry said minutes after the accident. "The nurses are coming in with the stretcher to get him."

"Everyone, please. My son will be put on the stretcher."

"I'm going to the hospital right now."

"Let's get together in my car, Annette."

"Yes let's go."

"I'll go with mine," Richard said.

The guests left from the mansion. Everyone lamented what had happened. Richard and Cherry were the first to go to McKay Dee Hospital, Ogden's most respected.

"Doctor, for God's sake, save my son!" Annette begged, following the litter that was led through the cold corridors of the emergency room.

"Sorry, but you can't come in. You have to wait outside."

"But it's my son! I have the right to know what you are going to do with him."

"Do not worry, my love. Our son is in good hands. It will be all right. Doctor, she understands, we'll wait here."

"What happened to Albert? I'm desperate," Brianna asked anxiously, as she paced back and forth.

"My brother must have tripped, so he fell off the stairs. But Albert's going to be okay, right Mom?" Meg tried to console her future sister-in-law with her childish innocence.

"But of course he will, Meg. Do not worry. He'll get better, daughter."

An hour later, Dr. Smith appeared in the waiting room.

"So, doctor, what's the news about my son?"

"What's wrong with him?"

"Keep calm. Your son has fractured a vertebra and is being operated on. After the surgery we will do more exams to find out what he really has. Before being sedated, he regained consciousness and reported weakness in his legs."

"Yes, now I remember well that he felt weakness in his hands in New York. He even let a cup fall." Brianna remembered nervously.

"Doctor, what do you think he has?"

"Without the result of the exams I cannot advance any diagnosis. First let's see how he recovers from the surgery and then do whatever it takes to find out what he has."

"I can't believe this is happening right now that I'm about to get married!" Brianna lamented the new reality.

"Contain yourself, Brianna. Marriage can wait. My son's health is more important than anything." Matthew emphasized reprovably.

"My husband is right. Now is not the time to worry about marriage. Brianna, you're very nervous. Go home, rest. Then I'll call you and tell you how the surgery was." Annette advised.

"No way. Albert is my fiancée and I'm going to stay here until I know he's OK!"

Cherry and Richard entered the waiting room.

"Girl, how's Albert?" Cherry asked, hugging Brianna.

"Is he awake?" Richard wanted to know.

"Albert broke a vertebra. He's undergoing surgery." Matthew replied.

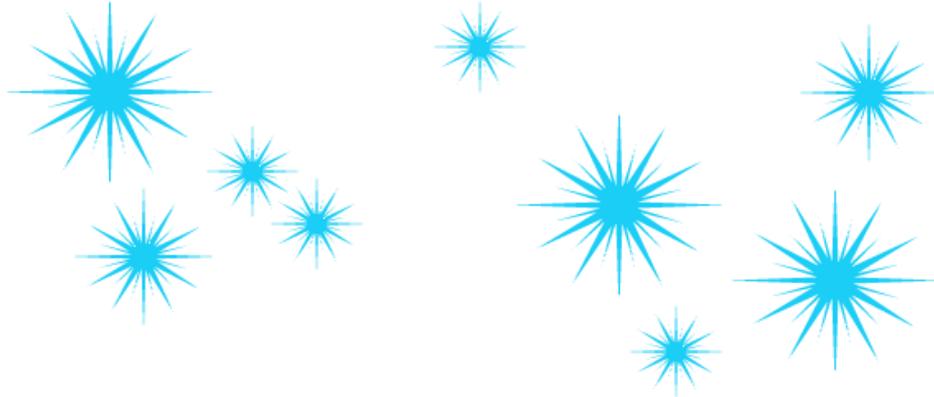
"I hope everything goes well," Cherry said.

"After the surgery he will do several tests to find out why he is feeling weak legs," Meg explained to his brother's friends.

"It must be no big deal. Albert is so young and so strong. He will recover soon."
Richard was optimistic.

"That's what we all expect, Richard," Annette said, hugging her husband.

A NEW YEAR



It was Christmas Eve and Gabriel had the day off. He should have stayed at home helping with the preparations for the supper her parents were organizing in Santos, but he was surprised that Ana Lucia did not contact him after lunch at the restaurant and thought that date could not go blank. He had to see his beloved one more time.

"Concierge, what is Mrs. Margareth's apartment? I'm friends with her niece. My name is Gabriel. I'd like to speak to Ana Lucia." he said, in front of the Acapulco Beach Building.

"It's apartment 403 on the fourth floor. I'll call you over the intercom and ask for permission to come up."

"Thank you."

"Mrs. Margaret, there's a boy here claiming to be friends with your niece. His name is Gabriel." the concierge warned her.

"Yes, you can let him go up," he said.

"Come on up, boy."

"Thank you."

Gabriel went upstairs and rang the doorbell. Margareth opened the door.

"You must be Gabriel!" She smiled at the boy.

"Yes It's me. And you must be Aunt Margareth. Am I right?"

"Yes, I am Aunt Margareth."

"It's nice to meet you. He held out his hand."

"It's my pleasure, boy."

"Is Ana Lucia there? I need to talk to her."

"Come in and make yourself comfortable. Ana Lucia went to the supermarket with my husband. They bought some things for supper. Sit down. She will be back soon."

"Excuse me." He stepped inside and sat down on the couch.

"Would you like some juice?"

"No thank you. I tried to call her, I sent her a message, but I could not get an answer from WhatsApp."

"She lost her smartphone. She probably dropped at the gas station. Ana Lucia is so distracted." she said.

"What a pity. It was such an expensive phone. She told me she brought it from the United States." Gabriel lamented.

"Yes, it's a pity."

Freddy and Ana Lucia entered the apartment. They carried shopping bags in their hands.

"Ana Lucia, look who's here: your friend!"

"Gabriel!" She exclaimed in surprise.

"I tried to call you, but I could not, so I came here!"

"Oh, I just lost my cell phone," she said.

"Your aunt told me that you lost your smartphone at the gas station."

"Yes! Wow! It hurts my heart just to remember that I lost a cell phone so dear!" She pretended to be in pain.

"I want to know if you're up for a walk on the beach with me." Gabriel invited her.

"Right now?" She asked.

"Yes now."

"I'm coming back from the market, and I promised to help Aunt Margaret prepare the sweets for our Christmas dinner at Santos's house," she said, trying to dodge.

"I thought they were having dinner right here in Enseada."

"At first, yes, but my cousin insisted so much that she persuaded Aunt Margaret and Uncle Freddy to spend Christmas night with her. Sorry, I did not

introduce you to my uncle. Gabriel, this is my Uncle Freddy. Uncle, this is a longtime friend, Gabriel.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Freddy.”

“Just call me Freddy.”

“As you wish, Freddy.”

“I'm going to the kitchen to take the bags.”

“Let me take your bags, Ana Lucia. Freddy reached out to take the bags.

“Thank you Uncle.”

“Ana Lucia, you are fine to go out with your friend. I can handle to bake the sweets for supper. I'm more than used to doing it myself.” Margaret released the niece for the walk.

“Are you sure, aunt?”

“Yes. Don't worry my dear.”

“Come on, Gabriel.”

“Let's go.” He stood up.

Side by side, they walked down the sidewalks toward the beach.

“For a moment I thought you did not want to see me again,” Gabriel commented, wanting to know more.

“I have no reason not to want to see you. I just lost my phone. Besides, I was sure you'd come to look for me in the building.”

“I'm going to spend the night with my parents in Santos. I have not told you anything before, but now I live here in Guarujá.”

“Where at?” She was curious.

“On Avenida Dom Pedro I. I rented an apartment just for myself in Edifício Ilhas do Atlântico. It's been a while. I thought it was time for my life, to be independent of my parents.”

“That's good, because you're working here.”

“You have to go there and taste my pasta any day,” he invited her.

“Maybe one day I'll try out your culinary skills.”

They reached the beach, down to the sand, walked along the shore.

“Ana Lucia, the way you talk, it seems you're afraid to go to my apartment.”

"You do not know me, do you? Do I have reasons to be afraid?" She asked him ironically.

"Of course not. I'm not the bogeyman."

"I'm sure it is not."

"You want a corn?"

"Yes, I do. I love corn with margarine."

They went to the kiosk just ahead of where they were.

"Wow! The beach is already full." She commented, covering her eyes because of the sunlight.

"Like every sunny holiday, even more so in the summer season. Two corns and a spring water, please." He motioned the kiosk worker.

"How I missed the Brazilian climate of beach, sun, and corn in the kiosk..." She expressed her longing.

They already had the corn in their hands. Ana Lucia tasted it, put more margarine.

"Ana, you still have not told me what happened in the United States."

"What do you mean?"

"Do not even try to hide anything from me. I know you. Every time I touch the subject of the United States you hesitate, change the conversation, and begin to talk about the longing you felt from here. Something very striking and not very pleasant happened to you there in the land of Uncle Sam and you are going to tell me now what it was." He summoned her.

"Your impression, you're imagining things. What happened there was not even extraordinary."

"So something really happened?"

"I promise I'll tell you later. But now let's get into the sea? I'm crazy to go for a swim." she suggested, taking him by the arm.

"Hell, I'm not even in the right shorts."

"Who cares? Take off your shirt and let's go! I'm going to get into shorts and regatta."

"You won. Let's go." He took her hand.

The clock marked 11:30pm on December 31, 2016. Enseada Beach was crowded with tourists and locals, who, as usual, anxiously awaited the beautiful fireworks display to receive the New Year that would begin. The buildings were all lit by the lights on the apartments.

"How I missed the sensational climate of the New Year on the beach, in the company of people that I like so much." Ana Lucia showed her joy alongside Margareth, Freddy and Gabriel.

"You look beautiful, Ana Lucia." Gabriel praised her, holding up a bottle. "Look, I brought the non-alcoholic champagne you asked for."

"And we brought the glasses. Get yours. In a few seconds we will be giving the beginning of a new year." Freddy handed out the glasses.

"It's good to have you with us," Margaret said through the presence of her niece and Gabriel.

"Guys, Countdown!" Ana Lucia exclaimed excitedly.

"Five, four, three, two, one!" everyone counted together.

The fireworks made the sky colorful at that moment. Everyone embraced.

"Happy 2017, Ana Lucia! Gabriel wanted her with the face close to her eyes.

"Happy 2017!" She said with a smile.

Gabriel stroked Ana's face and said nothing else, just kissed her. She responded totally to the feeling.

"A toast to 2017. And to love!" Freddy offered, raising his glass.

"A toast to this unforgettable night on this beautiful beach!" Margaret cheered.

"A toast to Aunt Margareth and to you, Freddy!" Gabriel wanted to.

"May 2017 be our year of achievement, Aunt and Uncle!" Ana Lucia exclaimed contentedly.

Gabriel hugged Ana Lucia picking her up.

"Ana, there is a super cool party of a friend going there in Santos. He just sent me a WhatsApp calling me to go. Let's go?" He invited her excitedly.

"Have fun, my dear!" Margaret counseled her, smiling.

"So let's go. Ana Lucia smiled took the hand of her beloved and they went to the car.

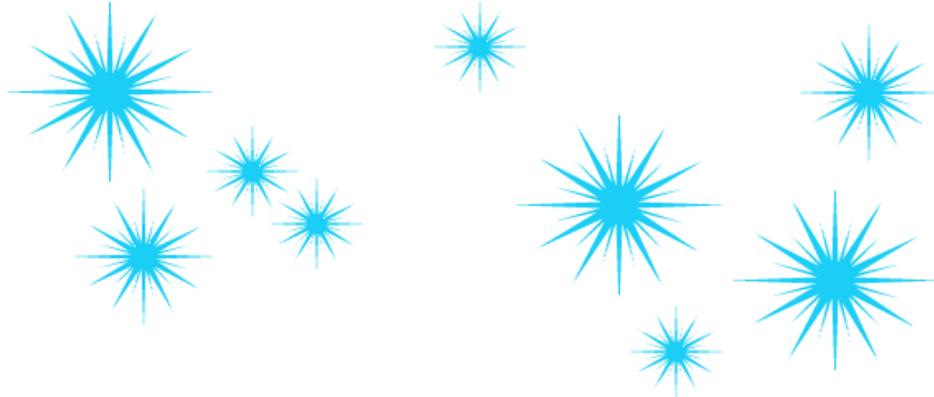
The party happened in a house on Gonzaga beach. As soon as they arrived, they were greeted by an electronic music that Ana Lucia loved and marked that night: "Runaway" - Galantis. They went straight to the dance floor, where they danced with all those songs. Hear me Now - Alok played after.

"What do you think of us running to the beach and taking an unforgettable sea bath?" Gabriel made the invitation, already taking her arm, toward the beach.

"I find this idea madly incredible! Let's go now." Ana Lucia agreed quite happily.

As they crossed the still-filled strip of sand, the song "Firestone - Kygo" was being played in a kiosk. It was the theme song of the instant they kissed in the sea. Then they played water on each other. Gabriel was sure that the love he discovered to feel was true and forever.

HOSPITAL



Brianna arrived at the hospital minutes after the doctor confirmed Albert's diagnosis. He called the family in his office to break the news.

"Doctor Smith, what is my son's illness?" What does he have? He has been in this hospital for fifteen days; Christmas and New Year have passed here. Can he go home?" Annette questioned him.

"Calm down, Annette. Let the doctor speak. What does my son have?" Matthew asked anxiously.

"Doctor, what is my fiancée's illness?" Brianna asked anxiously.

"I regret to inform you, but Albert was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis" the doctor uttered the harsh words.

"What are you saying, Doctor? Is this a disease that makes a person crippled in a wheelchair without being able to move?" Brianna asked again, desperate.

"That's the one, miss. I'm sorry." the doctor confirmed.

"I cannot believe my fiancée will be crippled! My God!"

"And there's no treatment that can stop the worst from happening?" Matthew asked, trying to keep his cool.

"We'll pay whatever it takes to see our son well," Annette insisted, already in tears.

"There are drugs to slow down the degenerative process, but nothing to ensure that the disease does not progress in the most severe way. The patient should be accompanied by a multidisciplinary team of physicians and physiotherapists.

There are cases where the disease stops to evolve and the patient has a reasonable life even with many limitations. There is also research on alternative treatments with adult and embryonic stem cells. You may even try alternative treatment in China.

"As a father, I will do my best to ensure that my son has the best possible conditions. How many days does he still have to stay here in the hospital?"

"I do not doubt that, Mr. Bennett. Your son's going to stay here for a couple of days, then he'll be discharged and he can go home." the doctor explained.

"Doctor, how long will he be paralyzed?" Brianna asked, and then let out a heavy sigh.

"Each organism reacts in one way. It can take decades or months. I advise him to start walking with a cane. Between five and twenty years Albert will be in a wheelchair completely without movements if the disease progresses more severely."

"Does Albert already know, Doctor?" Matthew asked, distressed.

"Yes, the patient was the first to know. He was very sad, of course, but he behaved with maturity. You can go to the bedroom to talk to him."

"I'm going to talk to my son right now," Annette said.

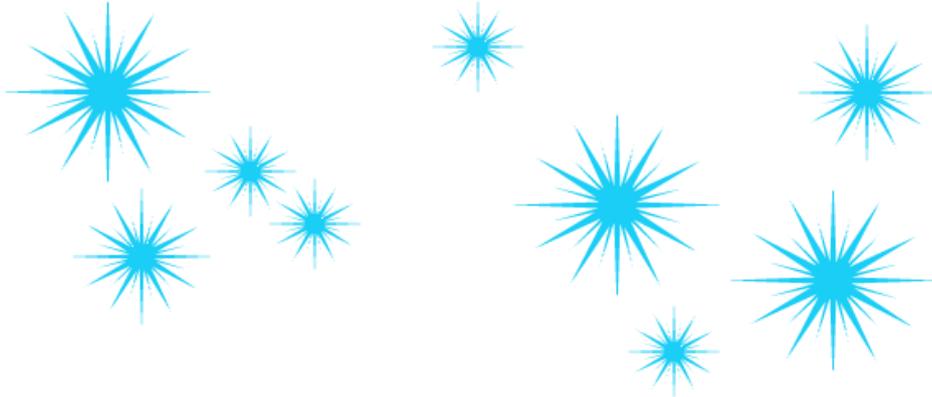
"I'm going with you, my love."

Brianna wept unmistakably.

"Brianna, will not you come with us to the bedroom to talk to your fiancée?"

"I cannot talk to him right now. I'm disturbed by the news of his illness. I'll go to my house to reflect. I'll be back tomorrow." Brianna left.

DISAPPOINTMENT



"Annette."

"Brianna! Why did it take so long to get here?"

"I had some things to solve. How's Albert?"

"And you still ask? Her fiancée discovers that he has a terrible disease and does not have the bride next to him to support him!"

"Stop censoring me. I need to talk to him right now. I made a decision and he has to know from me."

"Then go and talk to him! What are you waiting for? The room is number 104, on the next corridor."

"I'm really going to talk to him. Excuse me." Brianna headed for the hospital room.

She walked in without asking. When he saw her there, Albert felt no joy, he was afraid.

"Brianna, at last you have come," he said, lying on his bed, his head held high.

"How do you feel, Albert?"

"Now I still feel good. But as the years go by, I'll be stunted in a wheelchair, unable to move."

"I know, the doctor explained everything to me.

"You don't have to go on circles, Brianna. Tell me what you got to tell me."

"All right, I'll tell you soon because I cannot stand another minute in this hospital," she said harshly. "Albert, I do not want to get married any more. I would

never be able to take care of you. I do not have the psychological conditions of having a crippled, motionless husband in a wheelchair.”

“What are you saying to me? What about our son? You are pregnant! Do you want to be a single mother?”

“I was thinking of the best way to tell the truth, in a less cruel way. But there is no other way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Albert, I'm not pregnant. I've never been pregnant. I invented this pregnancy story just to force you to marry me. I did it to separate you from Ana Lucia.”

“And the exam you showed me at the best New York clinic?”

“I faked that pregnancy test. A friend of mine who is a doctor helped me to forge it.”

“What? No! This cannot be true! You cannot have done this to me! You're ruining my life. Brianna, you separated me from the woman I love and now you're abandoning me because I'm sick! Is that right or am I going crazy?” He did not want to believe what was happening.

“That's right; I'm ending my engagement to you right now. My bags are already in the car, I'm leaving to New York right now.”

“You tricked me, you lied to me. You kept me from being with the woman I love and now you're abandoning me. You're horrible, you're a snake! Ana Lucia told me so many times that you were no good and I did not believe you. I should have asked for another exam. Should have accompanied you on an ultrasound examination and so discovered your farce. Get out of here, Brianna! Get out of here now! I do not want to see you ever again!” Albert shouted with all his soul.

Brianna hurried off, crying hard.

Annette and Matthew witnessed the moment Brianna ran out, heard the son's screams, and hurried to the bedroom to find out what had happened.

“Albert, my son, what happened? Why did your bride run away from here?”

“She's not my fiancée anymore, Mother.”

“What do you mean; you're not your bride anymore?” Matthew asked, startled.

“And you still ask, Father? What woman do you think would agree to marry a man who's going to be lynched in a wheelchair, huh?”

“I cannot believe Brianna has abandoned you because of your illness! I can't believe she did this to you.” Annette was indignant.

"I'm not crying because she abandoned me. I want more is that Brianna sums up my life forever. I do not want to see that woman anymore! I did not even want to marry her."

"I know that, my son. You did not even want to go down to your engagement party. So what is the reason for your pain?" Annette questioned, still not understanding.

"I'm crying because, because of Brianna, I stopped being with the woman I really love. I felt compelled to marry Brianna because she invented this pregnancy story and even faked an exam! All of that just to make me marry her. Just to separate me from Ana Lucia."

"But that's terrifying. How was Brianna able to play with your feelings? How could she fake a pregnancy test just to force you to marry her?" Matthew was more and more outraged.

"Brianna's a viper. She broke up with me because of my illness, said she could not bear having a crippled husband! I told Ana Lucia that I loved her and that I would not marry Brianna even though she had a child of mine. But Ana Lucia did not accept the situation, claiming that she could not bear to stay with me knowing that I would have a child of another woman who would torment her life forever. Ana Lucia was quite right. Brianna is evil, she is treacherous." Albert let it out.

"What a horror! How could she have left you, Albert, my son? I do not suppose anyone fools a son of mine that way!" Annette was disgusted.

"I feel so relieved to have Brianna no longer in my life, and even more relieved to know that the pregnancy was false. But because of her I lost Ana Lucia forever. I love that Brazilian with all the strength of my heart." Albert said, crying.

"My God! But how was she able to do that? It's awful!" Annette repeated, still not believing.

"Her attitude is pitiful. She faked a pregnancy test." Matthew recalled.

"Actually, the woman who just walked out the door is a snake. She's no good. And now I'm here alone, without the woman I've loved most in my life. By the way, the only woman I've ever really loved." Albert cried once more.

"My son, what Brianna did was deplorable. I'm so sorry you're suffering like this." Annette hugged her son warmly.

"I'm going to talk to Brianna. She owes us explanations. How could she lie like this and then just leave you? I'm going after her right now. That woman needs to

hear some good truths. How could she come up with such a lie? Pregnancy is serious, not a joke." Matthew repeated his disgust in words.

"Don't my love. Don't make scandals."

"I'll go after her, Brianna will hear me. She cannot play that way with people's feelings." Angrily, Matthew withdrew, slamming the door behind him.

"It's all over for me, Mother."

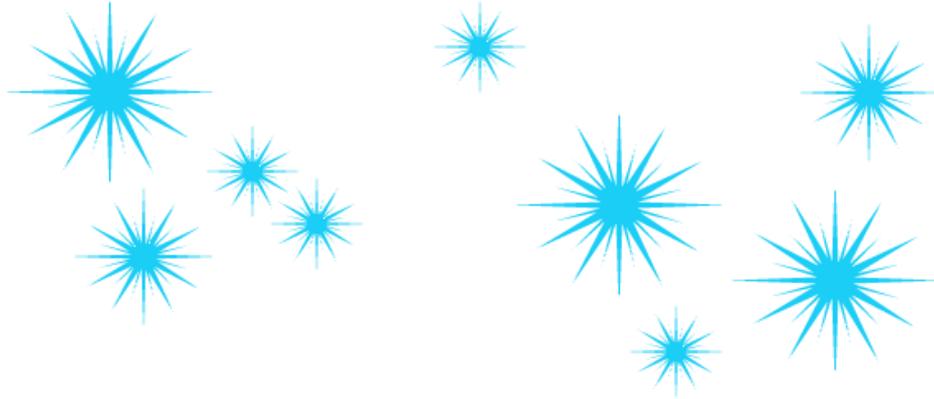
"Albert, hold me. I'm here to take care of you. Your sister is out there, she wants to see you. Meg misses you."

"My little sister is so innocent."

"Son, you're going to have to call Ana Lucia and tell her everything that's going on. She needs to know the truth."

"No, Mother, I do not have the courage. By now she must be with someone else and I do not want to make her suffer even more."

TRUE FEELING



“Ana Lucia.” She was sitting on the balcony reading a Physics article on the tablet.

“Aunt.”

“Can I know what you read so much on this tablet? It must be something very interesting.”

“Yes, it's very interesting. I am reading the doctoral thesis of the physicist Alan Beventura. It's unbelievable. This is a study of time-closed curves.” she told Margaret.

“I do not understand anything about scientific language. Translate it for me.”

“It's a thesis about time travel. Especially travel to the past. It was published by USP.” Complemented the explanation.

“And, according to what this physicist wrote, is it possible to travel to the past?” She asked curiously to her niece.

“Well, the calculations say yes, it is possible to travel to the past. But it's not so simple to do. We would need an effective means of transport that is far from being invented. We do not know whether the human body would endure travel as fast as light. I loved this thesis, I just finished reading.”

“Ana Lucia, is there anything in the past that you would like to change if you could go back in time?”

“But of course! It would change many things. Who would not want to change something in the past if it could go back in time?”

"Speaking of going back in time, your beloved is down below waiting for you to walk on the beach."

"Wow! I completely forgot that he would come today. I was so distracted reading this incredible thesis that I forgot. I'm going to change fast. We will take a wonderful sea bath in Pernambuco Beach."

"Do not delay; do not go leaving your prince waiting."

They sat on the sand of the Pernambuco Beach. That Saturday afternoon was sunny.

"I love this beach. It's the first time I've been here since I came back to Brazil. And this Jequitimar hotel is beautiful!" Ana Lucia expressed her joy.

"Looks like the hotels in the Caribbean," he said, admiring the sea.

"Have you ever been to the Caribbean, Gabriel?"

"I never have been there. But I see it on the internet. This married sea is fascinating. Maybe one day I'll go to the Caribbean with my girlfriend." he suggested.

"You are very funny. When I was a kid, here was a magical place for me. I thought it was amazing a beach with two seas."

"Actually, it's just a sea divided by a strip of sand," he clarified.

"Yes, but in my child's head were two seas."

"Now that we're dating, it's time for you to tell me what happened in the States that hurt you so badly that it made you agree to stay with me again." He demanded an explanation.

"Wait, you're confusing things. We're not dating. We're going out, getting to know each other."

"It's the same for me. Going out, dating, whatever. I want you to tell me now everything that happened."

"Why spoil everything with a story that is not worth remembering?"

"So it was something that really hurt you. I need to know not to have any surprises later. You open up with me. Unplug. Whatever it is, I'm here to support you."

"Gabriel, since you insist on knowing, all right, I'll tell you everything."

"Tell me the name of the guy who hurt you so much that you agreed to date the man who deceived you."

"His name is Albert. I met him at the mansion where I worked as a maid. His father promoted me to the desk, on merit. I got French businessmen in their absence, I translated the conversations, I made the negotiation." She began the narration of the facts.

"Congratulations! And what did Albert do that hurt you so much?"

"He already had a girlfriend when I met him. A proud woman, very rich and beautiful, but arrogant. At first, I began to make my observations on the telescope at the top of a hill, on the farm. I went there every day after work. Until one day..."

"Until Albert got very curious and went up the hill to learn more about what you were doing. Am I right?"

"How do you know?"

"That's what I would do, too. Who would not be attracted to a beautiful woman who spends hours watching the night sky and the stars?" Gabriel explained to him about the men's attitudes.

"And that's how it all began. He went other times up the hill. Then the second time, he marveled at astronomy, asked me to admire the sky with him, took my hand. And the drama started because he wanted to be with me, but..."

"But he did not dare leave the millionaire bride to be with the poor girl he really loved."

"Exactly; he even started studying astronomy in college because of me. We got even closer on campus. But when, at last, he decided to end it all with the bride, a terrible truth came to light."

"What truth?"

"She said she was pregnant with him and so Albert gave up on abandoning her. However, he turned back and came to me, said that if I accepted that he was the father of another woman's son, he and I could be together forever."

"But you did not agree to be with a man who would have a child with another woman who was extremely unbearable, who would make your life an eternal torment that would never leave you alone with him and use his own son as an object of threat. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's right! You took the words out of my mouth. Do you believe that at the time of farewell Albert begged me to kiss? But I did not. More than once he

wanted to kiss me, but with great difficulty I refused. I did not want to be the other, the one who came later, just as I was the other in her life.”

"Ana Lucia, do you love this guy?"

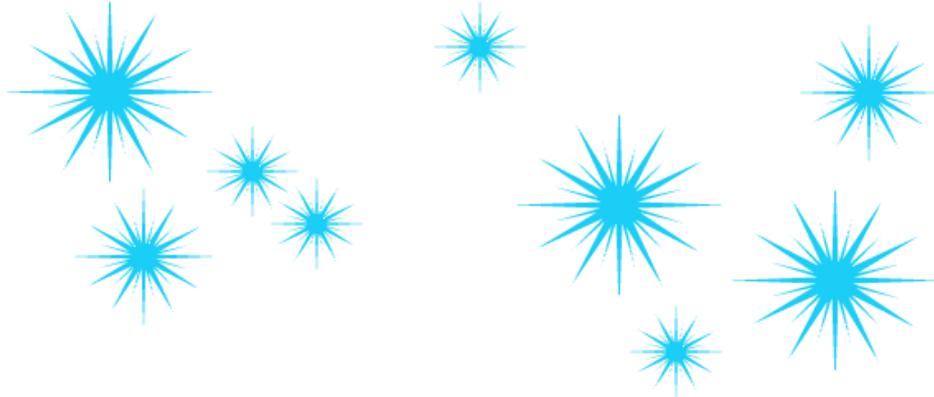
"Look, all I know is that I need to forget him. At this time he is already marrying the other. I do not want to talk about this anymore.”

“Okay, I got it. Now I want to know how you feel about me.” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"That question is very easy to answer. The passion I felt for you is still here inside my heart. When I met you at the beach that day I was all creepy. You still mess with me a lot, Gabriel.” She stated her true feelings.

"I just want to kiss you and make you forget for a moment all you've suffered.” He said, stroking her hair. At last he kissed her.

THE PAST IS BACK



Freddy accompanied his niece to the United States consulate in the city of São Paulo.

“Ana Lucia, was everything okay? Renewed your visa?”

“Uncle Freddy, they denied my student visa! I do not know why, I presented all the college papers. They said that I worked harder than I studied there. I do not understand, I did not miss school so much.” she said quietly.

“You do not look so shaken by your denied visa. On the contrary, you seem very relieved to know that she will not be able to return to the United States.” Freddy made the remark.

“Uncle, I decided not to bother with this anymore. I can continue college here in São Paulo, USP. Astronomy is the same throughout the world. I have all the papers from Weber University here with me. I study two more years here and I take my diploma. In the second semester in the United States I advanced several subjects on Saturdays.”

“You dreamed so much about graduating from an American university. You fought so hard for this, Ana Lucia.”

“But what can I do? They just denied the visa for me. I prefer to conform and continue here even my studies.”

“It has to do with Albert, does not it? Your aunt told me everything.”

"Yes, you're right, Uncle. I'm relieved that they denied my visa. I do not dare go back to the United States, or meet Albert again, knowing he's with another woman." She started to cry.

"My dear, you can cry. Cry on your uncle's shoulder. I'm just asking you to think it through. You can change university; you can go to another American state. There are so many good universities in the United States.

The bell of Margareth's apartment rang. She opened the door.

"Gabriel."

"Margaret, is Ana Lucia there?"

"Sure, you can come in. She is in the bedroom resting."

"Is she fine?"

"Sad. She could not renew his visa."

"What a pity. It is her dream to graduate as an astronomer at an American university."

"You can go to her room, I'm sure Ana Lucia will love your visit."

"Excuse me, I'll talk to her."

"Feel free."

Gabriel knocked on the bedroom door.

"Come in," she agreed.

"Excuse me."

"Gabriel, I'm glad you're here."

"You did not even call me to tell me what happened at the consulate." He sat down beside her on the bed.

"It's because the day was so tiring today, I just arrived from São Paulo."

"Your aunt told me your visa was denied."

"Yes, I do not know why, but it was denied."

"What about your college? And your dream of being an astronomer graduated from an American university?"

"Often parts of our dreams have to be left behind." She nodded.

"You seem quite content not to return to the United States."

"Yes, I'm very well adjusted. I will continue my studies at the University of São Paulo. Astronomy is the same everywhere in the world. You should be happy to know that I will not go back abroad."

"What is it? I know you loved American very much, but being a university graduate is the great dream of your life! I would never be happy to know you gave it up." he said truthfully.

"Let's change the subject?" She asked.

"That's right."

It was Monday. Ana Lucia received a surprise.

"Gabriel! What a surprise! You here so early! I thought you were running on the beach."

"I've come to get you to eat a pastel at the fair together. I know you love it."

"Yes, I do! Pizza is my favorite flavor. Only here in São Paulo they make a special pastel with a unique flavor."

"Then let's go to the fair! I'll also step in the Japanese shop to buy an Itubaína that you also love."

"I'm also in love with this tutti-frutti soda." She smiled at her beloved.

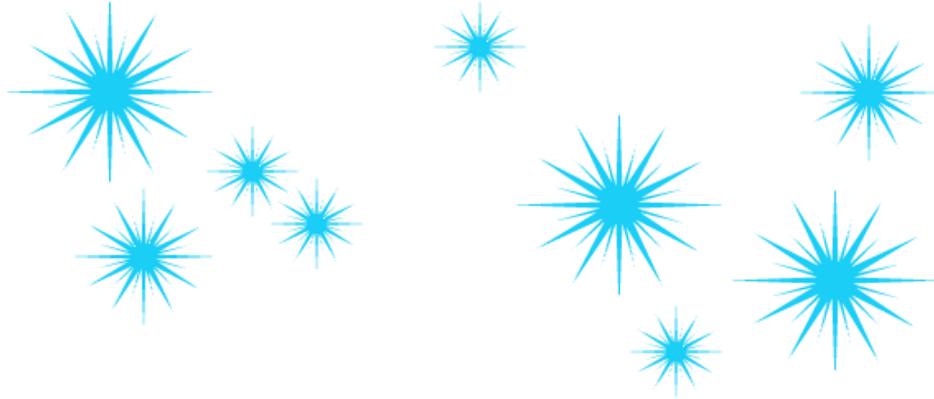
The carnival was approaching and Ana Lucia planned a trip in the company of her uncles and Gabriel. That night he had just returned from the travel agency with Freddy.

"Auntie, we bought the packages for the trip. Northeastern beaches await us at this carnival."

"I chose a wonderful hotel to spend the holiday facing a beautiful beach," Freddy told his wife.

"That's good, my love." She kissed her husband.

CARNAVAL



"Auntie, I always wanted to be here in Fernando de Noronha! These beaches are beautiful. And this view from the balcony, facing this crystalline sea, is wonderful!"

"Where is your boyfriend?" Margaret asked curiously.

"He's gone to his room. He's crazy to go to the beach and have a delicious sea bath."

"Do not waste time. Live this love that is doing you so well, Ana Lucia."

"True, this love is doing me very well. Soon I will resume my studies at USP and everything will return to normal in my life." She said excitedly.

"Well, your uncle is already there in the hotel garden waiting for me. I'm going down; let's clear the beaches and the city."

"Nice ride, Aunt. Have a good time." Ana Lucia smiled.

"You as well, my dear." Margaret kissed Ana's face and left.

Gabriel knocked on the door and Ana Lucia opened it:

"And then? Are you ready to know the beautiful beaches of Fernando de Noronha?"

"Ready. Let's go!" She said with a smile.

"I'm looking forward to the 90's carnival ball that will take place tomorrow night in the hotel lounge."

"Really? I was not even aware of this dance! It looks like it's going to be a lot of fun."

"The DJ is well known. It will remix the biggest hits of the 90s."

"I love 90s music".

"Me too."

The dance night came.

"The room is very ornate, the weather and the excitement are contagious." Ana watched, bouncing.

"Let's dance until you're tired, Ana Lucia. Tonight is ours!" He exclaimed excitedly.

"The DJ has started playing, let's go to the dance floor!"

The first song of the night could not have been more romantic: "Espelhos d'água", followed by a Brazilian funk: "Quero Te Encontrar". They danced for hours.

The clock struck two o'clock in the morning when they returned to the hotel room.

"Today was incredible, the best I've had since returning to Brazil," Ana Lucia assured him, with a radiant smile in front of her bedroom door.

"Ana Lucia, come with me to my room. We can talk some more, eat something." He invited her, stroking her hair.

"Gabriel, I appreciate your invitation, but I'm very tired. I'm going in; my aunt must be worried already. I'll see you very early tomorrow." She tried to dodge.

"Will you leave me alone?" He tried to make her pity him.

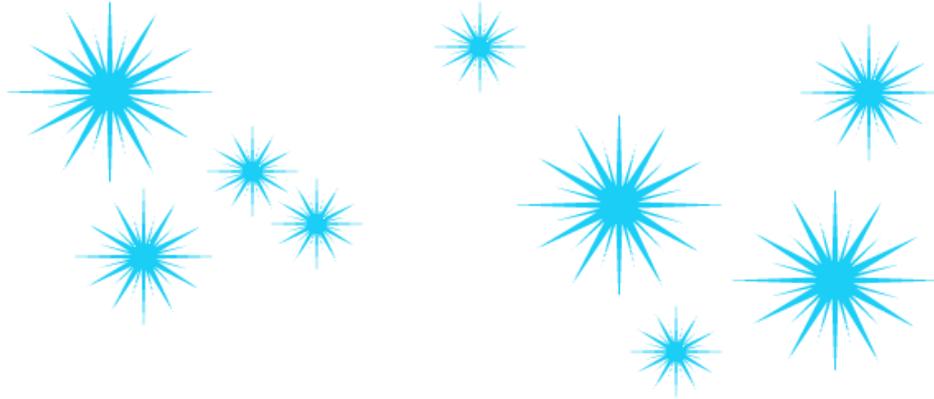
"Look, you know, it may be a bit out of date, very stupid, but I'm a practicing Catholic, and staying with you in your room now would not be cool. I'm like this, you know it, and we've dated before. This is what makes my conscience not weigh so much, knowing that I was your parallel girlfriend. If I had done more to you than kissed you, I would have felt very bad, the worst of lovers. I would never have forgiven myself, even though I was innocent, even though I was misled. You understand me?" She explained, lowering her head.

"Yes, I understand, I know very well how things are with you. That's why I'm sure you're the right woman for me. So we'll see each other tomorrow morning. Let's have a beautiful day at the beach."

“Yeah, we’ll see each other. Our days are always beautiful. Good evening.”

They kissed, he left, and Ana came into her room.

THE UNEXPECTED



That day was rainy in the city of Guarujá. Early in the morning it was possible to hear the sound of the sea waves.

It was late afternoon when Margareth gave the message to her niece, who had just arrived from Alice's house:

"Ana Lucia, you got a call from the United States."

"From the United States? Who was it?"

"It was your ex-mistress Annette. She really wanted to talk to you. She seemed to be very anxious."

"How does she have your number, Aunt?"

"First she called Alice, who gave me my number."

"And you speak English?"

"No, I do not speak fluently. There was an interpreter operator on the line."

"Did Annette say what was the important thing she has to talk to me about?"

"No, she didn't say anything on the subject. I asked her to call later."

"What does she want with me?"

"She said she would call again."

"I'll stay here in the living room waiting for the call. Honestly, I have no idea."

Ana was intrigued by this unexpected phone call.

"Well, you'll know soon enough."

The phone rang. Ana Lucia ran to answer:

"Hello!" She said anxious, certain that it was Annette on the other side of the line.

"Ana Lucia, it's me, Gabriel! Why did you say 'hello'?"

"Gabriel! Is that you?"

"Of course it's me! Who did you think it was?"

"I said hi because of the habit. I got used to answering the phone like that in the United States."

"I know force of habit. I couldn't go by today to see you, I worked until late today, I'm very tired. But tomorrow you can have lunch together in my apartment. What do you think?" He made the invitation.

"Okay then, I'll wait for you to pick me up." She accepted.

"Well, see you tomorrow. I also called to say good night." He showed his kindness.

"Goodnight My Love. Sleep tight." She tried to be affectionate.

"Kisses"

"Kisses." She hung up the phone.

"Well, it was just Gabriel wishing you good night." Margaret said.

"Yes, Auntie, it was just Gabriel wishing me good night."

The phone rang again.

"It's her now, Aunt. Hello!" Ana Lucia was right. It was Annette on the other end.

"Ana Lucia, is that you?" Annette asked in anguish.

"Yes, Annette, it's me. I'm very surprised by your call. Did something happen?"

"It did."

"Tell me, what is it?"

"Ana Lucia, for God's sake, you have to come back to the United States as soon as possible."

"Why do I have to go back?"

"Albert is very sick. The day of the engagement he felt his legs weak and he felt from the stairs, he was taken to the hospital."

"And what does he have? Is it a serious disease?"

"Yes, it's a very serious illness." Albert has sclerosis.

"Sclerosis?"

"Yes, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. The doctor said that little by little he will lose all his movements. He runs the risk of dying in a few years." Annette explained the situation to her.

"My God! This is horrible. I never imagined what Albert is the kind of disease. How is he now?" Ana asked, nervous and trembling.

"He's walking with a cane. It still looks good. But the worst you still do not know. It has been a month since he does not want to get out of bed anymore, he does not want to do anything else, he barely eats, and his life lost its purpose because he lost you. Albert does not want to live because he has lost your love forever, Ana Lucia.

"Annette, I've explained the reasons why I cannot stay with your son. He's going to be a father. Brianna's having a baby with him!"

"No Ana Lucia. Brianna is not pregnant! She never was!" She told the cruel truth.

"How come Brianna is not pregnant?"

"Brianna invented a pregnancy just to force Albert to marry her. In fact, a friend of hers, who is a doctor, faked the pregnancy test. And now, after all the lies, Brianna left Albert, gave up her marriage, and left for New York. She said that she does not have the psychological conditions to live with a crippled husband."

"No, Annette! This can't be true! For God's sake, tell me that this is not true! No! No! I cannot believe Brianna did such a thing! She is very cruel! It's an abomination!" Ana Lucia cried, her hands trembling on the phone.

"Unfortunately it's true. Brianna fooled Albert and so did you. She was able to separate you."

"I'm in shock. I do not know what to say."

"Ana Lucia, you need to come back and save my son's life. He loves you so much and I know you love him too. Please give him back a will to live. At this point Albert needs you a lot. Save my son, I beg you. If it goes on like this, he will die before the time. He needs to treat himself, do physical therapy and have you by his side." Annette begged on behalf of her son.

"You're absolutely right. I love Albert; I love your son more than anything in this life. And I'm very sorry that he's sick. But I can't go back to the States."

"Why cannot you come back?"

"Unfortunately, my student visa was denied by the consulate. They did not want to renew. I do not know why, I'm so sorry. My soul is desolate for everything you just told me."

"Ana Lucia, listen to me, I'll find a way to get you a work visa. I'll make you a contract to sign, a letter with a special request for the consulate. I'm going to a lawyer friend of mine in Rio de Janeiro and he'll file your visa application. You can do everything at the consulate in Rio. The lawyer will give you all the advice you need to get you back. In the last case, I take my son to Brazil, but he needs to be close to you."

"Alright, I'm going to Rio de Janeiro to talk to this lawyer."

"Go as fast as you can. Go tomorrow. I'll give you all the information by email."

"I'll wait."

"I went ahead and transferred five thousand dollars to your international account. It is for your expenses with the visa procedures and for your trip back here. If you need more money let me know."

"Annette you did not need to."

"Of course I needed it, Ana. I know things are difficult there in your country. It's the least I could do to bring you back here."

"It's all right. Tomorrow I'll catch an afternoon flight to Rio de Janeiro. At night I call you to tell you how it all was."

"Thank you, Ana Lucia. My mother's heart is more relieved to know that you're willing to help save my son's life."

"See you soon, Mrs. Annette. Goodbye." Ana Lucia hung up the phone.

Ana Lucia collapsed in tears, bent down on the couch with her hands on her head.

"What happened so badly, my dear? What did your ex-boss say made you cry so much?" Margaret asked in agony.

"Auntie, something horrible has happened. Albert has a serious illness."

"What disease?"

"Sclerosis, he's going to be stranded in a wheelchair."

"Oh my God! This is horrible."

"Albert was abandoned by the bride as soon as she discovered that he will be disabled."

"What an evil woman! And the kid she waiting?"

"She does not have any kid. She is not pregnant. She was never pregnant. Auntie, that woman lied to Albert, she fooled us. She lied that she was pregnant just to force Albert to marry her. Now that he's sick, she abandoned him."

"This woman played with the feelings of good people who did not deserve all this. And tell me, what does your ex-boss want you to do?"

"She wants me back in the States to save Albert's life. He is devastated, he doesn't even eat because of his depression.

"I bet. After all, he lost you because of a lie."

"I am really bad. God, I do not even know what to do."

"Did you explain that they denied your visa?"

"I explained. She contacted a lawyer to advise me on the process of obtaining a work visa at the consulate of Rio de Janeiro. I'm going to Rio tomorrow, after having lunch with Gabriel and telling him everything."

"I'm sorry. Just now that you were getting on so well with Gabriel this had to happen..."

"Auntie, Gabriel will have to understand the situation. I love Albert with all the strength of my heart and I cannot leave him there slowly fading alone. You understand me? As much as he does not survive and the future is uncertain, I have to stand by him and help him deal with the disease!"

"I understand, the situation is very serious, Albert has a degenerative disease. In a few years it will be completely invalid. You have to make him happy during this time that remains for him."

"I'm going to; I'll stay by his side every minute."

"I wish you good luck, my niece."

"Thanks aunt." They hugged each other.

"I'm going to my room to talk to your uncle about all this. I think he can accompany you to Rio de Janeiro."

"Okay."

Ana Lucia was devastated. She cried one more time. She needed to breathe, to feel the air in her lungs to try to understand what was happening. She could not be content. She went bewildered toward the beach."

On her knees, she held handfuls of sand in her hand, waited for the sea darkened by that bitter night to bring her solace. That's when she said to herself:

"I left the man I loved because of a lie. I could be there, next to him now. I could have kissed him and been happy. Albert, forgive me for not being with you, forgive me."

The next morning, Ana Lucia made a date with Alice at Gonzaga Beach. She needed to vent before she had lunch with Gabriel.

"Alice."

"Cousin, what happened, huh? You look so sad."

"Glad you came. I'm desperate. Something horrible happened."

"Tell me, what happened?"

"I have to go back to the States."

"What? You said your visa was denied."

"Yes, but I have to go back to Albert."

"I do not understand, you're getting on so well with Gabriel. Why run after that American?"

"Albert's mother called last night. She told me he's very sick. He has degenerative sclerosis. Albert's going to be crippled in a few years."

"Oh my God! I'm sorry, Ana Lucia."

"The most shocking thing is that his fiancée gave up on his marriage and left for New York. She abandoned him because of his illness."

"What about pregnancy?"

"She lied, she was never pregnant. She falsified the pregnancy test to force Albert to marry her."

"This is horrible! What this woman did is unforgivable. She separated you from him in a dirty way."

"That's what hurts me the most. I could have stayed with him. I could have fought for my visa there and even applied for a work visa. But I came back here to stay away from Albert, since I believed he would have a child with another woman. I was the victim of a cruel and inhuman lie."

"You love him very much, do not you?"

"I love him; I love Albert more than anything in this life."

"What about Gabriel? How will he feel when you tell all this?"

"I have a passion for Gabriel, I like him. But my heart beats for Albert. It's Albert the one I love."

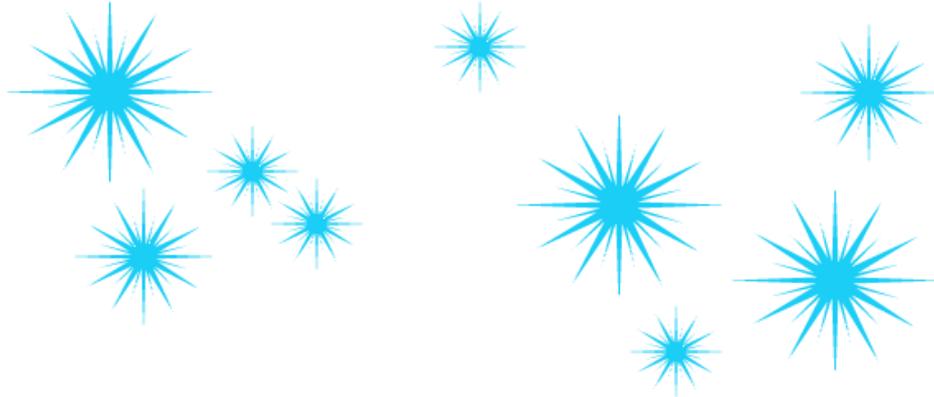
"Talk to Gabriel quick. Tell him right away that you need to get back to the States."

"I'll tell him, we'll have lunch together today.

"Speak nicely so as not to hurt him."

"It's too late to avoid heartache."

MOMENT TO LOVE



“Ana Lucia! Come in, my love. At last you came to see my apartment. I prepared the pasta I told you about. It’s my specialty.” Gabriel kissed her and hugged her affectionately.

"It must be a delight indeed."

“You can sit. I’ll prepare the table.”

“I hope so.” She smiled.

Minutes later he came back.

“The table is ready. Are you alright? Seems tense, Ana Lucia.”

“I am fine. Let’s have lunch? I’m anxious to taste your pasta.”

"Margaret, I'm very worried about Ana Lucia," Freddy commented.

“Me too.”

"The choice she has to make is very serious. I left her there at Gabriel's apartment for lunch. I'll go back to pick her up later. I do not know what that boy's reaction might be when he learns that she wants to return to the United States to help the man she truly loves."

"It's a very complicated situation. I do not see how she can give such news without hurting Gabriel."

"I'll go there now. If she calls me on the phone, I'll be around to help her out of some unforeseen situation. Maybe she needs me earlier there."

"Are her bags already in the car?"

"Yes."

"What time do you embark for Rio de Janeiro?"

"We'll get on late afternoon flight. We'll go to the lawyer's office tomorrow."

"I'll go with you to the airport to get the car back. Let's go get her then."

"Let's go."

"Gabriel, lunch was delicious. I loved your pasta."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"Now that we had lunch, I must have a very serious conversation with you." She had a serious face.

"It must be serious, because the look in your face. What happened, Ana Lucia?" He asked, already worried.

"I have to go back to the States." she said.

"You have to go back to the States? You said that you would continue your college in São Paulo, USP!"

"Yes, I did." But it's not because of the faculty that I need to go back there.

"If it's not for college, what's the reason?"

"For Albert."

"For Albert? But he's going to marry another woman."

"My ex-mistress called me."

"What she wanted?"

"She told me something horrible. Albert is sick. He has degenerative sclerosis. He'll be disabled in a wheelchair in a few years."

"Wow! I'm sorry for him."

"And that's not all. His fiancée dropped out of the marriage, she abandoned him, left for New York."

"Is not she pregnant?"

"No. She lied about being pregnant and faked the pregnancy test just to force Albert to marry her."

"This woman is a viper, no character. She deceived you and him. He separated you from the man you love. This disease he has is the same as that cosmologist you admire, is not it?"

"Yes, it's the same disease of physicist Stephen Hawking. In a few years, Albert will be completely invalid." She reinforced.

"And your ex-mistress wants you to go back there to make Albert have a little happiness in the years that still remain. After all, you're the woman he loves..." Gabriel deduced.

"Yes, that's right. It's a matter of life and death. He is depressed, doesn't want to eat. He needs me. You understand?"

"I see, of course I understand. Albert is the man you love, is not he?"

"Yes, he is the man I love. I do not want to hurt you, Gabriel, I really like you, I had a passion for you, but it's not love. Maybe it would become love if we had more time together."

"I know, I always knew of your love for him. I just think Albert might have taken a little longer to get sick, so I would have you more time here with me.

"I'm very sorry about all this." She lowered her head with tears in her eyes.

"But they denied your visa."

"I am traveling to Rio de Janeiro today, I will make a work visa process there. My ex-boss hired a very good lawyer to advise me. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"Honestly, I know this is a horrible situation for you. I do not even know what I would do in your place."

"I'm glad you understand. I'm not going back to have fun. I'm going back because there's a dying man who needs my help. I do not even know what my future will be, I do not even know how long he is going to live, I do not even know if Albert and I will be together, but the fact is that I have to go there and try to make him happy for as long as he lives."

"Ana Lucia, listen to me. Go back to the United States, help Albert, and then we'll talk. Call me whenever you need to talk. Above all, I am your friend. And I know that when you get there, we will continue to be just good friends. That will be better. You can enjoy your stay there to finish your college." Gabriel was sympathetic.

"I thought of that too. I'm going to finish my college there."

"Do this, fulfill your dream. Maybe I'll even visit you on my July vacation. I'm going to want to know everything that's going on over there."

"Thank you, Gabriel. You're being so kind. Wonderful. You're being charitable to me."

"And promise me you'll make Albert have happy times. If I were in his situation, I would want you on my side."

"I promise you that. You live here in my heart, Gabriel. I'm going to need your friendship; I'm going to need your support because the situation is not easy for me either."

They got up from the table and hugged each other gently.

Three days ago Ana Lucia had returned from Rio de Janeiro. The procedures for the visa had already been initiated and in ten days she would do the interview.

"Aunt Margareth! You came back late from shopping."

"Your uncle left me here and went back to work at the mall." It is not easy to own a clothing store, especially in this crisis that Brazil is facing. Now evening is the time when more customers appear."

"I have to go to Uncle Freddy's shop to get some new things."

"Someone's out there waiting for you. It's Gabriel; he wants to take a ride with you."

"Ask him to come up".

"He did not want to come up. Get dressed quickly and go down. Enjoy your last moments here with him. In the United States you will experience difficult and unpredictable situations."

"I think you're right, Auntie. The weather there will not be for joy. I'll get dressed and go down."

Gabriel was waiting for her at the door.

"Ana Lucia."

"Sorry for the delay, I was getting ready."

"You do not have to try to hard. You are always beautiful."

"That makes me embarrassed."

"I'm here to take you out; I want to walk with you there at the Gonzaga."

"At the Gonzaga? Sounds cool. We can walk along the beachfront, talk. Enjoy."

They got into the car.

"How was it in Rio de Janeiro?"

"It was okay. The interview will happen in ten days."

"I'd like to take you to the airport when you go to the United States."

"I appreciate your kindness; it will be good to have your company at such a difficult time. It is not a cheerful return."

"But you need to show some joy."

"Yes, no matter how awful the situation is, I must be strong to be happy."

They ran toward the sands of Gonzaga beach just after Gabriel parked the car.

"I love to walk along the edge of this beach, even more so now at night, with everything lit up."

"Then we'll have dinner at Tertulia."

"That's cool. It's an expensive restaurant."

"You deserve it, Ana Lucia."

"I've thought a lot about everything that's going on. I support you. It's a matter of charity; I know you love him very much. But reality speaks louder. Albert's situation is lamentable, absurd. What that woman did to him and to you, deceiving and lying so vile, so low, is unforgivable."

"Yes, that's what hurt me the most."

"I only ask you one thing, Ana."

"What?"

"While you're here, do not forbid me to kiss you. I'll miss you." He ordered.

"I do not want to hurt you. You're an incredible man."

"On the contrary, I want to remember these moments of love we are living in." He finished his words with affectionate kiss.

"Listen, Gabriel! Listen to the music playing on the kiosk!"

"It's the music we danced at the carnival ball in Fernando de Noronha."

"Yes, 'Espelhos D'água.' Patricia's voice is beautiful. I love this song." She smiled as she remembered.

"Let's dance it right here, by the sea." He took her hand.

"I loved the invitation." She gave herself to the moment.

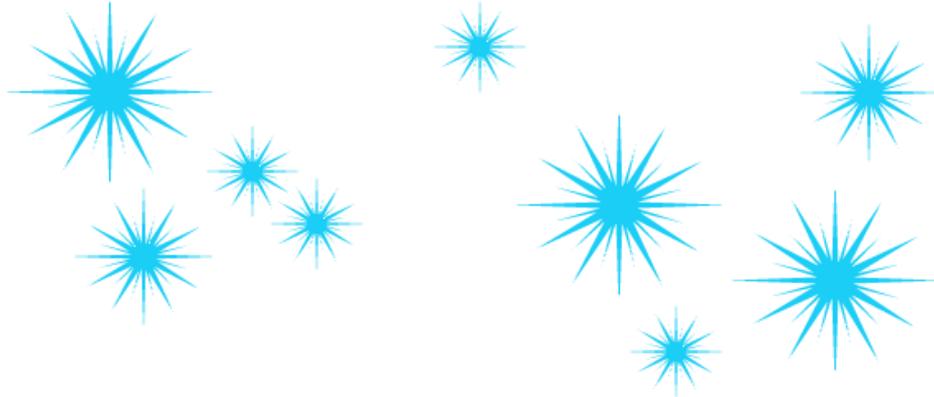
They danced.

"Now, let's go lie down together in the sand to admire this gorgeous sky full of stars," he suggested.

"Of course," she agreed.

They lay down in the sand and Gabriel took Ana Lucia's hand as they gazed up at the night sky. A tear fell from her eyes as she remembered Albert.

DEJECTION



That Sunday was gray. Ana Lucia went to Mass in the São Paulo Apostle Chapel, facing the beach of Enseada. This time she was unaccompanied. She needed to think about everything, she wanted to understand if there was a purpose for what was happening in her life at that moment, she longed for a divine inspiration that made her feel the reason for her suffering. She should be as close as she could to the man he loved, who suffered from his weakened health after discovering a sudden illness. She arrived, sat down, but the reality was dark, the pain she loved was already part of her heart.

At one point in the Mass Ana Lucia could not resist her tears and wept. They all sang the hymns, but she remained silent. At that moment she just wanted to hear, maybe some inspiration would come from the skies to comfort her... She had already arranged with Father Cristiano a conversation that would follow soon after Mass. Her return to the United States was inevitable. The pain in her heart for having to abandon Gabriel, the one who loved her so much, crushed her soul. Before Albert's remembrance revived, she thought she was beginning to be happy again. Ana Lucia repeatedly heard that it is not possible to love two people at the same time, but her heart screams the opposite, she felt affection for these two men in an equal and unique way. She discovered it so painfully, so unexpected.

Sitting this time in the front seats in the church, Gabriel looked back and saw Ana Lucia crying. He did not expect to find her there. He was accompanying an

aunt who had recently arrived in the city. His brown eyes made his inner doubt clear: why should his girlfriend, until then, have been crying at such a spiritual moment? The change of his life was undeniable. His dreams and longing for love have long been exchanged for the hope of having her forever in his arms, in his life. Next to Ana Lucia he learned to be faithful, he learned what it is to truly love, with each kiss he felt that maybe she loved him too.

Before the end of the Mass, Ana Lucia ran out of the Church, walked aimlessly along the seashore. Gabriel looked once more behind him and saw his loved one no more. He went out, searched for her, and was able to see her from a distance, walking uncontrollably by the edge of the sea. A sense of anguish remained grounded in his mind and soul. He ran as fast as he could to reach his beloved. He needed to know the reason for her tears; he needed to know why the most beautiful woman he had ever known had run away without waiting for him.

He shouted loudly as he ran:

“Ana Lucia! Ana Lucia!”

She looked back. Even after seeing him did not stop, she continued to run away.

“Ana Lucia, come back here! Wait! My love, wait for me!” She was close.

At last he managed to touch her and she fell on the sand in tears.

“Ana Lucia, my love! What happened? Why did you run out of the church? Why are you crying so much?” He asked, crouched in the sand, and took her arm.

“Gabriel, for God's sake, don't call me my love!” She asked in a pleading tone.

“And why not? You're the woman I love. I do not want to see you suffer. Tell me: what's going on?” He asked.

“Leave me alone with my suffering. You are the problem; my whole life is the problem! I need to be alone and cry.”

“Ana Lucia, I love you above everything else and as long as you're here, I'll be by your side. And even far away I will always think of you. Get off the ground and let me hold you.”

“I do not want to make you suffer, Gabriel. I'm sure you love me, I know your feelings, but I do not deserve your love. I'm not able to love you like you do.”

“But I'm not demanding anything from you. Just let me hold you, let me kiss you; let me feel your body in mine. Ana Lucia, you taught me to be a faithful man. With you I am learning what it is to truly love a woman.”

"The more you say, the more I feel guilty. I'd rather you did not love me. I love Albert, but I discovered that I love you, too. I'm suffering so much. So do not feed your illusions. I'm leaving."

"I want to deceive myself; I want to believe that someday you'll be mine forever. No matter how long I have to wait until that day arrives. I will never give up. You can be sure of that."

"I cannot guarantee you anything, Gabriel. I do not know of the future. Doubt torments my soul. I feel like a lost woman, I do not know what to do or what to think. My aunt traveled for two days with Uncle Freddy, I'm alone at home. I have no one to talk to, so I decided to come to the Church to seek solace."

"Do not think of anything. Come with me. I'll take you home right now in my car, I'll console you, warm you up. I am your love and your friend."

Ana Lucia rose from the sand. Her beloved took her by the arm and they walked to the car parked in front of the church.

That Sunday afternoon was devastating. Ana Lucia kept the headphones in her ear and lay on the couch. Gabriel covered her with a comforter. The songs were varied and made her remember her sorrows and joys in those last months.

"I'm going to take my aunt home and I'll be back to keep you company," he warned.

"You can take your time, I'll be fine."

"Rest my love." He kissed her forehead and left.

Ana Lucia was walking around the house without finding any consolation, and suddenly, once again, she played on the radio "Scream of Passion", the music that carried her most to all events at that moment. She went to the kitchen, felt the urge to cook beans and did, lay down on the couch again, reflected more on her sadness and the empty end she felt. It was an inexplicable and indestructible emptiness.

All she wanted at that moment was someone listening to her outburst. She stood on the couch wrapped in the pink blanket, listening to the sound of the pressure cooker mingle with the music that reached her ears. There were many, a real session of musical drama, among them "Classic", "Red Eyes", "Tanto" and many others.

Two tears were already streaming down Ana Lucia's face when suddenly there was a noise at the door. There was someone. She noted: it was Gabriel coming

in. He grinned, but this time the lady responded with an apathetic, indifferent laugh.

Gabriel leaned over the back of the couch and said, already expecting a sad reaction from her:

"I brought a chicken stroganoff that my aunt did. I figured you'd be hungry."

This time Ana Lucia did not respond with laughter of excitement. She simply looked into his eyes and started to cry again.

"I'm feeling bad, really bad," she confessed.

Gabriel was quiet, curled up half-bent on the couch and just stared at her with wide eyes. Not knowing how to act, not knowing the real reason for his girlfriend's sadness, he asked after a few minutes:

"Tell the truth in my eyes; tell me the reason for your deep sorrow. Tell me what the reason for your anguish is.

She continued to cry without giving any answers, until after a few minutes she wiped her eyes a little and reacted, exposing her feelings:

"Because of everything, because of Albert, and because I have to leave here. Because of you. I still have not said anything to you because I do not want to hurt you; I think it's unfair that I cannot be faithful to your love. I'll leave soon. And I do not know when I'm coming or going. Gabriel, when I came to live here my life was so bad; so many things happened that distressed me, so many sad things... If it were not for you to have appeared in my life I would not have endured it all by myself. You helped me a lot. Thank you for everything you've done for me. I know that we cannot depend on anyone to have joy, but there are times when the situation is very difficult and it is almost impossible to endure everything without anyone by our side. Thanks."

Gabriel sat down beside her on the couch and then hugged her. After a few seconds, she asked him to go to the stove and turn off the fire from the beans.

Gabriel returned to the living room, after reflecting on the words of Ana Lucia. He finally felt that somehow she loved him.

"Ana Lucia, listen to me. I was wrong in my life, I hurt you in the past, what I did was terrible. But fate gave me one more chance to love you, to make you happy. That's why I'm here to take care of you. It is also a way of asking for forgiveness. And you want to know? I see in your eyes that you love me too."

"But..."

“Do not say anything. Do not try to explain to me what has no explanation. I know perfectly well that you also love Albert and that you are suffering from the choice you had to make. But love is just the same, it has several nuances. One love does not nullify the other.”

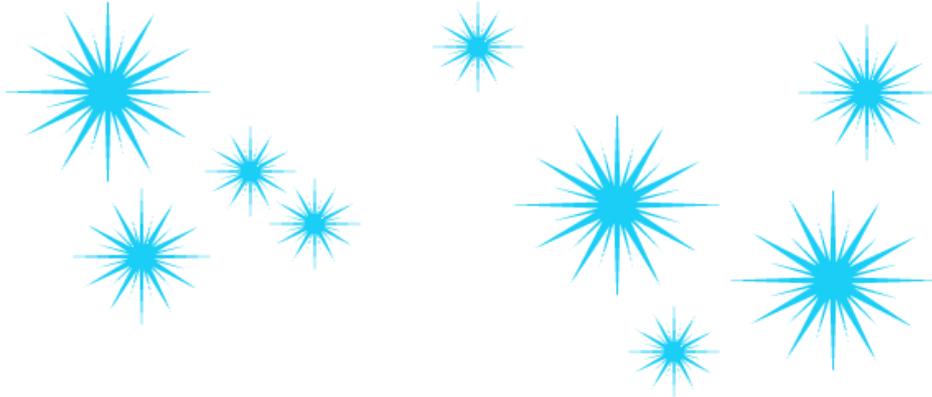
"I did not think you could believe that there were any ways to love."

"But of course there are. This is more of a mystery to life." He smiled.

After dinner they heard some songs. They also watched movies on her netbook and a part of a documentary about the Milky Way. They ate a delicious dessert: chocolate mousse with sweet biscuit.

They spent the rest of the day exchanging cuddles on the sofa in the living room and watching TV. She remained with her head resting on Gabriel's lap.

SUNSHINE



The sun was shining brightly that afternoon. It was about 4pm when Ana Lucia arrived at the Tortugas condominium. It was a long walk from the concierge to Gabriel's uncle's apartment on the tenth floor. She went all the way across the huge garden to the entry. Arriving at the elevator, she was a bit tired. She rang the doorbell and Gabriel opened the door.

"Ana Lucia, my love, I'm glad you're here! Now my Saturday will be really good!" He exclaimed, smiling and hugging her then.

"How lovely this apartment! And the condo is also wonderful. I've always seen everything from the outside, but being in here is so much better. You never told me you had a rich uncle." She commented, smiling.

"Yes, I have. He recently returned from England. And you still have not seen anything. You have to know the cinema of the condominium, the gym, the tennis court, anyway, everything."

"Where's your uncle?"

"He went to the beach with my aunt and my cousin. The employees are in the kitchen."

"And he would not think it bad to come here?"

"No! I talked to them. I explained that you are my girlfriend, the most incredible woman I have ever met."

"So you explained to your uncle that you and I are dating to placate our loneliness..."

"Yes. But that's not why we're dating."

"No?"

"It's much more than that."

Gabriel approached her and kissed her, stroking the hair of her young girlfriend.

Ana Lucia and Gabriel went straight to the pool. They hugged each other wet and kissed underwater. Approaching the face of her beloved, she said:

"It's wonderful to be here with you. Your face is so beautiful, and your brown eyes..."

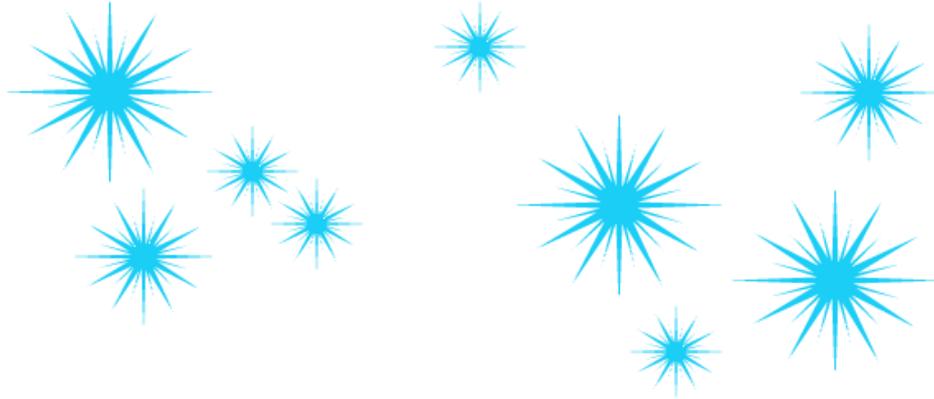
"I would die far from you."

"And I give you my heart, with all my sufferings, but full of love."

"Ana Lucia, you're the only woman in my life. Today is our farewell, but only for a moment." He said with particular sincerity.

They kissed.

THE DEPARTURE



The expensive parties and dinners were no longer in the Bennett family mansion. Most of Albert's friends walked away after he fell ill.

"Albert, my son, you've been locked in this room for days. Let's take a walk on the farm. You can still stand alone, enjoy. Enjoy living and having joy while things do not get worse. It'll be good to you to have some fresh air." Annette tried to persuade him.

"No, Mother, I do not want to have to countdown, being forced to take a few years just because I'm going to be completely invalid."

"I understand, but you will do the best treatment, we will try the embryonic stem cells back in China. You need to be excited, confident. You need to eat."

"Mom, I appreciate your concern, but I want to be alone."

"I will, but I will come back, my son."

Ana Lucia euphorically entered the apartment saying aloud:

"Aunt! I got the visa! I got it! Everything worked out right at the consulate."

"I'm so happy for you!"

"I bought my ticket. I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Already?"

"The situation is urgent. I have to go soon."

"Whenever you want to talk, you can call me anytime."

"Thanks aunt. I already said goodbye to Alice."

"That's a lot bags!"

"I bought some cold coats. The temperature there is low. I'll pack my bags. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you: Gabriel is going to drive me to the Guarulhos airport. It will be our farewell moment."

"If you want it that way, fine."

Ana Lucia's heart soared with anxiety. At the Guarulhos International Airport, Gabriel said goodbye to her by giving her the last kiss.

"At last the time has come for you to leave, Ana Lucia."

"Yes, it came. I'm so nervous." She was shaking with anxiety.

"I understand. I would be as well. Call me if you need anything."

"Yes, I'll call. Thank you for coming with me."

"I'll never forget you, Ana Lucia. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

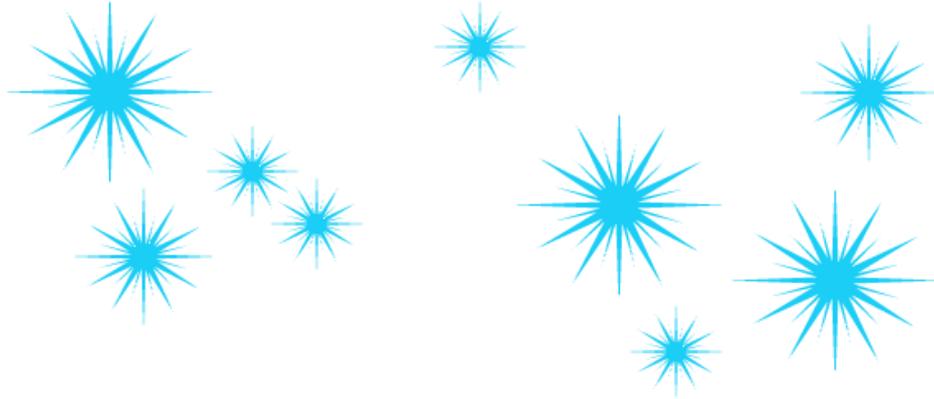
"Because I love you, even though I know you love another man. I do not want you to suffer."

"Gabriel, I do not know what to tell you."

"Do not tell me anything, Ana Lucia; just give me the last kiss." He asked, caressing her face.

They kissed.

THE ARRIVAL



“Ana Lucia!”

“Annette!”

"How good it is to see you again, Ana Lucia!" Annette hugged her.

"Thank you for picking me up here at the airport. I thought Shelly would be here too; I talked to her on WhatsApp and she told me she was coming."

"Your friend Shelly asked me to let you know that she could not come because she had a family affair to resolve, but she said she'll be staying at the mansion later."

"At the mansion?"

“Yes. You're staying on the farm with us, are not you?”

"I made this trip for Albert, but I do not want to stay at your house. During the day I stay in the mansion, but at night I sleep in a hotel."

"I just thought staying at home would be easier to keep Albert company. But okay, if you'd rather sleep in a hotel, feel free, Ana."

“Yeah, I'd rather. I booked a hotel room, it was a bit rushed. Then I rent an apartment for myself. A small studio is enough for me to stay well.”

"I'll see that for you. I am a member of a condominium of apartments and studios here in the city and I can get one for you to live for free. Let's go to the hotel to leave your things, and then we head straight for the farm. Albert will be happy to see you."

"I want to get my telescope with Shelly. It will be good for Albert to watch the stars and the night sky again."

Ana Lucia and Shelly met and hugged each other.

"Friend, how good to see you back here in America!"

"I'm happy too! But now I'm in a hurry, I came to get my telescope. I'm going to the farm. I'll see Albert for the first time after he discovered the disease." Ana explained to her friend.

"Good luck. Richard and I went to see him, and Albert hardly even looked us in the face. But with you it will be different. He loves you. I'll help you get the telescope to the car." Shelly volunteered.

"Thanks friend. I'm staying at a hotel, but I'm going to live in a studio soon."

"That's cool! You'll have your own apartment!"

"My mistress is going to give me a studio in one of her condos."

"Then give me the address."

"Sure will." She hugged her friend once more.

Annette and Ana Lucia were in front of the door of Albert's room, on the ground floor of the mansion. The heart of the Brazilian accelerated. The long-awaited moment had finally come.

"Ana Lucia, I'll go in first, and then I'll call you. Wait here."

"Yes I'll wait."

Annette entered the room.

"Albert, my son, I have a surprise for you."

"What a surprise?"

"Look who's here!" Annette opened the door.

Ana Lucia entered the room.

"Albert!"

"Ana Lucia! You are here?"

"Yes, I am. I came back!"

"I'll leave you guys alone; you need to talk a lot." Annette left the room.

Ana Lucia sat down on the bed next to Albert.

"Why did you come, Ana Lucia? Why are you here?"

"I'm here because I love you! We were fooled by Brianna. She did everything to separate us. But now I'm back to stay by your side, to support you in your treatment. How are you?"

"I still feel good. I walk with the help of a walking stick, more because of my spinal surgery. I feel pain when I step on the floor directly. Look, I still move my hands. I can still talk."

"So let's live those moments intensely while we still can," Ana Lucia proposed.

"Ana Lucia, I love you so much, more than anything in this world. And I'm very sorry for my illness, I'm sorry I cannot be the right man for you. In a few years I will be completely invalid. That's why I beg you: walk away and leave me alone with my pain. I do not wanna ruin your life."

"Don't talk like that. What I most want is to stay by your side." She hugged him with the greatest affection in the world. "For God's sake, Albert, do not send me away from your life!"

He continued as they hugged each other:

"Tell me one thing: during this time you stayed in Brazil did you have a boyfriend?"

There was silence for a moment. She stared at him and said,

"Yes, before I came back here I was dating a boy, but we finished before my boarding here. I thought you were already married to Brianna. I needed to forget you. We were the victims of a lie."

"Go back to your boyfriend. Get out of here. I do not want to see anyone. Please, I want to be alone." he exclaimed, disillusioned.

"My love, do not say that. I love you." she insisted.

"Get out of here. I want to be alone."

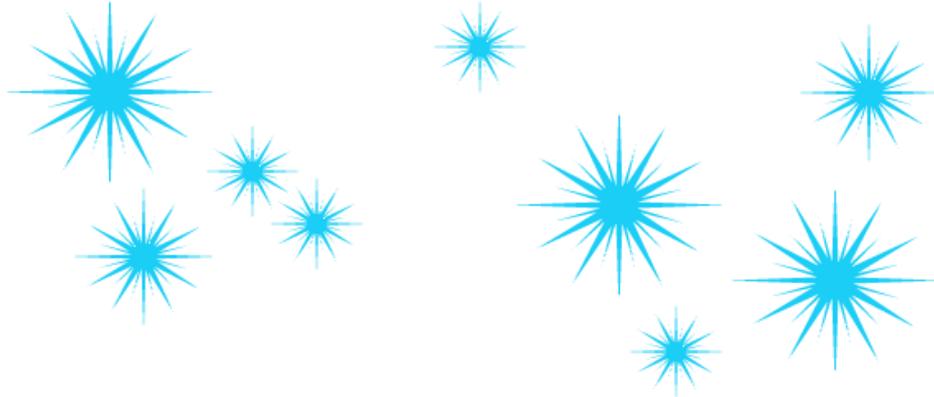
"We can go up the hill tonight and reminisce about the old days," she suggested.

"Old days?"

"Yes. I brought my telescope. Soon at nightfall I'll put it there for us."

"Do not insist. Get out of here, please, I'm asking you."

NIGHT SKY



A week after her arrival, Ana Lucia had finally convinced Albert to leave the room and take a walk outdoors. On the hill, sitting on the grass, they talked as they watched the stars on that beautiful night of glowing skies:

“Ana Lucia, I never imagined that I would be abandoned by the woman who swore love for me, who lied to marry me. The worst part was the pregnancy that she invented and separated me from you.”

“I also thought she'd stay with you forever. She had no eyes for any other man.”

“I loved Brianna, but after a while she became a cold woman. It was enough to know of my illness and abandoned me. But now it's over. I do not want to talk about her anymore.”

“You're right. Let's talk about us.”

“Talk about us?” He looked curious.

“Yes. We can go back to college together. It would be amazing to graduate in astronomy.” She said with a smile.

“I don't know. I think my life is over. I would never be the man you deserve. I know you love me, but only love is not enough.”

“Sure is enough. It's enough to be happy together. Let's realize our dream of being astronomers, setting up our observatory...” she insisted.

“The sky is beautiful today. It looks like it was designed by something or someone. Now I know the First Cause Argument. Kalam's cosmological

argument makes perfect sense. Physics should never have been separated from Philosophy.” Albert said, smiling at his beloved.

“I also believe in this. Philosophy should never have been separated from science. If the universe did not always exist, but now it exists, there has to be a cause, a causer. I believe that this sky full of stars of light like the blue of your eyes does not exist by chance. I suffered so much when you sent me through WhatsApp that video with our music. I suffered so much from your absence.” She stroked his cheek.

“I also felt destroyed without you here with me. I'm remembering now the first day I came up this hill. I have loved you ever since.” Albert stirred in her hair. “How I missed your black hair like the darkness of space...”

Albert stroked Ana Lucia's face, pressed her cheeks together, and kissed her for the first time.

“Finally, I kissed you. I waited so long for this moment. It was better than I dreamed.” Albert said, smiling.

“You cannot imagine how happy I am for this. It was so hard not to be able to have you.”

“Do you want to be my girlfriend?” He asked.

“And you still ask? Of course I want to be your girlfriend. I'll help you beat this storm. We just need to have faith and believe that we will be happy despite all the difficulties, my love.” She stated, staring into his eyes.

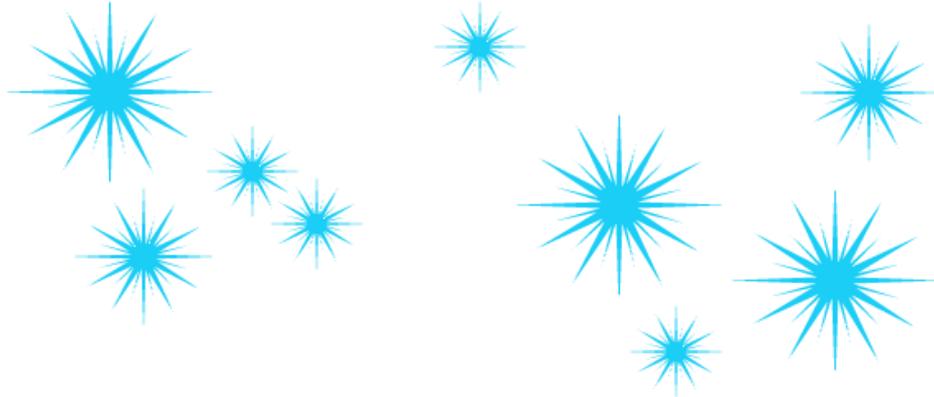
“Faith?”

“Yes, an unwavering assurance that even in the face of all obstacles we will overcome and be even happier.” she explained.

“I really want to have that faith and I believe that I can be happy not only in the future, but especially now, at this very moment. Let me kiss you again then. I do not want to miss another minute of your company. I love you, Ana Lucia.”

“I love you too.” She kissed him once more. They embraced, uniting their souls in one.

THE LIGHT OF THE STARS



"Annette, Matthew, where's Albert? Is it ready yet?" Ana Lucia asked as soon as she entered the mansion room.

"He's in the room with Meg, and he's done packing up. Today is the most important day in your life. And that makes me very happy." Annette replied with a broad smile.

"Anyway, after these two years of study and fighting, you and Albert are graduating in Astronomy. You helped him fulfill a dream. Congratulations! After all we face together, alternative treatments in China, difficult times, we finally have made some progress in his health. The disease has stopped, has not progressed yet, at least for a while. Thank you so much for everything." Matthew thanked her by holding her hands.

"No need to thank me, all I did was out of love. I love Albert more than anything in this life. And Meg also helped a lot; she's been a wonderful sister to him, partner and friend. Here they come."

Leaning on his crutches, beside Meg, the young astronomer Albert approached his parents and his girlfriend, who welcomed him with a smile.

"Astronomer Albert Bennett, prepared for this great day of our graduation?" Ana Lucia asked kissing him.

"Yes, I am prepared and very happy," Albert replied, still with some difficulty with his speech, but with a radiant smile.

"Then come, my love. Today is our special day!" Ana said happily.

"My brother looks beautiful, doesn't he, Ana Lucia? Starlight has the same color as his eyes: blue." Meg said, thrilling everyone around.

"Yes, he looks beautiful. Beautiful words, Meg." Ana Lucia replied cheerfully.

"My son is always handsome. Albert, you look very elegant. Annette flattered him by kissing her face. "Now come on, we can't be late."

"Yes, let's go. A great friend of my from Brazil, Gabriel, came to the United States especially for our graduation. He just sent me a message saying that he's already at the university waiting for us." Ana Lucia revealed her delight in announcing the presence of her friend.

Even on his crutches and having difficulty moving his hands, Albert held his astronomer's diploma, demonstrating the greatest joy he had ever felt in his life, alongside his beloved companion, Ana Lucia.