**Love Inevitably**

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Every ounce of her body ached as she climbed the steep stairs.

Creak.

Creak.

She was forever married to the old bones of this home.

On a cold blustery night, the sound of her wheezing husband comforted her as she hobbled into the tiny bedroom they’d shared for more than six decades. The silver moonlight peeked through wispy lace curtains, and it was enough to see her husband’s frail body curled against the night’s shadows. Tucked under the window was an empty dog’s bed. The first to succumb to old age.

She leaned her cane against the headboard of the mahogany bed they’d bought as newlyweds. Her fingertips grazed a framed photograph of a smiling little boy on the nightstand. The boy they raised into a man and now he lived so far away. She lowered her tired body to the soft mattress. Her husband restlessly shifted as she pulled the blankets over his shoulder.

“I’m here,” she soothed.

“Where were you?” he whispered.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Her hand lingered over him, and he filled her with warmth. He’d captured her heart many years ago when her eyes saw only innocence, her skin smooth, her lips painted red, and her dark hair flowed. She’d been his beloved prisoner ever since.

“You’re worried?”

“No,” she lied.

She curled her body against his turned hip, but as he wheezed, she gently pulled away from him. In the morning she would take him to another doctor. Tears snaked down her creased cheeks and dampened her pillow. Her bones ached, but her heart crumbled at the dreadful thought of living without him. She prayed. She bargained. Eventually, she floated away.

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Her eyes opened and her breath quickened. She picked up the cane at her feet to steady herself. Flanked by barren trees, a path zigzagged in front of her.

“Hello?” her voice echoed. Panic engulfed her.

She walked for minutes, perhaps hours. Her footsteps disappeared behind her. Her breath plumed white smoke in the biting cold. Tiny white flakes twirled around her like she had twirled so many years ago with him the night before he shipped out. Snow seeped between her arthritic toes with each labored step until finally the old woman crumpled to her knees in exhaustion. She was certain she was dying. Her shoulders heaved as she sobbed into her gnarled hands until a bark shattered the suffocating silence.

“Oscar,” she gasped as an old dog limped towards her.

She wrapped her arms around the dog’s neck and nuzzled her face into his white fur as streaks of light broke through angry clouds. The once barren trees suddenly dotted with lush green leaves. Flowering shrubs peppered the path. A warm breeze carried the lush forest’s subtle perfume of sweet sap. Birds chirped familiar songs.

“How’s this possible?” she mumbled.

Her hands, submerged in a pool of warm golden light, flexed with ease. The feet under her white nightgown no longer ached. Elation poured over her like a waterfall of youth. She twirled on her tiptoes like a young girl. And when she swept her hair from her eyes it was not white and brittle, but dark and silky. She held her chin higher. Her shoulders didn’t slouch. With each step her legs and arms firmed. With each step her beloved Oscar trotted with ease by her side. Then, she saw him. A dark-haired young man stood in the middle of the path wearing pristine dress blues and a white sailor hat with a crooked smile spread across his tanned face.

“It’s really you?” she whispered.

“It’s me.”

“Where are we?”

“You don’t remember?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“No, should I?”

“You’ve walked it many times.”

“I’ve never been here before in my life,” she protested.

“Not in this life.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her close. “It’s time for us to go, darling.”

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When her eyes fluttered open, she was in their quiet bedroom. The deafening silence erupted her worst fear as she frantically turned over layers of blankets in the bed until, in the shadows of the moonlight, she saw his muscular arms wrapped around a sleeping little boy. Tucked in a bed under the window was a shaggy-haired puppy. She was home.