



Victory Storm

THE SWEET POISON OF REVENGE



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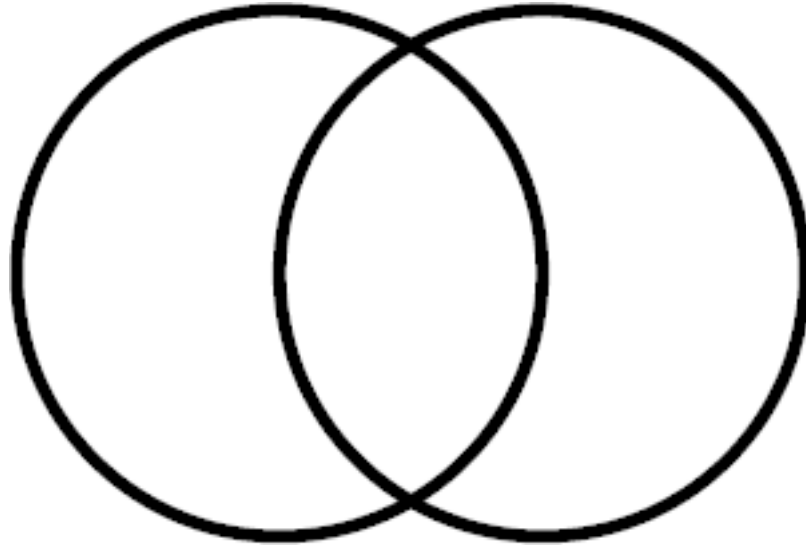
Содержание

THE SWEET POISON OF REVENGE	6
1	7
2	12
3	14
4	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

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THE SWEET POISON OF REVENGE

Zane Thunder is wealthy, charming, single, desired by many, and at the head of the Thunder Company, one of the most famous and respected advertising agencies in Chicago. In life, he always had to struggle but, in the end, he managed to get everything he wanted. Everything except Audrey. The only woman he ever loved and who betrayed him, destroying his happiness. Audrey Larson lost everything. Her happy life ended with the divorce from the only man she ever loved, Zane.

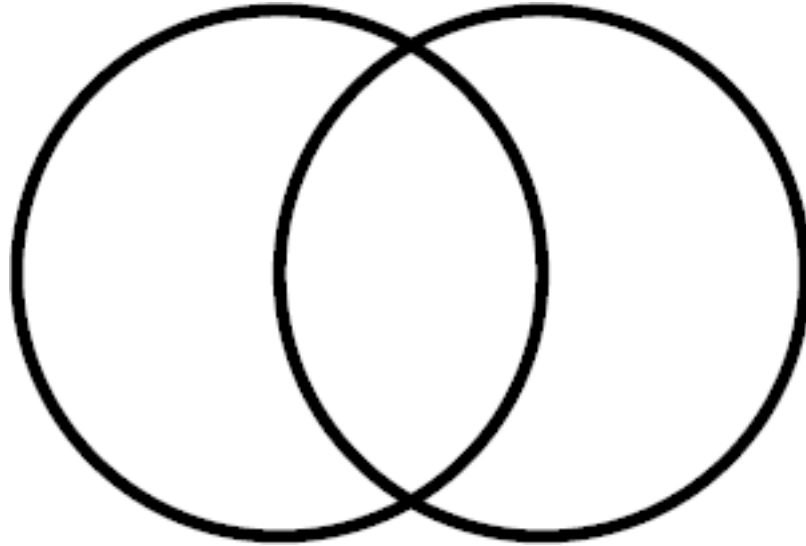
When they separated, her descent into hell started, but just when it seems like she had lost everything, Zane reappears in her life.

It has been four years since the last time they met.

Will these years make her forget and start a new page, or will their meeting only rekindle old grudges and the need for revenge that has been there all along?

1

Audrey



"Great job, Miss Larson," Peter Anderson mumbled quickly, seeing me run back to the kitchen to take yet another order to take to the table.

"Thanks," I whispered excited for the compliment, before leaving for the elegant dining room of the prestigious restaurant, my hands loaded with dishes.

"I cannot believe it. Anderson just complimented you. You can now consider yourself hired! Congratulations, Audrey!" My colleague Sharon exclaimed in a low voice, as I was trying to avoid running into her, moving towards the tables assigned to me.

That day *Prestige* was full.

All the tables were taken, except one.

The bar counter was crowded and everywhere there were people coming and going in every direction.

The risk of colliding with someone was extremely high.

A risk that I absolutely could not afford.

That was my third day at work as a waitress for *Prestige* and it would have been my last trial day before deciding whether to hire me permanently or let me go if I was not suitable for the job at the restaurant.

Actually, I never wanted to be a waitress.

I was a *Marketing* graduate with a concentration in *Administration and Public Relationship*.

In addition, I had studied advertising.

That had always been my world.

I had worked for advertising agencies all my life, until my divorce and my transfer to Gatesville to be near my father, who ended up in a wheelchair after a terrible stroke that had paralyzed him from the neck down.

Now I was back in Chicago, that I considered my city, the place where all my dreams had always come true.

However, I had soon discovered that, due to the four years I spent far away, many doors were now closed to me.

After years in Gatesville to take care of my only parent who was still alive, Chicago had changed.

Now requests, experiences, and competitiveness had reached levels that made my reintegration into what had always been my job almost impossible.

Seemingly, nobody cared if I had planned and organized prestigious advertising campaigns. The only thing that everyone stopped to look at was that four-year-old interval during which I had been cut off from the working world.

And now, here I was, being a waitress in a luxury restaurant, surrounded by buildings that gathered the offices of some of the largest advertising and IT companies in the city.

I had looked for work desperately after my father's death, overwhelmed by healthcare costs yet to be paid.

All my savings and money inherited from my father were gone.

The only thing left for me to do was to go back to work in Chicago, the only city I knew and that could offer me job opportunities that a small town like Gatesville could never give me.

Because of my financial problems, I had not been able to wait to find the perfect job, so I had to really search and in the end I had decided to find a job that would allow me to get in touch with the upscale world, without showing it .

Being a waitress at *Prestige* meant this to me.

It was not only the beautiful uniforms that made me feel at ease, but it was the possibility to meet the new owners of the advertising world that had aroused my interest.

Now the only thing I had to do was pass the three-day trial period and get that job, in order to pay the house rent, I had three-months in arrears, and I needed to start probing the ground for my future.

That day I knew that I had made the right choice.

While serving drinks as well as elaborate and tasty dishes, I overheard extremely interesting conversations: a certain Savannah, annoyed by the advertising work she had requested for her cosmetics line, a creative director who had resigned leaving the *Marshall Company* in a difficult situation, since they did not know now how to satisfy the requests of new customers, a certain Farlight who was discussing with a woman his desire to revamp his liqueur's brand logo ...

In short, in front of me, I had infinite possibilities of getting a hold of the right customer and getting a job in public relations of an advertising company in exchange for some of the tips I had learnt.

I knew very well there were those who would pay handsomely for that information.

I felt in seventh heaven. Despite the effort of that large and demanding clientele, always in a hurry, I had not slowed down or wished for a break.

"Bring this to table seven," Anderson suddenly ordered, handing me a tray full of appetizers.

That was the last of the free tables.

I looked at the clock.

A few more hours and my day at work would be done.

Zigzagging between a table and another, between a client and a colleague, I arrived at the tables assigned to me, but just as I quickly turned to the right to avoid the dog of a client who had lost control of it, I suddenly found myself facing a figure in black.

Before I could turn or focus my gaze on what was happening, I felt the tray crash abruptly against that obstacle, knocking all the glass goblets to the ground, which shattered in a thousand pieces.

"Oh, my God!" I whispered in desperation, in front of the carpet of broken glass, while my eyes went up on the silhouetted figure in front of me. "I'm ... I am sorry ... I did not see you ... The dog distracted me and ...," I continued to sputter in shock, looking at the man's white shirt, now completely soaked and stained by several drinks.

I was continuing to babble apologies, when I finally had the courage to look up and meet the man's furious look.

Suddenly I experienced a rapid heartbeat.

As soon as my eyes met his blue ones, I could not catch my breath and was not able to compose myself for several seconds.

"Zane," I uttered, still unable to breathe, while every part of my body that had been touched and kissed by him in the past seemed to awaken.

"Audrey," he replied dryly and annoyingly.

"What are you doing here?" I managed to ask, unable to think about anything else except that unlucky coincidence, which might only lead to two things: risking to lose my job and bring back the memories of our married life together that I had tried for four years to erase from memory.

"Mr. Thunder, I am mortified," the owner of the place uttered immediately, followed by two other workers who had come to clean up the damage immediately and to remove the glass from the floor before it could harm anyone.

"Anderson, I thought you were more careful in choosing your employees," Zane hissed sternly, wiping his jacket and shirt with a napkin.

That sentence hit me like a punch in the stomach.

I remembered that unyielding, harsh tone when he was after something.

I stared in perplexity at my ex-husband and what I saw made me feel like I was hovering over a precipice.

He kept looking at me as he spoke to my boss.

What I read there was not mere irritation, but also a veiled satisfaction masked by a smile at the sound of Anderson's words when I tried to fix the damage.

"I apologize for what happened. If I can do something ..." I tried to say, trying not to think how much it was costing me to apologize to the one who had destroyed our marriage.

"Miss Larson, there is only one thing you can do: take your stuff and get out of here. Immediately," Anderson replied furiously, without even looking at me.

Oh no! I had just lost my job!

Shocked and unable to react, I took one last look at Zane.

He was not smiling, but he had a glimmer of triumph in his eyes.

"You did it on purpose, didn't you?" I figured out at some point. "I need this job," I added, despite his silence.

"How dare you? Get out of here! Did you hear me, or do I need to call the police?" My ex-boss intervened, stepping between me and Zane.

"I'm leaving," I surrendered destroyed.

Four years had passed since the divorce, from the day Zane had managed to win and take away everything, everything I had.

After all that time, I had hoped that my fortune had changed and instead ...

Zane had won again.

He just got me fired.

I was sure: that confrontation had been intentional.

Hurriedly, I went to the back, took off my uniform and emptied my locker.

I did not even notice that I had started to cry.

Mine was a cry of frustration, anger, fear, disappointment, and bitterness ... They were tears of defeat.

Seeing Zane had troubled me a lot. Even too much. Much more than I could have imagined.

I had not seen him for years, and when I decided to go back to Chicago, I knew his ad agency was located north of the city, so I set out to never go over there.

In fact, I had looked for a house in the south and a job in the south-west.

I had hoped never to meet him, even though I had always repeated that after all those years I felt nothing more for him, except a cold and sincere indifference.

I wiped my tears.

Audrey, he is no longer your husband and he can no longer hurt you.

Running, I took my things and ran away from the restaurant, without saying goodbye to anyone.

"Audrey." I heard Zane's hoarse voice behind me. To hear my name spoken by his voice was pure poison to my heart.

I turned and saw him.

He too had exited *Prestige*.

"Isn't it enough for you to get me fired? What else do you want, Zane? Wasn't it enough for you to have taken everything away from me four years ago?" I burst out furiously, trying to stop my tears.

"Did I take everything away from you?" He growled, approaching me so much that I could feel his breath on my skin and his distinct scent.

I could not answer, I was too stunned by his closeness and by the sensations the smell of his skin always managed to unleash.

Why couldn't I forget your perfume?

How was it possible that, after so many years, his scent still managed to make me a prisoner as it once did?

Zane does not belong to you anymore. Remember that.

I nodded weakly.

'Audrey, it was you who started, destroying our marriage, and running away from me. Did you really think you could do what you did without suffering terrible consequences?' He hissed threateningly, his jaw contracted, and his eyes slit.

"Did you not get enough revenge already?"

"Revenge? No, baby, I just took what was mine. "

"Yours or ours? I'd like to remind you that, we founded the *Thunder Company* together and then you kicked me out. "

"You left!"

"I know and that's why I agreed to leave you everything and not ask for half of the agency. I only took back the money that belonged to me before getting married, "I reminded him angrily.

Yes, I had left it because I could no longer feel suffocated in a marriage without love and commitment, since we had founded our advertising agency. What was supposed to be a dream come true had turned into an obsession with Zane's success and a complete abrogation of the time devoted to love.

"You took what you deserved. Be thankful I did not take those too. You don't deserve anything. "

I did not know what happened to me. I only saw my hand move on its own and slap him in the face.

I had never been a violent person, but my nerves were shattered.

Within a year I had lost my father, the family home, I had finally left Gatesville for Chicago, could not find a job in the workplace and I was full of debts.

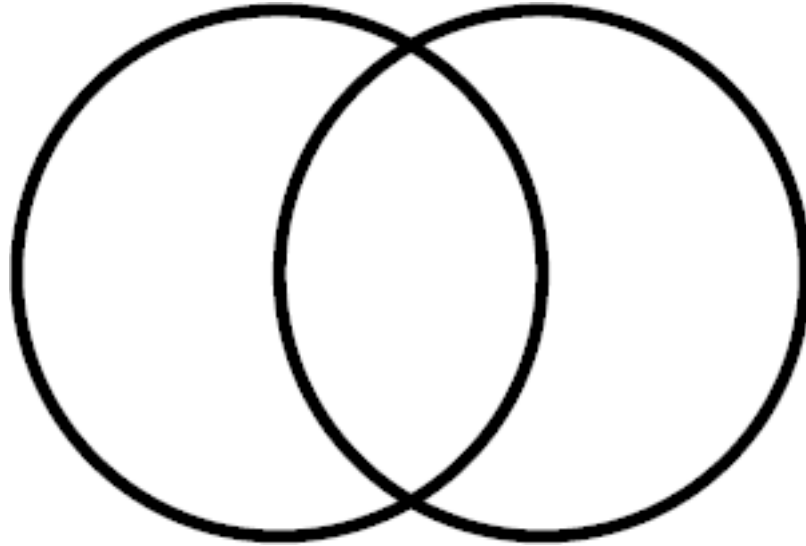
And now, Zane and my layoff.

"Please, excuse me ... I didn't want to ...," I whispered feeling guilty. I had never gone that far, not even during the terrible quarrels of the last year of marriage or divorce proceedings. "Wow ... This is the result of the hatred you have harbored over the past four years," Zane murmured angrily, rubbing his red cheek. "Wasn't it enough for me to lose an important customer with whom I had to sign a contract? No, now you are even raising your hands in front of everyone, in the middle of the road. " He looked around and noticed some passersby staring at us in horror. I apologize, "I murmured, my cheeks burning with shame. What had I done? How could I have hit the man I had loved for seven years and with whom I had ended all relationships for four long years now? "I don't know what to

make of your apologies," Zane replied dryly, turning to the street, and stopping the first available taxi. I could not even say good-bye to him or say anything else for that matter. Zane was gone.a...

2

Audrey



"Are you crazy?" Gwen exploded when I told her what had happened to me the day before. After the divorce, I had lost all of Zane's friends.

No one had wanted to keep in touch with me and I, on my way to Gatesville, had blown up any attempt at reconciliation.

The only person I managed to find on my return to Chicago was Gwen, the owner of the cafeteria where Zane and I always had coffee in the morning before going to work.

That place was one of the best memories of my love affair with my ex.

At the time we were just so much in love and full of dreams and ambitions. We had nothing else, not even the money for a vacation or a special dinner.

"I know ... I was wrong. Do you think he might report me? "

"I don't think it would go that far, but if I think back to the last few months of your marriage and you leaving him with Rick ... Well, it might cross my mind if I were in his place."

"I never cheated on Zane! Rick was just a friend who was always available, ready to listen to me and console me when I was shaken up from fighting with Zane. "

"Rick was a scumbag ready to take his boss's wife to bed through deception and fake flattery," she corrected me sternly.

"Now I know," I uttered softly. Unfortunately, I had discovered it too late and had not listened to my friends and Gwen when they told me to beware of Rick, whose goal was to get a hold of Zane's agency and who understood that I was his weak spot as far as making him lose his head and lose his job.

"But not your husband, Audrey, I don't think Zane ever believed your innocence. "

"I don't doubt it. As much as I tried to explain the truth to him, Zane never wanted to listen to me ... but it no longer matters. It's water under the bridge, right? "

"It depends. Are we talking about a wounded and vengeful man, or a man who has moved on? "

"I don't know. Four years have passed, and I know nothing more about him. "

"Did you tell me you got the impression that he got you fired on purpose or am I wrong?"

"I'm sure! I swear I was being careful, and he suddenly stood in front of me ... It can't be a stupid coincidence, believe me. "

"I believe you, Audrey. This is enough for me to deduce that you are not the only one who has not gotten over this. "

"I have gotten over it, Gwen!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely yes."

"Then why did you slap him?"

"I ... I ... I do not know ... I was falling apart... My life has been a circle of hell since ..."

"Since you left Zane," she finished the sentence because I would never have done it.

"I don't know what to do. Zane is vindictive, I know. He could really do something terrible ... Maybe a restraining order against me. "

"You just have to go to him and find out."

"What do you suggest?"

"Asking him, apologizing, and paying him for his suit's dry cleaner, my friend suggested.

"I barely have the money to pay for this coffee and muffin," I confessed, eating the last bite of Gwen's cake.

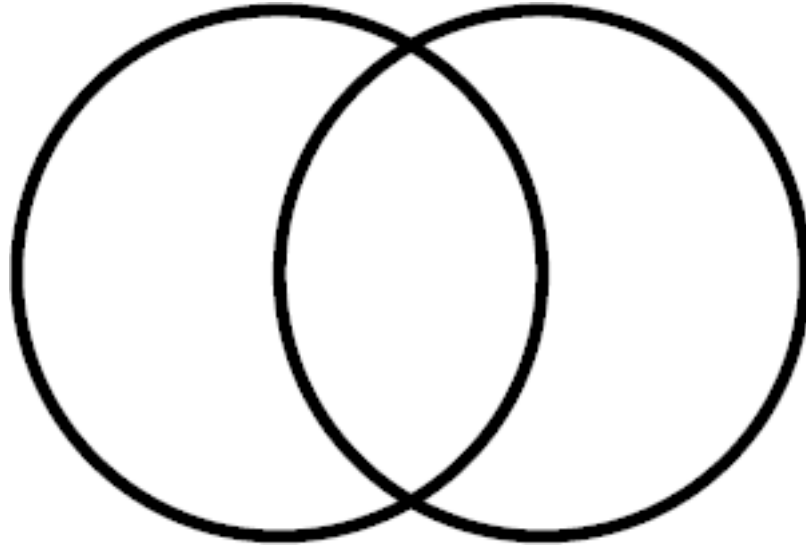
"This is on the house," she exclaimed sympathetically, preparing a tray full of blueberry muffins. "And these are for your husband. They were his favorites when you came here.

"Ex-husband," I corrected her. "Anyway, thank you," I whispered, moved by her gesture and by the memory of Zane's smile every time he ate those muffins.

I felt another twinge in my heart overwhelm me.

How will I ever be able to meet Zane again, without being carried away by memories?

3 Audrey



I had left Zane and the *Thunder and Larson Company* four years earlier. At the time, our business, which we had set up on our own, was little more than a dump north of Chicago, even though Zane's abilities and maddening ambition had succeeded in creating a small space in the advertising environment in just two years.

Two years in which each success of the company could be associated with a new brick that would soon create an impassable wall between us.

Although it did not start out on the right foot, Zane had made it and now seeing his studio on the thirtieth floor of one of the most beautiful skyscrapers in southern Chicago made my heart pound.

Of course, now my last name no longer appeared on the sign, but I felt that a part of me had remained there, wedged between the words *Thunder* and *Company*.

I too had made many sacrifices to make that dream come true.

I had always believed it and I knew that Zane, at the time my husband, was one of the most brilliant advertisers in Chicago.

I was the one who instilled in Zane the desire to start from scratch and start a company, not knowing the price to pay would be our love.

If I went back, would I make that choice again?

Would I still push Zane towards independence and ambition?

Yes, because he deserved it. He was worth more than what he did at the *Kreinberg Company*, where we had met and formed a team with other members who were always too lazy or distracted to allow us to make that qualitative leap and establish ourselves in that shark environment.

But what about our marriage?

Maybe that should not have happened?

I did not know, and I didn't want to answer that question either, because every time I thought about, it felt my wound bleed and my heart breaking again with the same violence of four years prior.

Erasing those thoughts from my mind, I headed for the skyscraper where the *Thunder Company* resided, as I had read on the internet.

I got to the right floor without difficulty, but when I tried to speak directly to Zane Thunder, an annoyed and exhausted secretary kicked me out decisively.

"Mr. Thunder doesn't see anyone without an appointment," she said shortly.

"Please, it's important. I'm Audrey Larson. "

"So? For me, you could be the President of the United States himself, but I won't let you into his office without an appointment. "

"Has Zane ever told you about me?" I found myself wondering.

Suddenly I looked around.

There were many employees walking back and forth.

I immediately realized that I did not know anyone.

Apparently, there were none of the first employees hired when I was still part of the company.

Nobody knew about me.

Zane did not tell anyone he was married to me.

I felt like an annoying insect, chased away and immediately forgotten.

Gwen was wrong. Zane had really turned the page.

Against all my wishes, I felt tears sting my eyes.

I felt mortified.

I was nothing now.

It was as if there was nothing left of me.

I had walked to that skyscraper, with my muffin-filled box and with the hope that something of me or mine was left in that company or ... in Zane.

Something I could hold on to in order to start over after leaving Zane and Chicago.

Instead I found out there was nothing there for me anymore.

No link. No foothold. No glance or opportunity to start from.

Suddenly, the door of the office guarded by the grumpy secretary opened and I saw Zane come out, accompanied by a very elegant and beautiful woman.

"Zane, you know how to make a woman happy," she exclaimed happily.

"Trisha, I know how to make you happy," he replied with a seductive smile and that hoarse voice that in the past always managed to make my legs give out.

"What a flatterer," she laughed cheerfully, but he was no longer smiling.

He was looking at me.

When I returned his gaze, every trace of his smile and charm was gone.

"Sarah, take the lady to the elevator," Zane immediately ordered his secretary irritably. "Trisha, sorry, but I have an emergency. I'll talk to you later. "

The emergency would be me ... Thanks for the umpteenth blow to my self-esteem.

"Get out! You're not welcome here," Zane hissed as soon as we were alone. "Have you come to create trouble here too and to ruin what I've built in these years?"

"Absolutely not. How can you think that of me? "

'First you accuse me of getting you fired, then you slap me and now you're here. Sorry if I cannot be optimistic. Maybe you preferred a welcome with open arms? Well, forget it! Your name no longer appears on the plaque at the entrance and you can no longer come here. Have I made myself clear?"

I had hardly heard a word of what he had just said to me. The hatred and anger I saw in his icy eyes had paralyzed me.

I did not understand how he could hate me so much.

He had a thriving and successful business.

He had remained young and handsome, just as I remembered him.

Surely, he already had another partner, perhaps that very woman, Trisha.

In an instant I looked at his left right finger searching for a ring.

No, he has not remarried.

He had it all. I had nothing.

What more could he want?

"I just wanted to apologize for yesterday and give you these muffins Gwen made. They are blueberry muffins, your favorites. Just a small gesture to make me forgive myself for what happened. I apologize. I did not mean to slap you. It was an impulsive and stupid gesture, dictated by the nervousness caused by a difficult period and ... "

"I don't care," he stopped me.

"Zane, I'm really sorry."

"As I told you yesterday, I don't know what to make of your apologies. Now, please leave and never come back. I have to work."

"What about the muffins?"

"I don't want anything from you. I just want you to leave. "

Zane looked really determined.

"Ok, sorry. I am leaving immediately. Bye," I stammered with a lump in my throat that seemed to want to suffocate me.

Zane did not even answer me.

I turned on my heels and headed for the elevators, under his watchful gaze.

I had never felt so humiliated and torn since the divorce day.

Apparently, four years were not enough to forget. Not for me and not even for him.

Only when the elevator doors closed, a tear of sadness fell on my face.

I felt alone, in the middle of an ocean.

I hugged my arms in search of warmth but found myself trembling confused and desperate.

I felt only a great void inside me.

This was not how I hoped to feel after four years.

Many times, I had imagined meeting Zane, but in all my fantasies, I always remained dispassionate and serene, satisfied with my life, and committed to my new career.

Instead, I was penniless, without a job or a new love ... and soon a house, if I did not immediately pay the rent.

Audrey, don't give up! There are still many things you can do!

I wiped my face and, when the elevator doors reopened, I ran to the exit.

I walked for a long time, until I arrived at *Sherman Park*, where I relaxed on a bench in front of a pond filled with ducks.

Exhausted and hungry, I opened Gwen's muffin box.

The scent of blueberries and frosting penetrated my nostrils, taking me back over the years, to when I used to spend Sunday mornings lying on the bed next to Zane, after making love all night.

I remembered that I loved leaving home early, secretly, to go to Gwen's coffee shop one block from our house. I stocked up on coffee, blueberry muffins for Zane and chocolate chips for me. Then I would go home, prepare trays, and go back to the bedroom. Each time Zane woke up because of the smell of sweets and coffee, his drug of choice.

We always had breakfast in each other's arms, making plans for the future, then we went back to making love without worrying about what time it was.

Only once Zane got ahead of me and woke up before me to go get muffins and have a surprise breakfast.

That was the time I found an engagement ring inside one of my sweets.

"What's this?" I asked him, pretending indifference, while my heart had jumped out of my chest.

"Oh, nothing important," he added quickly nonchalantly. "It's just a way of reminding you that you'll soon be my wife."

"And this would be your marriage proposal?" I laughed amused. "I expected something more romantic and blatant from a creative director."

"I thought about it, but then you dampened my enthusiasm the time you told me you hate public declarations of love."

"True."

"You also told me that you can't stand to hear the usual phrase" Will you marry me? "In romantic films"

"I find it devoid of originality and too classic."

"I know."

"Therefore? Does this mean you don't even ask me? "

"What?"

"If I want to marry you."

"There is no need."

"Aren't you thinking too much of yourself?" I had made fun of him.

"No. I am simply avoiding being refused, since without question, there is no answer. "

"I would never do that. You know I love you so much. "

"Thank God ... I made it! If you had refused me, I would have died. The idea of living without you is something that I hope will never happen. I do not know what I would do without you. I love you, Audrey, you are my whole life. "

"You are everything to me too," I replied, kissing him with passion and sealing our love with that ring.

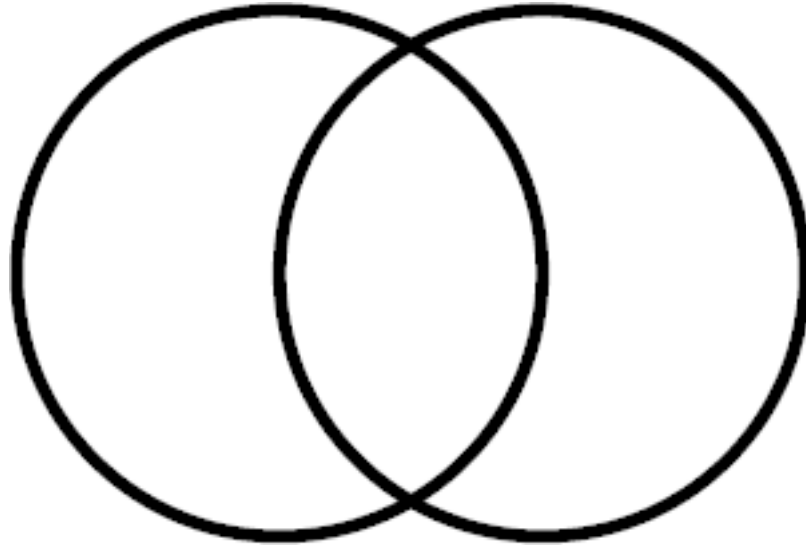
That memory made me melt into tears.

I could not eat even one of the six muffins that soon became drenched in tears.

I sat there on that bench for I do not know how long.

I just wanted to get rid of all the pain that had taken hold of my stomach and chest.

4 Zane



"A whiskey, please," I ordered hurriedly to the bartender, sitting at the counter.

I could not believe it.

I had stopped drinking for three years, except on special occasions.

Three years in which I was committed to forgetting my wrecked marriage, to putting back what was left of my broken heart, to go back to breathing without always feeling that dull pain in the chest that left me breathless ...

And now...

Now I was there, in a bar, not far from my office, at ten in the morning, sipping a whiskey instead of working.

I felt I was going back years when Audrey had left me and suddenly the whole world had collapsed on me.

For more than a year I had found refuge in alcohol, until I realized that soon I would also lose the *Thunder Company*, now on the verge of bankruptcy.

Only my work had given me the strength to get back on my feet and turn the page.

I had succeeded.

I had had the success I had always wanted, leading me to become the head of one of the most popular advertising agencies in Chicago.

I had achieved my dream and that of my wife, a woman who had pushed me to form a company, and to believe more in myself and the fact that I would achieve incredible goals.

I had worked hard for years to make her proud of me.

I loved my job, but what had always pushed me to stay in the office until midnight every night, to look for new customers even on Sundays, to invest our paltry savings in advertising, was her. I had done all that only with one purpose: not to disappoint the expectations of the woman I loved and who believed in me to the point of putting all of herself at stake to focus everything on me, her "winning horse," as she said.

I never took all her complaints seriously, about how I always spent too much time at work, for I knew how important it was for her too.

However, I understood how tiring it was for her. For that reason, I had decided to give her a break and hire an employee to do her job, so that she would have more time for herself, as she always asked when we worked at Kreinberg's.

I did it for her, just to make her feel good.

I had not thought that my decision would come back to haunt me, leading her to have a good time with my copywriter, Rick Mendoza.

In an instant I drained my whiskey, hoping that this would erase my past.

I felt alcohol burning my stomach and setting my throat on fire, but I did not care.

I had needed to dull my mind since I had seen Audrey at *Prestige*.

All I had to do is close my eyes to see my fingers scroll through the long brown waves of her hair, move the bangs that often fell in front of her eyes, slide on her face to the small and fleshy lips that always folded in a seductive smile inviting me to kiss her, while my hands continued to rest on her perfect curves ...

It was all so indelible in my mind and her voice still had the power to hypnotize me and make me lose my head, along with that fiery look she often gave me when we were married.

Oh my God, will I ever forget her for good?

Her image gave me no respite and knowing that she had left New York to come back here left me uneasy and relentless.

Why had she returned?

Had she broken up with Rick?

Why were you looking for a job as a waitress?

What had happened to her?

I should not have asked myself all those questions, but I had noticed her thin, pale face, her weight loss, her bewildered gaze, and that tension taken to the extreme, so much so that she almost collapsed.

"Hi," someone said behind me. I would have recognized that voice among thousands.

For a moment I wanted another whiskey, but I managed to control myself and turned slowly, keeping a straight face.

As soon as my eyes landed on her hazel ones, I felt my heart break.

I was in pain and hated her for it. But I also hated myself for the power I was giving her over me.

"Before you start accusing me of stalking and seeking a restraining order against me, I want to tell you that I am here only because I am looking for work and I am handing out my curriculum vitae to all the businesses in the neighborhood," she hurried to clarify.

If it had not been my ex-wife, I would have laughed at such a statement.

"Chicago is an exceptionally large city. Yet you are always here, close to my company," I pointed out coldly.

"You're right, but I intend to stay nearby precisely because these places are the most popular with advertising agencies."

"I thought it would be enough to take the resume directly to their offices, instead of seeking the agents at the bars," I said acidly.

"I've tried it before, but that road hasn't worked. So now I am trying a new one. "

"Do what you want, just stay away from me and avoid associating my name with yours to get something in return."

"Explain to me: what you don't want to reveal is that we were married or worked together, am I right?"

I did not answer her and turned back to the counter to finish my whiskey. I really needed it. Hearing Audrey talking about our marriage was something I still could not face. Not for nothing, nobody knew that I had been married and all the old employees of *Thunder and Larson Company*

had been fired. A decision I had made shortly after the divorce, during one of the worst times of my life and under the influence of alcohol that flowed through my veins from morning to night.

"Don't worry, Zane. Your name does not appear on my resume. It just says that I am divorced and worked for seven years at the *Kreinberg Company*. "

"Perfect."

"I didn't even mention I opened the *Thunder and Larson Company* with you. By the way, how is your work going? "

"It doesn't concern you," I replied dryly to her vaguely irritated and offended tone.

I stared at her again.

She seemed decisively annoyed and angry.

"You are right. It is none of my business, even though I spent three years of my life there. I just hope you're working hard to make your agency successful," she answered provokingly, making me instantly nervous.

I quickly got up from the stool and eliminated the distance that separated us.

I was so close that I could smell her brown hair.

"The *Thunder Company* is already an established agency. I have worked hard to get where I am now, and I am proud of the results. My life is filled with successes, money and fame ... unlike yours, as far as I can see. "

"You really don't know."

"Am I wrong or are you here to look for work as a bartender? It is obvious that to get to this point you have to be in a bad situation both economically and professionally. What has happened? Rick doesn't take care of you anymore? Maybe he is looking for a job too, maybe as a dishwasher? "

"I haven't seen Rick in four years, Zane, but you're right. I'm not doing well, but even if from the outside it seems that you are the career man you want everyone to see, I don't think it's really like that, otherwise you wouldn't drink alcohol at ten in the morning, with that brooding and worried attitude, when ten meters away you have a potential customer looking for an advertiser who can satisfy his requests to promote his new line of cosmetics, "she replied sternly, pointing to a blonde, middle-aged woman sitting at a table, in the company of what could have been her sister, given the great resemblance.

"And how do you know?" I asked, avoiding getting stuck on what she had said about Rick.

"I overheard her talking to someone at *Prestige* on the phone, saying she's not happy with her job and that she's looking for a new ad agency," Audrey explained.

I knew that woman. She was Savannah Summering, a rather fickle but extremely wealthy woman, passionate about make-up. I had tried to take her in, but the *Marshall Company* had preceded me.

"I know that woman. She has a reputation for being very unpredictable. I am not surprised the *Marshall Company* is having difficulty. However, I know their leading creative director and I know that he will be able to satisfy her requests ," I commented, trying to remain impassive, even if inside me I already had in mind a way to bring Savannah Summering to my side.

"The *Marshall Company*?" Audrey wondered.

"Yes, are you familiar with it?"

"No, but I also have news about this agency: it has lost its chief creative director, and everyone is concerned about it."

That was some news!

The *Marshall Company* had always been one of my main rivals. The idea of seeing it fail made me jump for joy.

I would have stolen every available customer!

As well as the artistic director!

"Do you know why the creative director left?" I asked.

"I don't know that. I only caught part of the conversation while serving lunch to a group of agency employees when I was working at *Prestige*. "

"What you've just revealed to me is extremely important and profitable, if used to my advantage."

"I know."

"Who else did you give this information to?"

"Nobody," she answered sincerely. "Even though I wanted to save it for the next job interview at the *Keith Company*. That is if I pass the first round of interviews. They've had my resume for four days now, but they never called me back. "

"I doubt they will."

"I think so too," she snorted in surrender, curling a lock of hair around her finger, as she did when she was nervous and worried.

It was unthinkable that such a clever woman in the marketing and administrative sector had been rejected during the preselection.

I had worked alongside her for six years and knew how smart and determined she was.

"What do you want in return, for you not to spread this news?"

"You want exclusive rights, if I understand correctly."

"Exactly. This is business. "

Audrey looked at me for a long time and with a strange intensity. She was the only one who could look at me like that.

That was how I fell in love with her.

In love...

I was not *simply* in love.

I was literally crazy about her.

So much so, that I could not think of anything but her.

I had to clench my fists not to touch her and get closer to her, with a sudden desire to kiss her.

'In return, I'm only asking for a little kindness. I do not want to revive the past and repeat for the umpteenth time the reasons for our separation are not what you think. I just want to start over and take over the reins of my life. "

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