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Magda Van
A THORNY PATH TO HAPPINESS

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Аннотация

Family remains the ultimate sanctuary. In this sweeping saga inspired by true events, the dramatic tapestry of the ancient Armanonts dynasty unfurls. Set against the fierce upheavals of the twentieth century, the chronicle of generations weaves into a gripping, relentless narrative.

The reader will journey from the unforgiving goldfields of the Klondike and the devastating fires of the 1915 Genocide in Ailur to the sun-drenched orchards of California. The family must endure epic ascents and bitter disillusions, material conquests and staggering moral losses, forging lifes profound truths from the ruins of the past. Yet, an unyielding faith in God and an unbroken fortitude of spirit empower them to rise above adversity.

Turn these pages to touch the raw depths of human pain—and discover the boundless grace of True, Devoted, and Pure LOVE. This profound, breathtaking novel will challenge and redefine your very outlook on life.

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Chapter 1. Above the Crests of the Family Hills

EPIGRAPH

...From distant cells, from shadowed, secret folds,
I drew the word like water from the deep.
I wrote for those who barely step into this life,
And those whose youth is spent, who now grow wise.
I wrote for those whose earthly race is run,
Who stand before the fatal, final threshold.
For both the righteous and the fallen did I write,
For those who bring relief, and those who weep;
For those who sit in judgment, and the judged;
For those who bend in penance, and the chained by sin.
For souls of virtue and the dark of heart,
For those of pure estate, and the defiled.
For all: the noble-born and the obscure,

The broken slave, the high and mighty prince.
I wrote alike for husbands and for wives,
For those cast down, and those exalted high;
For sovereigns who rule, and the oppressed,
For the abuser, and the deeply wronged,
For those who gave solace, and the comforted.
I wrote alike for humble and for great,
For dwellers of the towns, and untamed mountain clans,
And even for the ultimate supreme,
Who answers only to the judgment of the Lord.
I wrote for souls consumed by vanity, and for the blest,
For holy monks and hermits of the wild.
And may these lines, heavy with my own grief,
Become a sacred lesson for the world.
May he who weeps in bitter, heavy sin
Find comfort inside these holy scrolls.
May every soul turn all my toil and care
Into a blessing for their path ahead...

Grigor Narekatsi, 10th Century
The Book of Lamentations

Chapter 1. Above the Crests of the Family Hills

A relentless torrent of cars surged down the highway toward Santa Barbara, locking boundaries in the suffocating embrace of summer traffic jams. Fleeing the valley's sweltering heat,

the travelers pressed toward the coast, drawn by the raw, clean promise of the Pacific. Many were bound for the Santa Ynez Valley, seeking sanctuary beneath the shade of Lake Cachuma for the weekend. The past few days had been merciless; the sun beat down with a blinding fury, thick air hanging heavy and stagnant, making every breath a chore. Yet just beyond the asphalt, the cloudless vault of the blue sky mirrored perfectly in the sapphire vastness of the ocean, where frothing waves crashed against the long, sloping shore—a rhythmic, lulling murmur that swept away the dust and friction of mundane lives.

Above the highway, cutting through the heat with a muffled, resonant roar, a private jet surged low like a great silver-winged bird, charting its course toward the jagged mountain ridges. Inside the opulent cabin sat the Thomas family: Richard, the visionary tycoon of the gold fields; his wife, Margarita; and their twins, Daniela and David.

The young Thomases had just graduated at the top of their class, securing their places at Harvard University—a triumph that filled the family with profound pride. A brilliant new chapter was unfolding for Daniela and David, who counted the days to their departure with breathless anticipation. To honor their achievement, a grand gala was to be held at the family's mountain estate in the exclusive hills overlooking Santa Barbara.

Richard had recently celebrated his fifty-five-year milestone, yet he carried his age with an effortless grace that defied the silver at his temples. He possessed the immaculate refinement

born of true aristocracy and immense wealth. His eyes, intensely blue like the sky above, radiated a genuine, deep-seated warmth. Richard sat in a plush armchair, his gaze anchored on the woman who had held his heart entirely throughout their marriage. He cradled her soft, pale hand in his palms; destiny had blessed them with a rare, enduring devotion that grew richer with time. Margarita was approaching fifty, yet her skin remained flawless, completely untouched by the years, prompting Richard to often whisper, "Time has no power over you, my love."

Margarita would answer with a rich, melodic laugh. Her rich chestnut hair, streaked with silver strands, fell in luxurious waves over her shoulders. Her emerald eyes, shifting with the deeper hues of the sea, were framed by a thick fringe of dark lashes. The delicate oval of her face, her slender, straight nose, and the vivid crimson of her lips formed a portrait of timeless elegance. When she smiled, her perfect teeth caught the light like fine mother-of-pearl. She was the absolute center of Richard's world, a quiet harbor of happiness after the fierce storms and trials of his earlier years.

The jet climbed higher, tilting toward the peaks. Margarita leaned her head serenely against her husband's shoulder, while the twins engaged in a low, spirited debate across the aisle. At last, the chime of the stewardess announced their descent. In the distance, nestled securely between the rolling green ridges, their ancestral domain came into view, shielded from the world by a high granite wall and a perimeter of ancient, towering trees.

The aircraft touched down with a feather-light grace, slowing to a gentle halt. Expressing their gratitude to the crew, the family stepped down the airbridge into the embrace of a cooling mountain breeze. In high spirits, they moved to the waiting fleet of white limousines. Leaving the private airfield behind, the cars swept half a mile down the road before pausing at the massive, intricate wrought-iron gates. The guard offered a respectful salute, throwing the gates wide to let the procession pass.

Manicured lawns unfurled on either side, punctuated by vibrant, artfully designed flowerbeds. Along the edges, sprawling thickets of white bougainvillea and violet jacaranda erupted in magnificent, wild blooms. Ahead lay the covered pavilion and a Spanish-style guest villa, its facade of deep emerald glass gleaming like a mythical crystal palace. Set slightly back, commanding the landscape, rose the primary three-story palace —a masterpiece of Baroque white marble. It boasted grand classical columns, intricate gold filigree framing the windows, and a wide, sweeping grand staircase flanked by classical stone vases overflowing with pristine white and pink lilies.

Before the staircase, a monumental fountain came alive. At its heart, a tier of embracing angels supported a gleaming golden basin, sending cascades of water into the sunlight to shatter into a million diamond shards. Inside the vast grand foyer, a massive crystal chandelier suspended from a dizzying height cast fractured light across the space. Twin marble staircases, draped

in rich emerald carpets, swept upward to the galleries, while the grand hall offered an unobstructed view through a semi-oval glass wall opening onto a private, shimmering lake.

Final preparations for the gala were reaching a flawless crescendo. The banquet spaces were dressed in soft rose and gold tones, mirrored walls magnifying the light. Round tables were set with immaculate English porcelain by De Lamerie. A pristine white Steinway grand piano stood poised in the corner, and at the center of the hall lay a circular dance floor framed by an exquisite mosaic of polished marble tiles.

When the evening required, the mirrored walls of the banquet hall glided back on silent tracks, revealing a massive billiards room housing six tournament-grade tables. In the corner, a sleek mahogany bar stood fully stocked, adjacent to a discreet service station where gourmet dishes rose silently from the expansive subterranean kitchens via hidden dumbwaiters. To the left of the main hall, guests could access a refined parlor featuring card tables draped in rich green velvet, tailored for high-stakes preferans. Nearby lay a sanctuary of a smoking room, lined with an exceptional selection of carved pipes, ornate hookahs, and rare, vintage tobaccos, where crystal decanters and tumblers already caught the ambient light.

Beyond the palace's rear facade lay the estate's crowning jewel —a breathtaking natural lake fed by the crystal-clear waters of a rushing mountain stream. On its glassy surface, black and white swans drifted with regal serenity. A delicate white bridge arched

over the water, connecting the banks beneath a canopy of fairy-tale blossoms that hung in thick, fragrant garlands.

Further still, ensconced in the quiet isolation of ancient, spreading trees, stood the private sanctuary of Richard and Margarita. A winding stone path transitioned into a magnificent spiral staircase, its wrought railings anchored by the masterfully sculpted figures of two white marble doves, forever captured mid-flight as they soared toward one another. Beyond the steps lay a vast, hidden meadow blanketed with rare velvet roses of extraordinary, deep hues. Before the two-story villa itself, a spectacular symphonic fountain danced in full majesty; through its iridescent, shifting spray, two marble figures emerged—a man holding a woman in an eternal, tender embrace. As the music swelled, underwater lights subtly shifted, changing the hues of their stone garments in perfect harmony with the cadence. This breathtaking masterpiece, capturing the raw essence of the owners' profound love, was the work of a master sculptor commissioned directly from Rome, a triumph worthy of Michelangelo's own chisel.

n this secluded haven, the very air was thick with devotion. The interiors spoke of an uncompromised luxury that transformed reality into an unbroken fairy tale. It was instantly clear that the souls who had brought this breathtaking sanctuary into being possessed not merely immense, staggering wealth, but an artist's rare vision and a pure, untamed spirit.

Chapter 2. The Cold Gold of the Klondike

In the fading twilight of late nineteenth-century England, within one of London's bleak, forgotten fringes, lived the family of David Tovmasyan—Armenian refugees uprooted and forced to flee the soils of Egypt. Life in this alien land was an unyielding crucible; David was forced to grasp at any backbreaking labor simply to secure a meager crust of bread. Day after grueling day, their existence was a relentless battle against starvation, yet destiny was preparing an even more merciless blow. David's wife was carrying their child, her strength already spent to the absolute dregs. Having brought a baby boy into the cold world, the exhausted woman drew her final breath and passed away.

Grief and a paralyzing terror for his newborn son nearly shattered the father's spirit. He was trapped in a desperate paradox: he had to work to survive, yet he was entirely alone in nursing a fragile infant. Out of pure, silent mercy, the neighbors intervened. They watched over the small child, who was given the name Tadevos, though the local tongues adapted it to the English style—Teddy. To the astonishment of everyone around, despite the pervasive deprivation, the boy grew resilient, vibrant, and strong.

His entire childhood was forged upon the harsh, unforgiving

pavements of London. When Tadevos turned twelve, the thin safety net collapsed entirely—death took his father. Left a complete orphan, the young teenager fought desperately for his place beneath the sun. Defying the heavy hand of fate, he resolved at all costs to stand firm and fulfill a silent, burning dream: to escape the mire of poverty and conquer wealth. Gathering a tight-knit circle of homeless boys around him, Teddy revealed the iron-willed charisma of a natural leader; he fiercely convinced his companions never to sink into the easy degradation of theft, but to build a real, serious enterprise.

Soon, breathtaking news swept across the Atlantic like a sudden tempest—gold had been discovered in the frozen reaches of Alaska, along the wild rivers of the Klondike. Tadevos understood instantly: this was their single, elusive hour of salvation. He ignited his comrades' hearts with the fire of his own ambition. A young, hardened, and single-minded crew began to prepare for the great transit. In those desperate years, steamships departed for the north packed to the absolute breaking point; cabins and deep holds overflowed with bodies, while the canvas tents of fortune seekers were pitched right onto the open decks. Securing a passage seemed a mathematical impossibility, as ticket prices skyrocketed to five hundred pounds. For this ghost of a chance, artisans liquidated their workshops, farmers bartered away their lands for pennies, and factory workers walked away from their machinery. Englishmen, Irishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, and Russians

hoarded provisions, purchased heavy gear, and bought precious lessons from weathered prospectors, their voices chanting a single, maddened litany: gold.

Yet, destiny turned a benevolent gaze upon Tadevos. Endowed with a sharp, instinctive wit, he managed to strike a secret bargain with a ship's boatswain: he and three of his closest companions were taken aboard as coal stokers. This dangerous, exhausting labor exempted them from the crushing transit fees and secured their daily rations. In those frantic moments, they believed the bitterest of their trials lay behind them, completely unaware of the true inferno that awaited them in the wilderness.

The voyage proved to be long, brutal, and unmerciful. It dragged them across the storm-battered expanses of the North Atlantic, only to cast them onto the lethal hazards of the Edmonton Trail—an ancient, punishing route once trodden by fur trappers. It wound through the vast Canadian wilderness, pressing north across the Peace and Mackenzie rivers toward the Yukon. Out of the hundreds of thousands enchanted by the siren song of wealth, only a fraction survived this hellish journey. By then, Tadevos had reached his twentieth year. Powerful, stubborn, and profoundly hardened by his street childhood, he pressed forward despite the hollow gnawing of hunger, the bone-chilling frost, and feet rubbed raw to the flesh. But the North showed no quarter to the weak. Two of his companions lost their resolve, turning back halfway through the wilderness. The third fell gravely ill and perished on the trail. In the border camps, fatal

diseases ran rampant, reaping human lives like wheat, and the heavy air of the outposts was poisoned by the sweet, sickening stench of decomposing bodies.

With his meager funds almost entirely exhausted, Tadevos threw himself into any agonizing, brutal labor to prepare for the final, daunting surge over the mountain passes. Securing work with the British Timber Corporation, he felled timber, earning twenty dollars for every cubic meter of raw wood. Sweat poured from his brow in freezing torrents, while local taverns charged extortionate, robber-baron prices for a squalid cot and basic sustenance. Yet, through a miracle of discipline, he managed to hoard every single cent. In the evenings, Teddy would slip into the raucous, smoke-choked saloons where veteran prospectors gathered. Reliable maps of the jagged Canadian and Alaskan wilderness simply did not exist; thus, the young man spent hours sifting through drunken altercations, carefully harvesting invaluable fragments of information regarding secret trails and wealthy creeks. Step by agonizing step, he advanced toward his prize. At long last, he broke through to the Yukon.

He established himself in a raw mining outpost. Late one evening, as he walked back toward his squalid log cabin, Tadevos passed a tavern from which loud, discordant music spilled into the frost. A heavily intoxicated, elderly prospector stumbled through the doors, closely trailed by two predatory young men. Teddy caught a sinister fragment of their muttered exchange:

"Did you see that? The old man paid at the bar with a raw gold

nugget from the pouch on his belt. Let's trail him into the dark and break him. He's blind drunk; tomorrow he won't remember a thing."

Having been raised on the treacherous alleys of London, Tadevos instantly recognized the lethal peril hovering over the old man. Quietly, he dissolved into the shadows behind them. The moment the amber glow from the tavern windows faded into the dark, one of the thieves lunged forward, delivering a crushing blow to the old man's skull. The prospector dropped like a felled tree. But Tadevos was already moving. With lightning speed, he dropped the first attacker with a precise blow and immediately turned to face the second, in whose hand a blade flashed hungrily. Deflecting the strike, Teddy delivered a devastating hook that sent the bandit crashing into the frozen mud. The muggers scrambled to their feet, but catching the steady glint of a revolver and the absolute, lethal resolve in the stranger's eyes, they chose not to tempt fate and fled into the night. In those wild, untamed territories, being stripped of a weapon was tantamount to a death sentence.

The old man lay unconscious, the frost beneath his head turning crimson with blood. Tadevos hoisted the heavy frame onto his shoulders and carried him back to his cabin. Laying the wounded man upon his solitary bed, he gently cleansed the wounds, while he himself drifted into a fitful sleep sitting upright at the table.

Only toward dawn, when the pale light of the northern sun

brushed the rough-hewn log walls, did the old man groan heavily, forcing open eyes clouded with agony. In the fading light of a guttering candle, he stared long and hard into the exhausted face of the youth sitting across from him, before croaking hoarsely:

"Why did you save me, boy?"

"Thieves are devoid of honor," Tadevos replied flatly.

The old man studied him intently, recognizing the rare, untamed nobility in this youth who had not coveted another man's wealth within the walls of a locked cabin. Exhausted, the elder closed his eyes; the trauma to his skull was severe. In the agonizing days that followed, Tadevos nursed him with fierce, unbroken devotion—feeding him water from a spoon and nourishing him with warm broth. Gradually, the prospector regained enough strength to speak, yet it was clear he would never walk again; his vital forces were draining away irretrievably.

A deep, unspoken trust forged between them. The prospector spoke at length of his solitary life and listened intently to the chronicle of Teddy's journey. One evening, he beckoned the youth closer to his pillows, drew forth his sacred leather pouch, and pressed it firmly into Tadevos's palm:

"I have never known the joy of children. But tonight, with all my heart, I claim you as my son. You are brave, honest, and merciful. Take this. Inside are pure, raw nuggets. You could have stolen them while I lay senseless, but your integrity would not allow you to become a thief. I will not rise from this bed, and gold is of no use in the world beyond."

The old man caught his breath, his voice dropping to a fragile whisper as he revealed his ultimate secret:

"I found a place... a true motherlode. Deep beneath the earth lie massive veins, and upon the gravel banks of the creek, rich deposits of gold sit waiting for their master. But to legally secure this claim, you will need immense funds. Sell these nuggets, register the territory under your name, and what you unearth there will make you a king. Remain an honorable man, and fortune will never abandon you."

Spent by the long exertion, the old man's eyes closed. Tadevos sat stunned by the weight of the revelation, but chose not to disturb the invalid. In the morning, the old man did not wake. Tadevos buried him with deep reverence and dignity, honoring him as he would his own father. Soon after the burial, he journeyed to the specified coordinates—and froze in his tracks, entirely overwhelmed by the sight before him.

An extraordinary spectacle unfolded before his eyes. Along the sharp, winding bends of the creek, embedded directly within the river sand, glistened inexhaustible deposits of gold. Together with nuggets of varied sizes, rare and wondrous minerals and precious gems rested upon the shallows, their absolute clarity rivaling the finest jewels of the world. Teddy, acutely aware of the fierce envy, danger, and grief such unbridled wealth could draw upon a man, exercised absolute caution. He did not boast of his fortune.

Prudently and in total secrecy, using the gold bequeathed

to him by the deceased elder, Tadevos officially purchased the immense gold-bearing claim. Until his final breath, he remained profoundly grateful to both his nameless benefactor and to fate itself for this miraculous gift. Life had validated a simple truth: for every noble deed, a man will sooner or later receive an answer from above—if not in earthly prosperity, then in absolute peace of mind.

In the beginning, his solitary weapons in this war for a secure life were merely a pickaxe, a shovel, and a washing pan. Teddy worked without rest. Having conquered everything he had once dreamed of on the squalid streets of London, the hardened, immensely wealthy Tadevos relocated to a major metropolis. There, he met a remarkable young woman, and refusing to postpone his happiness, he married her. Soon, his wife blessed him with twins—a boy and a girl. It was as if fate itself had woven a special, sacred pattern into their birth, bringing absolute joy into Tadevos's home. Yet, having achieved the long-awaited fulfillment of life, Teddy had no intention of remaining in the frozen north forever. He felt the magnetic pull of a young, violently developing America.

Now a highly affluent and respected gentleman, Tadevos once journeyed to the sun-bathed south—to California—and fell completely in love with its golden shores. He acquired vast territories there and laid the foundation stone of the family estate. Gold, it seemed, flowed naturally into the hands of this powerful bloodline. From that moment forward, passed down

from generation to generation, gold mining became the core enterprise of their lives. Each new descendant did not merely preserve the fortune, but multiplied the family legacy, investing intellect, unyielding faith, and relentless labor into its growth.

Decades have slipped away since those wild days. The fierce, biting winds of the Yukon have dissolved into the distant past, the ancient surname of Tovmasyan has been reshaped into the elegant American title of Thomas, and the ancient lineage has thoroughly assimilated into the highest echelons of New World society. Yet the memory of where their thorny path to happiness truly began remains forever enshrined within the heart of the family.

Chapter 3. Shards of Crystal Happiness

David-Daniel, representing the next generation of the Thomas bloodline, discovered the sanctuary of domestic bliss only as he approached his fortieth year. His chosen one was Angela, a blue-eyed beauty and the sole heiress to an immensely influential Californian banker. For years, their horizon remained cloudless, save for one persistent shadow that lengthened across their union: the cradle in their grand home remained empty. Physicians offered fragile hopes, urging them to guard their patience. At long last, when youth had already slipped away, Angela brought forth a miracle—a long-awaited baby boy whom they named Richard. The parents' joy bordered on the sublime, yet their ecstasy was to be cruelly brief. The mother's fragile health began to dissolve day by day. Neither their staggering wealth nor the most brilliant minds of medicine could anchor her to this world. Left a widower, David-Daniel locked the gates of his heart, refusing to ever admit another woman. Every ounce of his unspent devotion was poured, without reservation, into his son.

The theft of his wife left a raw, unhealing wound within the father's soul. A few years later, hollowed out by grief and unable to endure the crushing gravity of his solitude, he passed away before his time, following his beloved into the quiet world

beyond.

The young Richard, now a complete orphan, bore the devastating weight of his parents' deaths with a fractured heart. Cast adrift in a vast, empty world, he initially faltered, his spirit buckling under the shock. Yet the ancestral iron and the deep-seated survival instinct that had preserved his lineage for centuries rose within him, shielding the youth from the path of ruin. Taking the immense weight of the family gold mines onto his shoulders and inheriting the legendary Thomas fortune, Richard revealed a brilliant intellect and a rare, relentless work ethic. By his thirtieth year, he had not merely stabilized the enterprise but had vastly multiplied the grandeur of the family empire.

His expansive endeavors demanded ironclad alliances, and over time, Richard surrounded himself with a tight circle of influential power brokers. Among them, a talented financier named Fred Stevenson commanded a position of singular trust. Their joint ventures were invariably triumphant, yielding millions in profits. Within high society, Stevenson was revered as a man of immaculate honor and unyielding integrity, commanding the absolute trust of the elite. Yet, his private life had been systematically demolished by tragedy. In his youth, Fred had fallen madly in love with a celebrated fashion model who consented to become his wife. But shortly after the birth of their daughter, the volatile beauty abandoned both her nursing child and her devoted husband, fleeing to England with an

obscure fortune hunter. She dissolved into the fog of London, never to be heard from again. This brutal betrayal inflicted a profound psychological trauma upon Fred, leaving a jagged scar that would dictate the rest of his days. He never remarried.

One evening, Fred invited Richard Thomas to his estate for an intimate dinner. It was on that fateful night that the young tycoon first laid eyes upon Victoria, the financier's seventeen-year-old daughter. At first glance, she seemed little more than a child —frail, slender, her silhouette possessing an almost translucent grace. Her face, framed by a halo of spun-gold curls, possessed a striking aristocratic pallor, while her immense, arresting blue eyes commanded the entire room. She was not a classical, canonical beauty, but she harbored a rare, elusive charm that defied definition.

Sitting across from Richard, Victoria watched him with a delicate, trembling shyness, seemingly unable to break the spell of his presence. The young magnate felt a foreign chord of tenderness vibrate deep within his chest. He was seized by an inexplicable, overwhelming desire to envelope this vulnerable girl in his arms, to shield her from the cruelties of the world, and to warm her with a gentle word. Yet, being a man of exceptional cultural refinement and immaculate breeding, he masterfully reined in his sudden emotional surge.

Before departing, Richard approached Victoria, and a conversation kindled between them. To his absolute astonishment, beneath the veil of maidenly timidity, he

discovered a brilliant, razor-sharp intellect and a flawless sense of humor. Victoria proved to be an exquisite conversationalist, navigating art, global politics, and world events with effortless nuance. Catching the undisguised admiration in her guest's eyes, the girl flushed with a delicate crimson bloom.

Following that evening, the image of the golden-haired Victoria refused to leave Richard's thoughts. At elite galas and exclusive receptions, he sought every elusive opportunity to position himself within her orbit. His closest confidants, noting the profound transformation in the usually detached millionaire, unanimously urged him to seize the hour and present his suit. Victoria’s father was a gentleman of the old guard, and the girl herself was deemed the flawless match for his empire.

Before long, Richard invited Victoria to an intimate dinner at one of the city's most exclusive establishments. Bathed in the romantic amber glow of the room and beneath the soft, weeping cadence of the music, he dropped to one knee before her. Opening a velvet case that held a magnificent diamond ring, he looked directly into her luminous eyes and asked, "Victoria, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

The girl radiant with an absolute, unearthly joy, threw herself into his embrace without a fraction of hesitation. Having secured her coveted consent, Richard approached Victoria's father that very evening to request her hand. Fred was profoundly happy, knowing he was surrendering his only daughter into the safest hands the world could offer. In blessing the young couple, he

presented Richard with a magnificent gift—a massive block of shares in the leading financial corporation he co-owned. The young tycoon had no need for wealth, yet he could not offend his future father-in-law. He accepted the capital on one absolute condition: that these assets would forever remain under the personal control and sole ownership of Victoria.

A lavish wedding followed shortly after. Within the newlyweds' home, an immaculate harmony, mutual devotion, and profound respect reigned supreme. A year later, their union was consecrated by the arrival of their firstborn—a daughter named Christie. Another year passed, and the universe gifted them a son, Paul. Both infants resembled angels; they inherited their mother's snow-white skin and soft, golden curls. Richard idolized his wife, completely dissolving in his adoration for their children. As the years rolled by, the children grew, entering school and delighting their parents with their gentle dispositions and obedient natures. Despite the crushing demands of his empire, Richard dedicated every spare movement to his family, existing in a state of indescribable happiness.

Everything unfolded flawlessly, until an insidious thread of anxiety began to weave into their quiet harbor. Lately, Richard had grown increasingly alarmed by Victoria's persistent pallor and a subtle, fiercely concealed malaise. She merely offered a soft, reassuring smile, soothing her husband with promises that it was nothing more than ordinary exhaustion and that there was no cause for alarm. Yet Richard, driven by a dark, unshakable

premonition, refused to relent. He contacted the family physician and demanded an immediate, exhaustive medical evaluation.

The following day, after sending Christie and Paul to their classes, Victoria drove to the clinic. The physician personally escorted her through the corridors, administering complex diagnostic tests. The moment the procedures concluded, Victoria hurried toward the school to collect her children. She had always fiercely preferred to pilot her own vehicle, flatly rejecting the services of private drivers.

The children chattered noisily and joyfully in the backseat, eagerly trading the day's school gossip. The automobile swept smoothly down the highway when the quiet of the cabin was violently shattered by the sharp ring of her cellular phone. Victoria engaged the speakerphone. From the speakers, the physician's strained, trembling voice emerged:

"Victoria... We need to conduct another, far more detailed examination. Please, return to the clinic tomorrow morning."

"What is it, doctor?" fear instantly pierced her heart like a needle. "Did they find something serious? Do I need to worry?"

The woman's voice fractured, and her heart began to hammer a terrifying, erratic rhythm against her ribs. The physician offered no answer; the line went abruptly, ominously dead with a series of short chimes.

In that exact fraction of a second, a violent vertigo seized Victoria. A searing flash of agony blinded her vision with a thick gray fog, her thoughts tangled into chaos, and her hands

momentarily relinquished their grip on the wheel. The heavy vehicle, traveling at high speed, violently lurched to the left—hurling directly into the path of oncoming traffic. A deafening shriek of tearing metal, a horrific impact, the shattering chorus of exploding glass, and an instantaneous, muffled explosion swallowed the world whole. In that catastrophic violence, no one survived. Victoria, Christie, and Paul perished in an instant.

Upon receiving the news, Richard nearly surrendered his sanity. In one horrific movement of time, he had been stripped of both his beloved woman and his angelic children. Following the tragedy, his world plunged into an absolute, dead void. For several years, he felt nothing save for a searing, toxic bitterness and a hollow, crushing ache. He was no longer living; he had mutated into a pale specter, existing aimlessly among the jagged shards of his past. Tortured by a mute despair, he would stare into the empty air for hours, screaming silently into the heavens:

"Lord! Why this punishment?! What is my sin?!"

His loyal inner circle kept a relentless vigil at his bedside, rotating shifts, terrified to leave Richard alone for even a single minute, lest in a spasm of madness and grief he should lay violent hands upon himself. The tragedy that had crushed him seemed unendurable, the wound entirely mortal.

But the river of human existence flows inexorably between its banks, bending to a higher, inscrutable architecture, and no mortal can foresee what sharp turn awaits them just beyond the next headland...

Chapter 4. The Triumph of Life and the Magic of Memory

At last, the limousines carrying the Thomas family smoothly came to a halt before the palace's grand staircase. On the marble steps, the household staff stood waiting, arrayed behind the estate manager. Bowing their heads in deep respect, the servants welcomed their masters and immediately set about transferring the luggage. Richard, keeping a protective arm around his wife, guided his family into the soothing coolness of the grand foyer, before stepping into his private study to summon the manager.

Robert entered a mere few moments later. Standing respectfully near the door, he addressed the tycoon. "I am at your service, sir. How was the flight? And how is your health?"

"Hello, my friend," Richard smiled warmly, rising from behind his massive writing desk. "Everything is wonderful with us. Please, take a seat. I see you have done a monumental amount of work during our absence. You have my deepest gratitude."

"I am entirely at your service, sir," the manager replied, seating himself on the edge of an armchair. "Is everything in order for the reception, or will there be additional instructions?"

"No, my dear Robert. Everything looks absolutely flawless. Besides, you know very well that I rely entirely upon your exceptional taste and devotion. I simply wanted to shake your

hand." Richard approached the manager and gave his palm a firm, warm handshake.

"It is my absolute honor to be of service to the family, sir," a gleam of genuine pride sparked in the old servant's eyes. He bowed politely and silently withdrew from the study.

Robert had served the Thomas household for over thirty-five years, standing as a living monument to honesty, meticulous precision, and absolute loyalty. He executed every single command as if it were a sacred duty. To the Thomases, he had long ceased to be a mere employee; they treated him like a cherished and devoted member of the family. The reality that Robert had remained a bachelor all his life only allowed him to submerge himself entirely into the cares of the estate, completely undistracted by personal affairs.

The elite design team commissioned by Richard had conjured a true miracle: in a mere week, the palace interiors and the winding park avenues had been transfigured into fairytale scenery. The final flourishes were being applied in an atmosphere of light, pre-celebration excitement. Robert headed directly down to the kitchens, where chefs and servers moved with quiet, synchronized efficiency. A single stern glance from him was enough to confirm that the entire engine of the reception was running like a Swiss watch. After a brief discussion with the executive chef, Robert stepped outside, verified that the additional parking areas were prepared for the hundreds of arriving guest vehicles, and finally breathed a sigh of deep relief.

Everything stood fully prepared for the triumph.

Toward evening, the elder children arrived at the estate—Margarita's sons from her first marriage, Denis and Philip. The two distinguished, flawlessly built young aristocrats arrived alongside their wives and children. By their thirty-second year, the twin brothers had achieved phenomenal success in the business world, having founded the renowned jewelry house, Denis-Philip. The exquisite creations of their brand enjoyed resounding success among royalty and the global elite.

Early on the morning of the gala, the city's top stylists and beauty artisans arrived at the villa to transfigure the women of the family into true, fairytale princesses.

And then, at long last, the long-awaited hour struck. The guest list revolved around an impressive figure—six hundred people. A steady torrent of luxurious, gleaming automobiles arrived at the villa's gates by the minute. The estate staff stood completely prepared, welcoming guests who had traveled from every corner of the world, including those who had arrived via private flights at the Thomases' personal airfield.

At the entrance of the radiant, mirrored banquet hall, Richard and Margarita personally welcomed the arriving elite. On this evening, the mistress of the villa looked truly incomparable. Her sea-foam silk gown harmonized perfectly with the rare shade of her eyes, beautifully accentuating a slender, youthful silhouette. Upon Margarita's neck, a magnificent diamond necklace encrusted with a cascade of large emeralds shimmered

with a regal luster. A heavy, antique bracelet adorned her delicate wrist, while a family ring dating back to the eleventh century—a gift from her father in her early youth—mystered and gleamed upon her finger. Heavy, cascading earrings completed the majestic suite. Every element of her appearance breathed legendary opulence, yet within this luxury lay not a single drop of extravagance—only the absolute triumph of refined taste. Still, the crowning jewel of the evening remained Margarita herself. It seemed that amidst all this brilliance, she was the rarest, purest, and most precious nugget in the entire history of the Thomas lineage.

Richard—slender, elegant, and immaculately tailored—matched Margarita's nobility in every way. Beside them stood Daniela and David, radiant with a youthful, blossoming allure.

The first to arrive at the gala were Richard's inseparable lifelong friends, Harry, Michael, and Ron, accompanied by their families. Following them came a long procession of guests, including numerous high-ranking dignitaries holding prominent positions within the global community. Gentlemen in flawless tuxedos and ladies in magnificent evening gowns gradually filled the hall. Every woman appeared as a unique, exotic blossom, while the myriad facets of their diamonds dazzled the eyes beneath the crystal chandeliers.

The arriving guests bowed gallantly, kissing Margarita's hand, and exchanged firm handshakes with the gentlemen of the Thomas household. Society patrons and representatives of the

old aristocracy embraced the mistress of the villa with genuine, warm smiles. Within Margarita, the pride of an ancient lineage mingled strikingly with a rare, captivating simplicity—a grace before which any pretense dissolved entirely.

At last, the assembly was complete. The tender, enchanting melody of a violin drifted across the hall, invisibly infusing the air with an atmosphere of high dreams, hope, and all-conquering love. Richard and Margarita, moving unhurriedly among their guests, left no one unnoticed. The singular, luminous charm radiating from the couple was so enveloping and deeply compelling that it dissolved any stray trace of envy or ill will directed toward them.

Soon, the master of ceremonies invited the gathering to the tables. Stepping onto the stage, he delivered a poignant welcome, congratulating Daniela and David on graduating at the top of their class and securing their places at Harvard. Then, one by one, the illustrious musicians, performing artists, and singers were introduced to the guests, poised to carry everyone into a true, living fairytale for the remainder of the evening.

The immortal chords of Strauss's "Viennese Waltz" began to play. By tradition, the honor of opening the dance floor belonged to the hosts and the guests of honor. As Richard with Margarita, and Daniela with David, stepped into the center of the ring, the hall fell still. The dancing couples glided smoothly and majestically across the mirrored marble parquet. It seemed as though they did not touch the ground, and the very air sang

in rhythm with their hearts. The spectacle was breathtaking. For a brief moment, Daniela and David grew quiet, watching their parents with undisguised admiration and tenderness.

When the music faded, all four dissolved into a tight embrace. They were immediately joined by Denis and Philip with their wives and children. In that moment, the guests were presented with a truly cohesive, indissoluble family bound in perfect unity. Many in the gathering—both the deeply moved women and the usually reserved gentlemen who watched them with affection—found their eyes misted with tears. It was an incredibly poignant scene. The hall froze for a heartbeat before erupting in a singular surge of deafening applause.

The gala continued to unfold at the highest level of grandeur. The chefs had outdone themselves: exquisite dishes, vintage collector spirits, and fairy-tale artisanal desserts followed one another in flawless succession. No fewer than a hundred servers seamlessly and invisibly attended to the tables. The guests drank, conversed, and danced with utter abandon to the spectacular performances of the artists.

Exactly at midnight, the first resonant volleys of the celebratory fireworks shattered the quiet of the night. The massive glass doors of the banquet hall glided open silently, inviting everyone onto the expansive open terrace by the lake. There, in the cool night air, an enchanting panorama unfolded: cascading, multicolored lights seemed to waltz with the stars, their vibrant reflections shimmering across the mirrored surface

of the water. The fiery fountains of the display grew increasingly spectacular, rising from the very earth toward the heavens to meet a cosmic shower of shooting stars. The guests stared upward, spellbound and enveloped in pure happiness. Such a brilliant, triumphant finale to a celebration of life etches itself into the memory forever.

Only toward dawn, when the exhausted guests could barely stand, did the celebration begin to fade. Richard and Margarita saw off the departing visitors with words of heartfelt gratitude, and these mutual expressions of thanks felt as tender and welcome as the first flowers of spring. The youth, however, had no intention of leaving; retreat to a garden pavilion, they loudly and passionately debated their plans for the future. In the east, the dawn was already breaking and the early birds were in full song when the final visitors departed the villa. Feeling a leaden exhaustion, the members of the Thomas family finally made their way toward their private residence.

Upon entering the bedroom, Richard and Margarita, despite their deep fatigue, immediately withdrew to their dressing rooms. Washing away the lingering rush of the celebration beneath a cool shower, they sank onto the royal bed, entirely spent. Richard gently drew Margarita against his chest. In response, burying her face into his shoulder, she tenderly traced her palm through his hair, outlined the contours of his face, and held him even closer.

The horrific tragedy that had once torn Richard's life apart had stripped him of peace for many long years. Back then, it

had seemed to him that the world was shattered beyond repair. Yet destiny had shown him mercy. With a boundless, aching tenderness, the millionaire looked down at the fragile woman in his arms—the one who had quite literally resurrected him from the dead and gifted him the happiness of a grand, all-consuming love.

Margarita's heart beat just as fiercely as it had on the day of their very first meeting, when he had first confessed his feelings to her. Her entire soul was flooded with limitless devotion for this noble man. A long, passionate kiss united their lips, and, holding each other as tightly as they could, they instantly fell asleep. Exhaustion had finally claimed its due.

A blessed silence reigned all around, broken only by the morning exchange of bird calls. The entire villa slept until nearly noon. During those hours, the estate staff pulled off the impossible: the grounds were restored to absolute perfection. The only reminders of the past evening's grand celebration were the exquisite designer decorations and a vast sea of fresh flowers resting in crystal vases.

By lunchtime, everyone gathered in the dining room—refreshed and thoroughly rested. The family sacredly honored their long-standing traditions: Richard and Margarita took their places at the table first, followed by the rest of the household. After the meal, the gentlemen stepped into the shaded gardens to discuss corporate affairs. Margarita's daughters-in-law also withdrew, leaving the children in the care of the matriarch; they

resolved to descend via the funicular railway to their favorite hidden sanctuary—a white-stone rotunda supported by classical columns, where they could unwind in absolute quiet.

Margarita, accompanied by the governesses and the children, headed deeper into the park toward an immense, azure swimming pool that resembled a natural lake. Along its banks rose commanding marble pavilions, shielding snow-white loungers, plush armchairs, and mini-bars stocked with refreshing drinks. Whenever friends of the Thomases visited the estate, they were willing to spend days on end within this paradise.

The day proved to be wonderfully warm. The cloudless blue sky was a joy to behold, while a gentle breeze brought a welcome coolness. The fragrant air was thick with the scent of blooming flowers. Margarita settled into a spacious hammock slung beneath the shade of ancient oaks and elms. A pleasant languor diffused through her body. The light chestnut tresses of the mistress of the house spilled beautifully across a tiger-skin rug laid inside the hammock. Closing her eyes, Margarita listened with a smile to the bright voices of her grandchildren, who dashed across the emerald lawn with joyful laughter.

She idolized her grandchildren, and every time her gaze settled upon them, her emerald eyes radiated a singular, profound warmth. Her sons, Denis and Philip, had once married on the exact same day, and now the estate echoed with the laughter of four little ones. Denis was raising two daughters: eight-year-old Magdalena and six-year-old Madlena. Philip's eldest daughter,

Sona, was the same age as Magdalena, while his youngest son, Hayk, had turned seven. Seven-year-old Hayk, unusually tall for his age, remarkably handsome, and emphatically serious, possessed a striking gift for bending others to his will. Yet despite this, he remained exceptionally obedient and impeccably well-mannered. Hayk stood as an immovable shield for his sisters, fiercely protecting their peace, and everyone in the household knew: woe to anyone who dared offend his girls. Denis and Philip occasionally teased him without malice over this knightly severity, but the boy merely maintained a proud silence, paying no heed to the jests of the adults.

Hayk, his face flushed from running, dashed over to the hammock and looked up at his grandmother with pleading eyes. "Grandma, dear, may we go for a swim in the pool for just a little while?"

"You may, my friend," Margarita smiled tenderly, patting her grandson's head. "But we have a bargain: no swimming out too far."

The children erupted into joyful shouts, and all four took a running leap, plunging into the cool water fully clothed. Shrieks, splashes, and happy laughter echoed over the water for a long time. Margarita never took her eyes off them for a single moment, until at last, using her sternest voice, she commanded them to come out onto the bank. The grandchildren reluctantly obeyed. Drying off beneath the warm rays of the sun, they immediately returned to frolicking upon the grass.

Margarita shifted her gaze toward Daniela and David. The twins had been sitting a short distance away all this time, completely absorbed in their reading, but feeling their mother's gentle gaze upon them, they hurried over and scrambled into the hammock in a single, running leap.

"My darlings, have mercy, the hammock will never bear our weight!" Margarita cried out with a playful laugh.

"Mother, dearest, the three of us together weigh less than a single proper gentleman!" they laughed, enveloping her in an embrace.

Chapter 5. Where the Vine Takes Root

Margarita swept a long, affectionate gaze over the hushed children. For a moment, a profound stillness settled over the garden, broken only by the soft lapping of the water in the pool. Upon the woman's shaded face reflected the ancient wisdom of her ancestors. Seventeen-year-old David and the young Daniela leaned forward, while the small grandchildren sat motionless at her feet, catching her every word.

"Rome and Byzantium, formidable Persia and the Arab Caliphate, the ruthless Seljuks and the fierce Mongols—all of them swept through our mountains like a fiery tempest. At times, they plunged the country into darkness for entire centuries, severing its cultural evolution. Yet, despite everything, the Armenian people endured. They resisted the invaders not always with weapons, but with the strength of their spirit, sacredly guarding allegiance to their roots and culture. The unity of our art lay hidden within a powerful, unquenchable emotional dawn that the Creator implanted into the soul of every Armenian. Our creative genius blossomed with striking, independent brilliance inside monumental architecture, poignant poetry, and aching music. The majestic tongue of Noah and the sacred alphabet of Mashtots dictated the supreme standard for all other arts."

Margarita paused for a heartbeat, gently stroking the golden curls of little Madlena, who pressed closely against her.

"From ancient chronicles, we know with what sanctity our ancestors guarded the manuscripts—the annals of the Armenian land. When enemies set houses ablaze, women pressed heavy manuscripts to their chests, saving them from swords and fire. They carried these books with them into foreign lands as their most precious treasure. They took them into exile, ransomed them from captivity with gold, and bore them away as they fled their ruined hearths... and invariably, through the centuries, the people returned to their origins, fearlessly conquering any adversity of fate."

Seven-year-old Hayk listened to his grandmother with bated breath, his eyes, serious beyond his years, gleaming with a feverish intensity.

"As early as the ninth century before our era," Margarita continued, "the powerful state of Urartu flourished upon those lands. Decades of excavations still reveal its majestic monuments to the world today. Great capitals—Tushpa near the azure Lake Van and the unconquerable Argishtikhinili—were the first metropolises of ancient Armenia. One of the earliest Urartian sovereigns was King Aramu. Our great historian Movses Khorenatsi inscribed him in the annals as the sixth descendant of our forefather, Hayk. It is within the name of King Aramu that many scholars see the origins of the very word 'Armenia.' After the twilight of Urartu, the integration of the tribes was complete, and a unified Armenian people finally stepped onto the stage of history, forging their own independent

kingdom."

Margarita raised herself slightly in the hammock, her emerald eyes alight with pride.

"At the head of our provinces stood the nakharars—proud lords of the local ancestral nobility. Wealthy merchant caravans began to flow through the land, and stone cities grew. And in the first century before our era, during the reign of the great King Tigran the Second, Armenia was transfigured into a mighty empire stretching from the Caspian Sea in the east to the Mediterranean in the southwest. Later, during the Arshakuni dynasty, the kingdom fractured into separate principalities. This weakened us, and in the year three hundred and eighty-seven, Armenia was torn in two: the greater part went to Sasanian Persia, the smaller to Rome. The royal throne collapsed. Yet it was in this hour of ultimate darkness that new, unyielding forces were born within the veins of the people. Nationwide uprisings and fierce resistance forced the formidable Persians to retreat."

"Grandma, is it true that we were the first to accept the faith in God?" Hayk asked quietly.

Margarita smiled warmly at the boy. "It is true, my darling. At the very dawn of the fourth century, in the year three hundred and one, an event occurred that forever defined the destiny and character of our people. Armenia became the first nation in the world to officially adopt Christianity as its state religion. A century later, in the year four hundred and five, Saint Mesrop Mashtots brought forth our alphabet—unique, rich in its depth,

and expansive in its phonetics. Every letter stood as a shield for our identity. And though in the sixth century our homeland once more became an arena for brutal wars between Byzantium and Persia, by the beginning of the seventh century, the Armenian genius entered an era of spectacular blossom. Masterpieces of architecture arose like mushrooms after the rain, while poetry and music flourished. Inside our spiritual capital, Etchmiadzin —whose name sacredly translates to 'The Only Begotten Son of God Descended'—monumental cathedrals were born. Armenian masters tamed the raw stone."

Margaritas face was once more veiled by a light shadow of sadness.

"Yet history knows no eternal peace. The Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries brought long years of stagnation. But beneath the ashes, the embers always smoldered. In the year eight hundred and eighty, a great representative of our princely lineage, Ashot Bagratuni, succeeded in unifying the lands and accepted the title of 'King of Kings' from the caliph. Thus began the brilliant era of the Bagratids. Crafts revived, transit trade flourished, and a great age of monumental architecture commenced. The heart and crown of this reborn Armenia was the legendary city of Ani. It was called the city of a thousand and one churches. The cathedrals of Ani were so exquisite that they seemed to have descended from the heavens. This was our golden Renaissance..."

Margarita sighed, casting her gaze somewhere beyond the

crowns of the ancient oaks, as if she could see those ruins with her own eyes.

"But the era of peace was severed in the eleventh century. Byzantium treacherously seized the Kingdom of Shirak, only to flee shortly after beneath the crushing blows of the Seljuk Turks. In the year ten hundred and sixty-four, the Seljuks stormed the beautiful Ani, subjecting it to total plunder and devastation. Later, Mongol raids and an earthquake of terrifying force completed the tragedy. The beautiful city, the crowning pride of our civilization, was reduced to silent ruins. The surviving Armenians, with tears in their eyes, abandoned their shattered hearths, wandering into the obscure unknown, into foreign lands... bearing within their hearts nothing but faith, memory, and the great name of their lineage."

"Through the mirror of Anis tragic destiny," Margarita continued quietly, her voice ringing with the notes of profound reflection, "one can not only witness the spectacular ascent of Armenian culture, but also comprehend the ultimate drama of our people. Standing firm beneath the blows of merciless adversaries, they arose from the ashes time and again like the mythical Phoenix and continued to build. Our ancestors possessed a rare harmony of physical courage and elevated intellect. Their unyielding nature, fortitude, and sheer will preserved the nation in defiance of historical tempests. The unity of cultural traditions and the inviolability of religious convictions, anchored by their devotion to one another,

empowered them to survive the most brutal persecutions aimed at their complete annihilation. Patience, allegiance to the native soil, bloodlines bound in unity, and an irrepressible love for life allowed them to endure unbearable conditions. And it was this persecuted nation that gifted the world great scholars, genius architects, immortal poets, master painters, and holy ascetics."

Concluding this part of the chronicle, Margarita felt a sudden knot tighten in her throat. A powerful torrent of memory washed over her—vivid imagery from the legends she had once listened to with spellbound wonder from her own father in her childhood. With undisguised pain and adoration, she looked down at the hushed children and grandchildren who caught her every breath.

Taking a deep breath, the woman squared her shoulders.

"And now, I shall reveal to you the secret of our own lineage—the grand house of Armanonts. This chronicle has descended to us from the mists of time, sacredly passed down from generation to generation alongside our family crest."

Seven-year-old Hayk shifted closer, sensing that the story was about to turn to his own namesake.

"In the eleventh century, the sovereign of one of ancient Armenias most flourishing principalities was our direct ancestor, Prince Hayk Armanonts. His ancestral domains stretched near the rushing waters of the Akhuryan River. Prince Hayk held himself apart, wisely steering clear of foreign rivalries and conflicts. He was an iron-willed, profoundly noble, and remarkably handsome man—tall and broad-shouldered, with

striking, piercing eyes the color of the purest emerald. His wife, Princess Anais, was equally renowned for her incomparable beauty. The house of Armanonts was legendary across the land for its staggering wealth, yet another family virtue was prized even more: their limitless humanity and kindness. Across their endless territories, celebrated vineyards carpeted the earth in rich green. Hundreds of souls labored upon these estates, nurturing the vine and creating vintage collector wines of the supreme quality, which merchants carried away to the most distant nations of the world."

Margarita closed her eyes for a fleeting moment, as if she could see those very vineyards stretching out before her.

"But dark, terrifying times arrived. The Byzantines, Persians, and Mongols destroyed everything in their path in merciless waves, tormenting the long-suffering land. Few managed to survive that carnage. The few surviving inhabitants, with tears in their eyes, abandoned the defiled graves of their fathers and moved south in search of salvation. For months, they wandered from place to place, enduring hunger and deprivation. At last, after long wanderings, Prince Hayk Armanonts and his loyal people emerged into a sun-drenched plain that stretched all the way to the mountain ridges. It was a truly heavenly, blessed place. The earth shone with velvet green, ancient oaks sheltered the travelers with their powerful foliage, and in the distance, like a shard of the sky, a clear blue lake gleamed. The people froze in mute delight. Prince Armanonts, reining in his fiery

steed, cried out in admiration into the silence: 'Ailur?!' In our tongue, this translates to: 'Where else?'. With this short question, he asserted his will: he could find no better land for his long-suffering people."

Margarita smiled, noticing how little Hayks eyes sparkled.

"From that time forward, the region was called precisely that —Ailur. The bountiful land proved generous, and the Armenian settlers were incredibly hardworking. Soon, axes resounded across the plain: sturdy homes rose, white-stone churches climbed toward the sky, and new vineyards rustled in the breeze. Life triumphed over death, and a new generation was born and grew strong. A peaceful nature and wisdom remained the core anchor of the Armanonts family—they never conflicted with neighbors, respecting people of all nationalities and faiths. The bloodline possessed a colossal creative gift. Over the years and centuries, their family capital grew unimaginably, yet they remained gentle, generous, and merciful, always aiding the needy and destitute. Centuries flew over Ailur like sands swept away by the wind of time..."

Margarita took a deep, quiet breath, her gaze warming as it traveled back into the nineteenth century, and she continued:

"In the nineteenth century, the rightful lord of these bountiful lands and all the gathered wealth of our house was Martiros, the son of Aram. With a passionate devotion, he continued the ancient family legacy—the art of winemaking. Before long, his adored wife, Melanie, blessed him with their firstborn son. The

boy was given the name Harutyun, which in the Armenian tongue translates to 'The Resurrected.' A year later, a daughter was born to the household, receiving the name of Emily.

Martiros loved his heir to the point of absolute adoration and indulged his every whim, yet despite this, Harutyun grew into an exceptionally obedient and deeply empathetic youth. While still a mere teenager, he labored diligently alongside the ordinary peasants upon the sprawling grape plantations. The boy possessed a fierce, obsessive curiosity for the mystery of a wine's birth, and every single moment free from his studies was spent inside his father's winery. Martiros would occasionally chide his son without malice, saying: 'Harutyun, my boy, you are quite literally living inside the production house. But right now, you must fix your thoughts elsewhere. You must graduate at the top of your class and secure your place at the university. Times are shifting with a violent speed, my son, and you are obligated to look toward the horizon. Our bloodline is fabulously wealthy; your inheritance will easily suffice for you, your children, and many generations yet to come. You have no need to accumulate gold. You are worthy of becoming a man of science or a distinguished statesman, my boy. "

Harutyun would listen to his father with deep respect, yet in the quiet spaces of his heart, he remained unyieldingly faithful to the legacy of his ancestors. Intellectually advanced and well-read beyond his years, the youth did not merely study the processes; he began to boldly introduce his own refinements to the methods

of crafting new varieties of noble vintages. His father could only shake his head in utter amazement, secretly harboring a fierce pride in his son and ultimately yielding to his innovations.

By his sixteenth year, Harutyun had thoroughly matured. He grew into an incredibly outgoing and deeply merciful soul, secretly and openly aiding every impoverished soul in the region. For his young, generous heart, there existed no dividing lines of faith or nationality—whether it was a starving Armenian, Kurdish, or Turkish household, their children were equally in need of bread, and Harutyun refused to remain indifferent to another's misfortune. For this rare humanity and kindness, the common folk absolute adored the young heir.

Simultaneously, Harutyun transfigured into a young man of indescribable handsomeness. Jet-black, raven hair, which he slicked smoothly back, strikingly accentuated the noble, aristocratic pallor of his face. His immense, expressive eyes of a rare emerald-green shade radiated a singular, hypnotic light —they quite literally drove all the local maidens to distraction. Thick, dark eyelashes lent his gaze a profound depth and charm. With a stately, toned physique, a proud posture, and a regal stride, his entire presence unmistakably signaled his ancient, princely lineage. Yet for all this grandeur, in his interactions with ordinary people, he remained remarkably simple and open.

Every local beauty secretly harbored a dream of tying her fate to his, yet Harutyuns heart had long since belonged to one solitary girl. His choice fell upon the graceful, fair-faced Sona—a slender

maiden with thick, golden hair that she wove into two tight braids. Sona was not a classical, strict beauty, but she harbored a rare, arresting charm. The local youths were already casting admiring glances her way, yet none dared approach her; everyone in the region knew that Harutyun and Sona had been inseparable since early childhood. Perpetually vibrant, spirited, and swift on her feet, she filled any space with her infectious, genuine laughter, which warmed the hearts of all around her.

Sona had barely reached her fourteenth year when Harutyun, refusing to lose a single moment, directly asked if she was ready to become his wife. The girl, laughing merrily with happiness, clapped her hands, threw her arms around his neck, and whispered the coveted "yes."

The youth immediately declared his firm resolve to his father. The word of his beloved son was a sacred law for Martiros. Wasting no time, he dispatched matchmakers to Sonas parents to settle the arrangements. The wise Melanie, Harutyuns mother, blessing her sons choice, said with a smile: "Let a woman not dazzle with striking beauty, as long as her soul is pure and her heart is faithful. She will grow into a wonderful wife." She knew Sonas noble mother well and was completely certain that the girl had inherited all the finest virtues of her family. Within the house of Armanonts, a joyful anticipation of the upcoming wedding reigned supreme...

"Soon, the long-awaited meeting of the two families took place. Martiros, carefully observing the ancient traditions of his

ancestors, declared to Sonas parents his fervent desire to unite their bloodlines. His words carried weight, sounding like a sacred oath:

'We have come to take a handful of ash from your home, to mingle it with the ash of our own hearth. We have come to light our lamp from the flame of your familys light. We have come so that your stone may be laid forever into our wall.'

To this, Sonas father replied shortly, respectfully, and unequivocally:

'The brides veil is henceforth yours!'

With those words, he accepted from the hands of the matchmakers a richly adorned basket, overflowing with ripe, crimson apples studded with gold coins—a dowry dedicated to the future bride. Alongside them rested plump pomegranates, select sultanas, and confections that served as an inviolable token of the guests' pure intentions. In return, a table groaning with delicacies awaited the matchmakers, along with the finest vintage collector wine from the Armanonts cellars and a warm, genuine understanding of the heart. Within the Armenian nation, these customs had been passed down through the centuries from father to son."

Sonas father and her brothers yielded without a fraction of hesitation. To marry into the grand and noble house of Armanonts was deemed the supreme honor, and the entire kinship rejoiced for the maiden's destiny. A date for the betrothal was swiftly set, and they resolved to hold the wedding two months

later. Throughout this time, Harutyun and Sona lived in a state of elevated, joyful excitement, counting the days with bated breath until the hour that would unite their fates forever.

And then, that blessed day arrived. A festive commotion reigned within the bride's home. At last, in the distance along the road, the triumphant escort of snow-white horses and a magnificent carriage adorned with ribbons came into view. At the first notes of the traditional folk music, Sona rushed to the window to welcome her beautiful prince. The guests arriving from the grooms side, bearing flowers and woven baskets filled with vintage wines and costly gifts, solemnly entered the house. Following the ordained rituals and beneath the rhythmic cadence of traditional wedding songs, her companions dressed Sona from head to toe in her bridal attire.

Radiant, holding each other hand in hand amidst deafening cheers and thunderous applause, Harutyun and Sona stepped into the wedding hall. Toasts flowed from every direction, and silver chalices were drained one after another. But then, the hour arrived to bid farewell to her father's house and journey to the Armanonts estate, where the young couple was eagerly awaited.

Then, another ancient custom came into play: the moment the groom attempted to guide his betrothed across the threshold, Sonas brothers stubbornly blocked their path, demanding the traditional ransom. Harutyun did not count the cost—with a smile, he emptied his entire heavy pouch, and gold coins showered with a ringing clatter upon the stone floor. The way was

clear. The radiant youth firmly took hold of Sonas slender hand, led her to the carriage, and tenderly lifting her in his arms, settled her onto the plush seats of the coach, immediately drawing her into a gentle embrace. The raucous wedding procession surged behind them. By the customs of those years, the entire region feasted for seven days and seven nights, celebrating the union of the universal favorite, Harutyun.

Sona, despite her youth, proved to be a flawless wife and an empathetic, respectful daughter-in-law. Martiros and Melanie cherished her beyond measure for her gentle disposition and the limitless reverence she displayed toward her elders. Sona remained vibrant, light-hearted, and hardworking, and soon her colorful, ringing laughter echoed continuously beneath the vaults of the old house, banishing any shadow of melancholy.

Time moved in its preordained course. Exactly nine months later, Sona blessed the bloodline with an addition—the twins Sis and Masis. Martiros and Melanie were overcome with happiness and quite literally refused to leave the newborns' cradle for a single moment. The old prince tenderly touched his tiny grandsons, his strong hands trembling with an excess of emotion, while torrents of deeply moved tears rolled down from his eyes.

"At last..." he kept repeating, his voice fracturing with emotion. "At last, boys have been born into our house. Two future warriors, two who will carry my name forward!"

He guarded the small infants like the apple of his eye and bordered on reverence toward his daughter-in-law for this

priceless gift. Harutyuns own joy was equally boundless. He generously treated the entire region with wine, celebrating his fatherhood. He could stand for hours by the twins' cradle, admiring their serene sleep.

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