



Dreams

The mind
has a heart of its own

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *BEARDS*
SERENA J. BISHOP

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Serena J. Bishop — Dreams

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DEDICATION

To my parents.

PROLOGUE

Leela shielded her eyes from the early sun and watched the lone male silhouette of her farmhand walk toward her through the dry brush of the high desert. The outline of the rifle over his shoulder led her to believe he had been on a potentially messy detail.

She wanted to yell but knew he would not be able to hear. To pass the time while he hiked toward her, she pulled on her work gloves and began to load boxes into the bed of her pickup truck. The activity helped stave off the chill of the late October air. She glanced to the west and saw the snowcapped mountains of the Oregon Cascades, and thought that at least it was warmer where she was.

Her land was a much more suitable environment to raise her animals.

She raised and loved a few dozen dairy goats that produced milk as equally delicious as it was suitable for making soaps and lotions. Although, she could only manufacture bath products on-site at Bakshi Farm. Someday, she would be successful enough to have pasteurization facilities on-site and not ship the milk to others. In ten years, she would be making her own yogurt and cheese. If that wasn't living the American dream, she didn't know what was.

Leela loaded the last of the boxes and retrieved her buzzing phone from her pocket. She rolled her eyes at the caller: 'Couch Doc.'

As she texted a response to her therapist, Leela thought for someone whose job it was to see that she was on level, he had a lot of abandonment issues. Canceling one appointment didn't mean she was in a downward spiral. It meant she had to sell soap.

With her gloves off and phone away, she rubbed her hands together for warmth. As she looked down at her boots, something else came to her attention that could provide a remedy to her chilled digits. She leaned down to the open pen beside her truck and picked up a golden bundle of heat and cuteness while the man with the rifle stopped before her.

"How many?" she asked as she clutched the baby goat closer to her chest, prepared to mourn the loss of her herd.

“None, but I definitely saw wolf tracks,” Keith said in his slight Texan accent as he adjusted the rifle on his shoulder. “After I’m done milking, I’ll call Jorge and see if he can help me patch the fence hole.”

“If the farmers’ market is slow, I can come back early to help. Or shoot.”

A puzzled expression crossed his weathered features. “There’s just something strange about a vegetarian hunting.”

“It’s not ‘hunting.’ If something is on my property, risking the lives of my goats or employees, it’s a protective measure.” Leela never liked to imagine taking the life of any creature, but as the co-owner and manager, it was her responsibility to see that every aspect of her business was cared for. “If we can’t get the fence reinforced by four, I want them in the barn early.”

“They won’t like that.”

“They won’t like being dead either,” she said dryly as she clutched the infant goat for warmth.

“You got it, boss lady,” Keith said with a grin.

She hated that title, and had been shocked when Keith told her his previous supervisor had insisted he be called ‘boss’ or ‘chief’ at all times. It didn’t make sense for her, a petite, Indian-American goat farmer, to be called ‘Chief Bakshi.’

“You didn’t tell me you were taking the kid with you to the market.”

Leela kissed the top of the infant goat’s head. “It’s important to get him used to people, and he’ll be great for business. Who could resist stopping by our table without saying hello to this cute little face?”

Keith reached forward to pet their newly acquired two-month-old goat, Butterscotch. “You better be careful. I can tell you’re falling in love with him. That’s gonna make it tough to give him up once the time comes.”

“I know, but I can’t help it. And like I said, that’s why it’s important to get him used to people. Petting zoos don’t really care for animals that are antisocial.”

Keith set his rifle down, folded the small animal pen, and tucked it between the boxes of their set-up materials. “You don’t think it’ll be too active there today, do you? The farmers’ market this close to Halloween can get a little looney.”

She shook her head and tucked her hair behind her ear. “We’ll be fine. The pumpkin craziness has mostly died down.”

“If you say so.” Keith gave Butterscotch one more rub behind his pointed ears. “Let me go get his car carrier.”

Leela smiled broadly at her foster animal. “Did you hear that? We’re going on a ride.”

#

Leela appreciated the scenic half-hour drive from her farm to the Bend Fairground, host of the farmers’ market. She particularly liked all of the activity along the Deschutes River. It meandered through the town, creating spaces for parks and trails, and was close to two of her favorite places: the slopes of Mount Bachelor and the tranquility of several lakes. She made a mental note to try and visit Elk Lake before the weather made the trip too treacherous. Even without snow on the ground, skinny-dipping was out of the question at this point. She had learned that frigid lesson the hard way.

As Leela neared the fairground, she heard the distinctive squawking of geese behind a hill. Hills were something else the town did not lack. Leela took her foot off of the gas pedal and coasted down one of the most dramatic descents. She glanced into her rearview mirror to see if Butterscotch enjoyed the small rollercoaster as much as she did, but he was sound asleep, nestled in his carrier.

She steered her truck into her usual entrance at the fairground and slowly drove through the crowds of other farmers from central Oregon. She saw her spray-painted number on the patchy, sometimes rocky ground and pulled into her assigned spot. Butterscotch uttered a high-pitched bleat from the abrupt change in motion. “Don’t worry, buddy. I have to do some setup and then you can stretch your legs.”

She eased herself to the ground and used the tires to climb into the truck’s bed. With her gloves on, she clapped her hands together. It was time to work. Boxes of soap, lotion, and salt were deceptively heavy, but she liked the challenge of lifting and pushing and pulling. This was her version of the gym. When she finished, she dismounted with a jump and raised her hands in the air for the judge who watched.

“I give it an eight and a half,” said Jill Smirnov, her friend and fellow farmer.

“An eight and a half?” Leela exclaimed in outrage. “That’s so lame! Where did I lose my points?”

“For starters, your legs were bent and separated.” Jill smiled, her laugh lines deepening as she did. Twenty years earlier she coached gymnastics for young women and girls, including her daughters in Los Angeles. Now, she had a simpler life as a berry farmer. “Do you need any help? I just finished my stand.”

At her nod, Jill helped unload the tailgate so she could focus on setting-up Butterscotch’s space. She placed the space heater just outside of the small pen, filled his water dish, and then gently lowered him onto a blanket. They watched him limp and jump around the area a few times before he decided on a place to rest again.

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll leap out?” Jill asked.

Leela laid an ornate cloth over her dingy card table. “He’s not jumpy. Poor little guy has a bum leg so he can’t jump. That’s why the owners wanted to get rid of him.”

“Well, I think it’s sweet of you to look after him.”

“It’s the right thing to do.” More than once she had fostered animals to bring them to full health for adoptions, and she often donated her products to the local homeless and women’s shelters.

Jill grimaced. “Have you talked to your folks lately? If they knew you took Butterscotch in, I bet they’d be proud.”

Leela scoffed at the remark and started to arrange her homemade soaps in a pyramid on the table. “Like Dad would ever be proud of anything I’ve done. He would be like,” she began in a thick Indian accent—a perfect imitation of her father, ““Leela, what have you done? Now you have gone and settled down with the goats.””

The only thing Leela felt she had in common with Siddhartha Bakshi was his last name.

“Surely your mother is excited?” Jill asked.

“She loves anything that’s good publicity for the farm.” Her mother, Tanha Mitra, purchased the farm when Leela was in high school. Once Leela started to manage, she downgraded her role as a silent partner. “Mom’s going to come down from Portland and get him for the petting zoo there.”

“When’s that?”

“Beats the hell out of me. Whenever she gets a break in her schedule from the hospital, I guess.” Leela set her lotion samples and assessed the table. It looked exactly as she’d wanted it— organized, colorful, and interesting. “Want to get your monthly fix of bath salts now or later?” While the salts did not contain milk, Leela started making her own since they were an excellent addition to the spa package.

“You know, ‘bath salts’ used to sound much less criminal,” Jill said, then viewed her scent options, all in small glass jars. “I’ll take the lavender-vanilla.”

“What a lovely choice for a lovely lady,” Leela said in a deeper, more seductive voice.

Jill giggled at the attention. “You know, Viktor doesn’t tolerate anyone flirting with me but you.”

“Gee, wonder why?” It never ceased to amaze Leela that so many men loved the idea of two women together. Of course, Leela also liked the idea of two women together. Especially if she was one of those women and the other one was the barista at her favorite café. Those wispy dark bangs. The bubbly laugh. The skirt.

Yeah, that idea didn’t suck at all.

Leela shook off her fantasy and brought her attention back to Jill. “I’ll come and get my strawberries once I finish. I still need to hang my backdrop.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.” Jill gave Butterscotch a pet goodbye and cautiously walked among the moving vehicles to her booth on the other side of the field.

When Leela clipped her last photo to the clothesline draped across the back of her canopy, she chuckled to herself. Keith would have hated it if he knew she put a picture of him on display. He had literally been up to his elbows in lotion. The caption read: *The employees at Bakshi Farm enjoy our products too.*

She kneeled beside Butterscotch’s pen and winced when a sharp rock poked her knee. “I have to get my strawberries and then I’ll be back. Hold down the fort while I’m gone.”

Leela was pleased to note that on her short walk to the berry booth, the foot traffic and regular traffic had increased considerably. She wasn’t quite ready to agree with

Keith's prediction that the day would be crazy, but she sensed making a tidy profit for the outing. Sunny autumn weekends were great for business.

Jill watched Leela cross the distance and held out a large carton of brilliant red strawberries. "Sweets for the sweet."

"Now, what would Viktor say about you flirting with me?" Leela smiled and took a berry off of the top. As she bit into it, pink juice dribbled down her chin. "These are so good. Your soil must be enchanted with unicorn manure or something."

"You always have the most interesting compliments, but you're very welcome. I'll be shifting into jelly-jam mode soon, so you might be getting a jar of that next time." Jill's relaxed expression shifted into mild concern. "You might want to head back over to your booth."

Leela turned to see a child running toward Butterscotch's pen with glee. The last thing she wanted was for Butterscotch to start bleating in fear. "Shit."

Once she started back to her canopy, a truck began to reverse quickly and in the direction of the small boy. "Oh shit!" She dropped the strawberries and sprinted toward him. "Move! Stop!"

The boy's attention was on nothing more than the cute goat.

From behind her, a man yelled, "Preston!"

Her feet kicked dirt up behind her and she outstretched her arms. In a split-second decision, she lunged toward the boy. She pushed him at the same moment the truck's chrome bumper connected with the space he had previously occupied, and struck her instead. She didn't have time to experience anything but surprise as her body was tossed backward. She rolled. Small stabs of pain stole her breath. Dust filled her mouth and nose when she tried to inhale.

Just as her momentum slowed, her head impacted something solid.

Her world went black.

#

An obese man lay prone on an operating table at the Portland Cardiovascular Medicine Center. A translucent cloth covered his hair, an anesthesia mask was affixed to his nose and mouth, and a sterile, light-blue sheet covered him below the large, surgical opening

in his chest. The medical staff stood at their designated stations and listened to a pair of doctors as the surgery neared its end.

“Slow and steady,” Dr. Tanha Mitra said through her surgical mask. This operation was the first coronary bypass surgery led by her cardiology resident. Through her micro goggles, and the pinkish mix of blood and saline, she observed him stitch the previously dissected saphenous vein to the coronary artery. The curved needle he held with forceps moved with precision. Briefly, she looked up to her taller protégé. “Not bad for your first CABG.”

When Tanha had first heard CABG said in a medical school lecture, she wondered what kind of condition would cause the heart to resemble a cabbage. She quickly learned the word was an acronym standing for coronary artery bypass graft. Oddly, she did not learn that in medical school, but from television. When she arrived in the United States, almost forty years prior, she watched numerous American medical dramas to perfect her accent.

“Should I suture the aorta more?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

He examined his work then moved his gaze to the cardiopulmonary bypass machine that pumped his patient’s blood during the surgery. “I say we let him try out his new tubing.”

Tanha smiled. “Very good.”

“Are you preparing to close, Dr. Mitra?” asked a muffled voice from just inside the surgical suite.

“I’m not closing, but yes, we are almost done. Is there an emergency?” she asked and kept her trained eyes on the naked, beating heart.

“Yes, there’s a personal phone call for you that you need to take. It’s on line four.”

It wasn’t uncommon near the close of surgery for another issue to spring and she would be called out. Usually, it was for an emergency situation, like the stab wound a week before.

That was messy.

But she hadn't received an emergency personal call like this in over ten years. At that time, her daughter's college roommate called because Tanha's only child was rushed to the ER from an overdose.

"I'll be right there."

Tanha hastily removed her surgical gowning outside of the suite and picked up the line held for her. "Dr. Tanha Mitra. Who is this?"

"Tanha! Thank the Lord you picked up."

She recognized that Texas accent anywhere. "Keith, what's wrong?"

"It's Leela. There was a car accident at the farmers' market. She hurt her leg and head real bad. She's been unconscious since it happened."

Tanha's heart went still and cold. "Are you at the hospital in Bend?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm waiting for news."

She looked at the clock. "I'll be there in around four hours. Call me on my cell phone— Never mind. I will see you at the hospital." If something happened to Leela, she did not want to be on a highway driving when she found out.

"Um . . . should I call Dr. Bakshi?"

"No," Tanha curtly replied. "I will call him once I can assess Leela's situation myself."

#

A small white ball soared in the air and almost disappeared in the backdrop of plentiful gray clouds. Eventually, the ball reemerged, fell, and bounced several times onto the bright green fairway of the private Seattle golf course.

"That's one hell of a shot, Dr. Bakshi," the pharmaceutical representative said with a cigar in his hand.

Siddhartha watched with pride as his golf ball rolled in the crook of the dogleg. "Thank you. After I finished my lesson series, I treated myself to custom clubs. I have already taken four strokes off my game."

The other man pushed his tee down and took a practice swing. “And here I thought maybe it was because researching hormones gave you an extra surge of testosterone.”

Siddhartha grimaced when his golfing partner’s shot landed on the cart path and then bounced in the rough. He waited for the string of profanity to stop before he commented, “I thought you would at least wait until the third hole to get to business.”

“I saw a suitable opening and took it. My company is on the cusp of creating a new synthetic HGH. Lab geeks found the base in a flower petal, of all things.” He led the short walk back to the cart. “How do you feel about the anti-aging medical business?”

Siddhartha did not want to spend his afternoon talking about synthetic human growth hormone. He was open to the discussion of alternative ways to block hormones for cancer therapies, but not this. “I feel a lot of things. I feel that I dislike the phrase ‘medical business,’ and I do not understand the anti-aging concept. It is illogical to go against nature and not expect a negative consequence. Just let your flower be a flower.”

“Surely you find some of the research interesting?”

“Of course I do. I am an endocrinologist, anything that deals with hormones I find fascinating, but just because I think it is interesting does not mean that I think it is healthy.” His phone rang, thus interrupting his practiced rant. He audibly sighed when he saw who the caller was.

“Who is it?”

“My ex-wife.”

Siddhartha debated ignoring it, but if talking to her meant he could stop his current conversation then he would take the risk. “Hello, Tanha. How are you?”

On the other end of the line he only heard hiccups of breath.

“Tanha?”

“Sid. It’s Leela,” she said between sobs. “She’s in a coma.”

CHAPTER ONE

Three Weeks Later

Large digital numbers counted down in the community ice center. The pee-wee hockey game was coming down to the final seconds, and the Avalanche's best forward broke away from the pack to potentially tie the game.

"I can't watch." Aurora looked away and nervously unraveled her braid as she kept one eye on the action. She'd had no idea watching her five-year-old nephew, Logan, play hockey would be so stressful. She squeezed her eyes shut.

The horn sounded to end the period and Aurora dared to look at the ice. Logan had his goalie mask off and was surrounded by his teammates in a celebratory group hug. Realization hit, and Aurora released a breath she hadn't realize she'd been holding.

"We won!" She hurried to clap with the group beside her.

"Yes, that's what happens when our team scores more points." Ani grinned.

Aurora shook her head. "Thanks for that, Mom."

Ani took it in good spirit. She squeezed Aurora's knee. "I'm so glad you could see this before you head back to Portland tomorrow."

"Me too." Aurora glanced back at the ice to watch Logan hug his teammates. Her employer, Miscellaneous Everything or ME, wouldn't grant her holiday leave, so she was forced to fly to Michigan a week early. Soaking up all the family time she could was paramount. "At least they didn't schedule any games over Thanksgiving next week." As if that made it better that she had to leave them again so soon, just to appease Miscellaneous Everything.

Her father shot her a disapproving glare.

It took Aurora a second to realize why. "Sorry, I meant Irony Day." Aurora's father, Niq Okpik, was half Inuit, and her mother was of complete Ojibwe American Indian heritage. All her life, Thanksgiving was referred to as Irony Day, because it was essentially a holiday started by the Europeans to give 'thanks' for all of their blessings. Never mind their blessings came at the expense of the decimation of North America's indigenous people.

The Okpik family celebrated their blessings by enjoying a feast of foods native to the Great Lakes. As a vegetarian, Aurora would have a small amount of fish or meat on this day, but only if the animals were bred and raised naturally. She understood the significance of hunting to her culture and wanted to honor that, as well as the importance of coming together as a family, but she had her own morals. She promised herself that until she could decrease her ecological footprint to one Earth, she would not eat meat.

Her father's reply was cut off by Logan's arrival. "Did you see me, Aunt Aurora?" The sweat from his helmet caused his hair to plaster against his skin, but he was grinning.

"I sure did! You were great out there. I even took a little video so I can watch it when I go home. I'm going to make you a big city celebrity."

The small boy looked up to his coach with wide eyes. "Daddy, did you hear that?"

"I did. Your aunt is very nice." River gave his sister a hug and kiss to the temple. "I actually miss her."

"I miss you too. Especially this guy." She tousled her nephew's sweaty head then wiped the moisture off on her jeans.

Aurora loved her family, but she was not moving back to Michigan. Too many issues had led to her departure. Like friends who wouldn't speak to her and a major employer who wouldn't hire her. That's what happened when you had a messy break up with someone in human resources, and that person's family ran the company. She tried to dislodge the funk the memories caused with a smile.

"Can I get a hug before I leave?"

Her nephew wrapped his little arms around her and she squeezed tight. She didn't know if he could feel it due to all of the padding, but it was the thought that counted.

"I love you. Be good."

"Have a safe flight," River said to her with a smile. "Mom, Dad, see you Sunday for the Lions game?"

"You better," Ani said seriously, then led her husband and daughter out of the community rink. "Want to go to Mikom's for ice cream?"

“Actually, believe it or not, Chris and Jamie got back to me. We’re doing dinner and a movie.” She noted both her parents’ surprised looks. “I hope you don’t mind if I hang with them tonight.”

Niq smiled. “Of course we don’t mind. We have plenty of leftovers to eat. Do you want us to drop you off? It’ll save you money not spending it on a Ryde or some other kind of taxi service.”

Aurora weighed her options. She didn’t have a car of her own and that would save her only friends in the area from driving a half hour out of their way. “That’d be great. Thanks.”

Within minutes, she was sat in the back of the family car and watched familiar signs go by. She had spent nearly three decades here. The funny part was, Aurora thought she had loved the town, but she now realized that what she had loved was the familiarity. She had known by heart when not to ride her bike based on the trash collection schedule. She had known the doughnut place at the corner always made their second batch of the day at ten a.m. But since she had moved, she had learned that other places had non-smelly bike routes and fresh doughnuts at set times, too.

And they also had people who didn’t spread rumors.

Her introspection was cut short as the car came to a stop.

To her surprise, Aurora realized they had arrived. Aurora leaned between the front seats and kissed each parent on the cheek. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Have fun, but don’t stay up too late,” Niq said. “We want to be able to have some quality time before you fly out tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure I pack your dreamcatcher so it doesn’t get damaged during your travel.”

Aurora grinned and gave her mom an extra kiss. She hadn’t known she had inherited the gift, but Ani had presented it to her yesterday, after a discussion about her heritage. She’d said Aurora needed a reminder of where she came from. According to Ojibwe legend, pleasant dreams came to the mind through the feathers that dangled from the base. Nightmares became tangled in the sinew’s web-like center and could not find their way into the dreamer’s mind.

Ani had said that Aurora and the dreamcatcher had much in common. It was beautiful, almost fragile in appearance, but strong and resilient—capable of withstanding life’s nightmares.

Aurora kept her smile while she thought of the recent memory, but as she walked into the casual restaurant, her smile faltered and she nearly did a one-eighty when she saw the greeter. He was a gossip in high school and his reputation since had stayed consistent. “Hi, Jayson.”

“Aurora?” the man behind the podium said in disbelief. “You’re here? I thought you moved because of the thing with Cheyenne. What are you doing back?”

All she wanted to do was sit down and hide behind her menu until her friends rescued her from the awkwardness. “I’m just spending a few days in town. I’m meeting Chris and Jamie, actually.”

“I guess I should seat you then.” He picked up three menus and started toward the dining room, but stopped suddenly. “Or would you rather sit at the bar?” he said with a knowing smile.

Aurora didn’t miss the insinuation. “The dining room and a water will be fine, thanks.” She took her seat and menu without any further words. She had been through this before and any attempts of, ‘none of it is true,’ fell on deaf ears. It was best if she ignored the comments. She knew who she was and the people who loved her knew who she was. That was all that mattered.

Time management also mattered to Aurora. She picked up her phone and texted:
U guys said 7, right?

It took a minute, but she received a response back. *Chris was supposed to text u. We can’t come. It would complicate things.*

“Dammit!”

A waitress hurriedly walked toward her. “Please, keep that kind of language down. Now, can I get you anything or are you still waiting on your party?”

“No.” Aurora stood and stuffed her hands into her hoodie’s pockets. “I was just leaving.”

Dejected, she walked out and programmed her Ryde for the movies. Sitting alone in a dark theater with a popcorn dinner would be an improvement.

She was correct.

The popcorn was pure carbs covered in delicious fat and salt. The movie itself wasn't fantastic—just an average fish out of water comedy. But the overly dramatic family made her grateful for the one she had and the goofy best friend reminded Aurora of hers in Portland. Stacy was a college friend and a bright spot when things went to hell a few months back. He greased the wheels at ME and got her an interview in finance. Plus, he provided reliable transportation when the distance was too far for her to ride her bike. He was a solid friend.

Even with Stacy in her thoughts, being stood up wounded her ego. Logically, she knew that she didn't want to associate with people who choose to believe rumors, but no one liked rejection. No one liked to hear that their company wasn't wanted. But even in a city that had moved on without her, there was still a place where she would always be welcomed.

As she finished her evening and entered her childhood home, being careful not to wake her parents, she readied herself for bed and, after several springs and bars squeaked, she nestled into the pull-out sofa's thin mattress the best she could.

Just before she turned off the light, she spotted a tin candy box. The dreamcatcher, no doubt, wrapped by her mother and ready for her to take back home. Aurora smiled. Whether she believed in its power or not, she could use some good dreams.

#

The hockey game was a blow out. The Fighting Salmon were thirty goals ahead of the Lake Sharks. Luckily, there were only four minutes left in regulation play because the bleacher seats had cut off the circulation in Aurora's legs and her stomach was starting to gurgle. She hadn't eaten a real meal in days. Aurora looked beside her to where all the Irony Day leftovers were lined against the stadium wall.

"Can you pass the rice?" Aurora asked her mother without taking her eyes off of the game. A warm bowl was placed in her lap and she looked down, perplexed. "Where's the spoon?"

“I left them at home, you’ll have to use your fingers.”

Aurora shrugged. If she could eat popcorn with her fingers, she could eat rice with her fingers. Her attention went back to the players as she ate small clumps of the nutty flavored side dish.

“Is anyone sitting here?”

Aurora looked up at the woman who asked. She was roughly her age, petite, bronze skin, and had large brown eyes. “No, please, sit down. Would you like some Irony Day food? There’s some right over . . .” Aurora turned in the direction of the food, but it was gone, along with her family. “Where did everything go?”

The woman shook her head. “Beats me.”

“That is just so weird.” Aurora looked at all of the exits and across the ice, but didn’t see a trace of her family. “Oh, well. Would you like to share some rice?”

The woman smiled broadly. “I love finger food. Thanks.”

Aurora slid the bowl of rice over and watched the game. The way their fingers kept grazing wasn’t annoying in the least. Actually, it gave her a small thrill. “I’m Aurora, by the way.”

“That makes sense.” The woman smiled. “The northern and southern lights are Earth’s most beautiful spectacle, and well, look at you.”

Aurora ducked her head bashfully, but then met the woman’s eyes. They were the most gorgeous, rich mahogany with flecks of gold. Aurora was entranced. “What’s your name?”

The woman furrowed her brow. “I don’t know. And I don’t know why I’m here, either.”

Aurora nibbled on the rice and came to a conclusion about the surreal elements around her. “I think this is my dream and I conjured you. So, I guess I get to make up your name.”

“That’s pretty cool. No pun instead.” The woman made an exaggerated shiver and gestured to the hockey rink with rice stuck to her fingers. “You made all of this happen?”

“Yeah. That’s why the nets look different. My mom gave me my grandmother’s dreamcatcher today and that’s what the nets are constructed from.”

The woman looked more carefully at the goal area. The posts were made from willow branches, the net was definitely not rope, and blue feathers hung from the top. "It's nice to know your roots and where you come from." The woman sighed. "I'm really confused about that. You know . . . other than that you put me here."

"I'm glad I did. You're very easy to talk to." Her surprise company was attractive too. "Do you like hockey?"

"What hockey?" The woman pointed to the scoreboard that read zero time left.

"It's over?" Aurora asked with a surprised lilt to her voice. But, as she turned to confirm the fact, the mystery woman was gone.

#

The clang of dishes bled through the wall of Aurora's former bedroom and woke her from her dream. She pushed the covers off with a groan and thanked the heavens she was leaving soon. She loved her family, but after several nights with a metal bar in the middle of her back, she couldn't wait to nestle in her comfortable bed.

She stood and stretched her tired body into wakefulness, then combed her fingers through her slightly tangled hair as she padded to the other side of the room to deactivate her classic rock alarm app that she clearly didn't need anymore.

Aurora passed a window on her short walk to the kitchen and noticed a fresh snowfall over the evergreen trees; not unusual for that region in November. When she left, she wouldn't miss the pull-out's probing bar or the small-town politics, but she would miss the peace when she returned to the hustle and bustle of Portland. Hopefully, before she said her goodbyes, she could walk down to the nearby creek to take pictures.

When she entered the kitchen, her father was making scrambled eggs and her mother was engaged in her morning ritual: drinking tea and checking her favorite websites.

Ani peered over her laptop screen and smiled. "Good morning, boo bear. Did you sleep well?"

"Kind of. Sorry Dad, but that couch isn't as comfortable as my bed."

He turned to her, spatula in hand. “The next time you visit, I’ll see if I can get one of those spongy coverings to throw on top of it. Hungry?”

She nodded and sat across from her mother at the table. “Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t just the bed. I had this really weird dream, too. I feel like I was living it all night.”

Ani’s brow raised. She loved anything unusual or vaguely paranormal. “What did you dream about?”

“All I remember is that I was at the hockey game eating rice and a woman sat beside me. We ate with our fingers and talked. She was really nice. Cute, too,” she said as her father placed a plate of eggs and toast in front of her. “Thanks. So, what are your plans after you take me to the airport?”

Niq grinned. “Before the four o’clock game I think I might put on the fat tires and take a ride through the snow. You know, if you moved back here, you could do that, too.”

“While it might not be snowy yet, Portland is great for riding. I can’t fault it there. Plus, I can’t be here anymore. Last night proved that ten times over.”

Niq and Ani shared a concerned look.

“We know, Aurora. We don’t fault you for spreading your wings.” Ani patted her daughter’s hand while she ate. “Did you have a good time last night with your friends?”

“I ended up going to see a movie by myself. They never showed for dinner and gave me the same reason everyone else does.” It was frustrating and sad no one bothered to hear her out or were too spineless to speak up in her defense. But, at least she still had Stacy. Aurora thought of her oldest friend fondly as she ate her breakfast.

“What time did you want to leave for the airport?” Ani asked.

“Around noon. I don’t have to worry about baggage claim, so that’ll save me some time.”

“And Stacy is picking you up?” Niq asked.

She met his pointed look with a smirk. “Yes, Dad. He’s a good guy and never once—okay, just that once—hit on me.”

“I think that’s what I don’t trust. You’re just too beautiful for anyone to pass up.” He kissed her on the crown of her head and went to the sink to wash up.

Once Aurora's shoulders drooped and head dropped, Ani rubbed small circles on her daughter's back. "Someday you'll find someone who understands and respects your beliefs. Have you given any thought to dating again?"

"Not really. Besides, this isn't the time to start. There's a reason I had to come out here the week before the holiday to spend time with my family."

"And we're glad you did," Niq said. "Promise me you'll text when you land." Aurora held her pinky finger out, which he hooked with his own. "I promise."

<<End of Sample>>

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