

# Seen in Africa

Loss is not the end, but a new beginning

Maj B Henrikson



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### **Viewed differently**

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### **With different eyes**

#### **Part 2**

Mirthe, Tedje, Ana and Diana

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### **With an eye on happiness**

#### **Part 3**

Bente

[Www.boekenvanmajbhenrikson.nl](http://Www.boekenvanmajbhenrikson.nl)

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### **Seen in Africa**

#### **Part 4**

Emma

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When Emma reads in the newspaper that the man with whom she shared her life for more than ten years has died, her good friend John proposes to work with him for a month as a volunteer for MercyShips in Africa as a nurse. Emma, who is very fond of her privacy, is struggling to open up to new impressions and acquaintances, and has a strong need for regularity, doubts whether she is suitable for this. But when John eventually manages to persuade her, Emma discovers that she does not know herself well at all and this journey turns out to be a turning point in her life.

*Both the storyline and the characters are inspired by the author's imagination, inspired by the stories of MercyShips crew members who volunteered on one of the hospital ships in Africa.*

*For Saskia*

*1965 - 2024*

## Proloog 2012

Emma had only started her own company two years ago, but had already achieved quite a few successes. She could have just made an appointment with the CEO and also owner of a large international company. If she could conclude a contract with this company, she would no longer have to worry in the coming years. Moreover, just the fact that she could link the name of her company to this organization would not make her wind. She was hopeful, because the preparatory talks with the department managers had led to her being able to conduct the final negotiations directly with the CEO.

Emma had always focused on her studies and career and built up a large network. Her social life had suffered the necessary damage. The few social contacts she had, in addition to some superficial acquaintances, consisted of a friend she had met during her studies but had moved to Brussels, and her good friend John who stood by her with advice and action and occasionally forced her to accompany him to a party or the theater. John was a surgeon and worked more hours than he would like. After his partner Rolf had left him for another man, John had more or less lost faith in love and had completely thrown himself into his work.

Emma herself had a few short-lived love relationships behind her, but none of them had been very successful. It took her effort to unconditionally commit to one person and that had had an impact on the course of her love adventures. Very occasionally she was tempted to go on a date, but often this stopped after a second appointment. She was painfully aware that this was without a doubt up to herself, and not to the men she was making.

From the moment Emma entered his office, she intrigued him. Her cool and distant attitude was in no way comparable to his wife Miranda, who had an extroverted and sparkling personality. His marriage had not represented anything for years and sometimes he wondered if there had ever ever been love. At least on her side. They had been living their own lives for years now and were now at peace with it.

And now a woman entered his office who made his heart beat faster. His management had insisted that he talk to her and were a strong supporter of her taking on internal and external communication. The company grew further and further into a multinational and good communication, both internally and externally, was insignificantly important to steer growth.

Emma had completed her studies in communication and information sciences at the University of Nijmegen and started her own business a few years ago. She had good references and an impressive CV, but he preferred to judge her qualities himself and also relied on the judgment of his management.

After offering her a cup of coffee, he tried to break the ice, but his business attitude prevented him from asking personal questions. Gradually the conversation, he became increasingly intrigued by her, but above all he was impressed by her presentation. He had therefore made his decision to conclude a contract - outside his principles - quickly.

A wide smile broke through her face after he told her he wanted to do business with her. Her cool appearance disappeared only a fraction of a second behind this smile, but had made his heart beat even faster.

After Emma left Ernst-Jan's office with the promise of a contract in her pocket, she could no longer hide her joy and conjured up a wide smile on her face as she hurried to her appointment with her friend Thérèse. Thérèse, who worked as a communications

employee for the Dutch Consulate in Brussels, was in the Netherlands for a week and they had a lot to catch up on.

Emma had met Thérèse during her studies at the University of Nijmegen and because they were both a bit of outsiders, a friendship had soon developed. Thérèse, like Emma, was a distant woman, but did not have the empathetic ability that Emma did.

After completing their studies, Thérèse was offered a job in Brussels soon after. And despite the fact that she was now married and her husband did not want to move with her to Brussels, she had accepted this job anyway. After a few years of traveling back and forth, her husband had unexpectedly decided about twelve years ago to eventually settle in Brussels as well.

Thérèse was already waiting for Emma and raised her hand to greet her.

"And has the assignment been awarded to you?" Thérèse immediately fell with the door in the house.

'Yes, it worked and it actually went very smoothly. I suspect he only made the final decision, but my previous conversations with his MT had already been decisive. So I will be there in the office one day a week next year. Because one of the conditions he set was that I would do the communication personally and not leave it to one of my employees. And partly with him in the office, although the latter was a bit of an unusual request for me. I think he is in the assumption that I will get more feeling with the company, although it is actually not as I am used to working.'

'Well congratulations, this will undoubtedly bring you many more assignments, especially if you can name this organization as a reference on your web page.'

While they looked at the menu, Emma thought about her conversation with Ernst-Jan. She had felt comfortable with this man and that had nothing to do with her work. This man radiated both a huge energy and a certain calmness. Emma couldn't put her finger on it exactly, but this man had awakened a feeling in her that she hadn't known before. Was it therefore that she had not raised any objections when he set as a condition that she had to handle the communication for his company personally and preferably one day a week at the office of his company? She had preferred to discuss this with Thérèse, but she was aware that her friend generally showed little interest in these kinds of subjects, and Emma changed the subject.

'How is Bart? I haven't seen him in a while, has he come now?'

"No, he's too busy with his work. And honestly Emma, I like to be alone here for a while. Sometimes I still think back with desire to the time when he still lived in the Netherlands and I in Brussels. I liked such a long-distance relationship much better, but I know he moved especially for me and burned all his ships behind him, so I keep my mouth shut against him. But sometimes it all suffocates me.'

'Thérèse, is your relationship going well?'

'Yes, at least I think so. Bart has known from the moment I met him that my career comes first, but despite that, he sometimes takes too much of me. Fortunately, the period he insisted on thinking about children is behind us and I don't hear from him about that anymore. I like it when he accompanies me at formal events. When he sits next to me in his tuxedo, I feel extremely proud. Because there are few women who have a man as attractive as I have, and he is also intelligent, wealthy and generally developed. But a family life, that is absolutely unthinkable for me.'

'Thérèse, you sound like you hire him from time to time when it suits you. Hopefully you have more common denominators than that.'

'Yes, of course. I love him in my own way and we can enjoy a good book and a glass of wine together. We like to go to concerts and theater performances. And on top of that, we have fantastic sex.'

It all sounded a bit loveless in Emma's ears and deep in her heart she felt sorry for Bart. And although a family life was also unthinkable for Emma, she was at least so realistic to

see that the consequence of it was that she would go through life alone. With an occasional fleeting affair.

## Chapter 1

### 2023

Emma was awakened by the sun's rays that invaded her bedroom through the window and made her skin tingle.

She loved the early morning, the sound of the birds and the awakening of the city. The tingle of the first tram, the sound of the sweepers and the traffic that slowly started. She never got up after six o'clock and enjoyed the moment when she had a moment to herself during the day.

Armed with a cup of coffee, her daily bowl of oatmeal with banana, blueberries and yogurt, she took a seat like every other day in the loggia, overlooking the Meuse. She was a creature of habit and the daily rituals were important to her.

She was aware that people thought she was boring, but she didn't care much about that. Slightly autistic, John had even called her once. And maybe that was the case somewhere. She could not deal well with large companies and did not feel comfortable at parties. She thrived best at intimate dinners with no more than six people. Then she felt heard and did not retreat into her shell. Despite that, she had great empathy and people rarely did a profession for her for nothing.

After enjoying the view for a moment, which had still not bored her after four years, she opened the digital newspaper on her iPad.

Arriving at page four, she felt her breath stop. It was a message like this dominated the news almost every day. The umpteenth attack on a house. But this time with fatalities, and after looking at the photo of the victims, she stared at her screen in disbelief.

She did not know for a moment what shocked her most: the photo of the man who had put his arm protectively around his wife and looked at her with a loving look, or the fact that they were the fatalities.

Emma walked last after the people, who shuffled from the foyer to the auditorium for the final farewell. She saw a few familiar faces from the time she worked for Ernst-Jan's company and Janneke, a woman she vaguely knew from the fitness center.

She tried to avoid a visibly moved group of women that the woman from the fitness center had attached herself to by taking a seat in the back of the auditorium.

The two boxes were surrounded by pink and white roses, adorned with ribbons with loving words of farewell in gold and white letters.

The interest was great, the sadness palpable. These had undoubtedly been loved ones, with a large social network.

Their son gave an emotional speech, where he spoke of a fateful attack on two innocent people. Their only involvement had been their help to a friend, who through no fault of her own had ended up in a situation due to an ex-friend, which he would rather not want to explain, but had resulted in the death of his parents.

'My little girl will never know her grandparents. Their regained love could not last long. I console myself with the thought that they did not die alone, but eventually found their happiness, however short, they eventually found their happiness.'

His last words cut through Emma's soul. How many years had she not been happy with him, even though he was married? But his marriage had never stood in the way of their relationship. Until the moment when he had decided overnight to save his marriage.

He had discovered that his love for his wife had not died and his love for his wife eventually turned out to be greater than his desire to be with her.

Her heart was broken, her trust damaged, but her love for him had never disappeared and she had never lost hope that he would eventually choose her. And now he was dead and there was no one with whom she could share her grief.



Slowly, the guests walked from the auditorium to the final resting place of Ernst-Jan and Miranda. The sadness could be read from the face of many and some could not hold back their tears. Silently, everyone watched as both boxes slowly sank, while a sudden gust of wind tore the autumn leaves off the surrounding trees and slowly, like tears of nature, swirled on the boxes.

Their son dropped a shovel of earth that came down on the box with a heavy bang, because the earth was wet from the many rain showers of the past few days.

With a broken voice, he gave a final greeting to his parents: 'rest easy dear dad and mommy. You are now together forever.'

After these words, those present walked past the coffins, respectfully said goodbye with their heads bowed and then walked back to the foyer where the guests were given the opportunity to condolences to the next of kin.

Emma did not intend to take the opportunity to express her condolences to the family, and perhaps raise questions about who she was and why she was present at the funeral. Moreover, she was afraid that she would no longer be able to control her emotions.

## Chapter 2

As soon as Emma was in her car and imagined herself unspiced, she let her tears run free, overwhelmed by sadness. The love of her life was no longer there and there was no one with whom she could share this grief, no one to comfort her.

Emma had no idea how long she had been sitting like this and after drying her tears, she put her car in reverse and carefully turned out of the parking space. She was startled by a loud honk and her car came to a shock. She hadn't heard a bang, but nevertheless got out of her car to see if her car had been damaged.

'Emma,' it sounded shocked and when Emma looked up she saw the woman she occasionally chatted with while exercising.

"Sorry, apparently I didn't pay attention. Do you have damage to your car?"

But after they both looked closely at the cars, they were able to reassure themselves to determine that there was no damage and that the emergency system of Emma's car had apparently worked.

'Emma, are you okay? If I may be so free to notice, you don't look good. Come then we'll have a cup of coffee if you have time and we can recover from this day.'

Overcome by so much kindness, Emma agreed to Janneke's proposal, and they agreed to meet at restaurant Storm at the end of the boulevard of the nearby city beach. There it was usually not busy around this time of year and they could calm down for a while. Moreover, there were no parking problems there.

As they walked from their car to the restaurant, Janneke pointed to an apartment building that stood at the end of the long boulevard.

'Miranda's girlfriend lived there, although she still lives there technically, but she is in hide.'

Emma looked at Janneke not understandingly and Janneke became aware that Emma was not aware of the circumstances, which had led to the death of Miranda and Ernst-Jan.

'Bente was Miranda's best friend and she was the intended target. Her ex-boyfriend turned out to have something to do with drugs and because of her he was arrested and convicted. Subsequently, more members of a drug cartel were recently arrested and the attack, which claimed Miranda and Ernst-Jan's lives, was intended for her friend. And although she too would have been an innocent victim, it is very bitter that she survived and Miranda and Ernst-Jan did not.'

"Where is that woman now?" Emma asked curiously.

"No one knows, except the police. For safety reasons, she fled or hid, whatever you want to call it, without telling anyone what to do. Maybe she even has a new identity

Accepted, no one who knows. And I think that's the best. I just can't imagine how guilty and lonely she must feel now. You would have the death of your best friends, even if it is indirect and through no fault of your own, but on your conscience. And then have to deal with this without your friends and family. She couldn't even attend the funeral, because of the safety risks.'

'Just as I can't share my sadness,' Emma let go and when Janneke looked at her understandingly, Emma felt her neck turning red, slowly pulling up to her hair roots.

'I didn't know you were so close to Miranda,' was Janneke's obvious conclusion.

'I wasn't either, but with Ernst-Jan.' Emma didn't care what the consequences would be at that moment, but she could no longer control herself and felt an indescribable compulsion to share her grief with someone. When Janneke looked at her silently, but with an understanding look, Emma continued her story.

'I've had a relationship with Ernst-Jan for more than ten years,' Emma began her confession. 'We got to know each other through our work and a bond slowly but surely developed between us. I knew he was married, but also that something was wrong with his

marriage. I didn't care much, because I knew I wasn't fit to live with someone for a long time or start a family. There has therefore never been any question of Ernst-Jan leaving his wife for me. Until he suddenly broke up the relationship more than a year ago. He had come to the conclusion that he still loved his wife and he wanted to give their relationship a chance again. Apparently she had improved her life or something, he was rather vague about that. Anyway, I've never seen or heard from him since.'

Janneke listened carefully to Emma's story, without making a judgment about it. Janneke had been aware for years of the fact that Miranda had married Ernst-Jan because of his ability and had not gone on romantic adventures out of love and herself. Until last summer she had spent a weekend with her friends in Valkenburg, and Miranda had decided that she wanted to save her marriage because she had discovered that weekend - for a reason unclear to everyone - that she still loved her husband. And although a lot of water still had to be carried to the sea before Ernst-Jan wanted to give their marriage another chance, eventually they had come together and they had even sealed this with a new marriage vow. That Ernst-Jan had had an affair with another woman that Janneke Ernst-Jan could hardly blame - given the circumstances.

Emma misunderstood Janneke's silence and apologizes to her. "Sorry, I should never have told you that. Miranda was a friend of yours and I can't expect you to understand me.' "No, no, that's not a problem. I have never been very close to Miranda, until the moment she threw her life over a different bow. I'm a bit introverted myself and extrovert was only approximately a correct description of Miranda. Yet she was welcome and it was difficult not to love her. Her exuberance always scared me a little, probably because I felt even more like the wallflower than I already was. And I could sometimes be immensely irritated by how she always pushed herself to the fore. The world always had to revolve around her and that sometimes hit me in the chest. But she had a good character and also did a lot of good, such as volunteering for the food bank.'

Emma was in a duel. On the one hand, she wanted to find out as much as possible about Miranda, but on the other hand, she only wanted to talk about Ernst-Jan and not about his relationship with Miranda.

'Yes, that's how I recognize Miranda from Ernst-Jan's stories. And that you are an introvert, that's no surprise to me either. In that regard, I can imagine your feelings.'

After these words from Emma, the two women sat silently staring in front of them, looking at the gray clouds and the foam heads, which seemed to fly over the water due to the strong wind. Each with their own thoughts, which were so far apart and yet showed so many similarities.

"Do you like him?" Janneke's words startled Emma out of her pindea, but the answer was not long in coming.

'I've had a hard time loving people all my life. But Ernst-Jan was an exception. I not only loved him, he was my soulmate, I could trust him and he understood me better than anyone else. And he loved me too, I'm sure. He found in me the peace he needed in his life, but that Miranda could not offer him. But apparently he loved Miranda more than me. And I don't understand how he could love both me and Miranda. The difference between day and night is smaller than the difference between her and me.'

'Maybe that's why he loved you both. His love for you may not have disappeared at all, but he realized that he could save his marriage alone by giving up his relationship with you. I think this decision was hard for him, although we will never find out again.'

Janneke's words offered Emma a little comfort and now that she had been able to share her grief, it seemed as if a heavy burden had fallen from her shoulders.

## Chapter 3

### 2024

Emma spontaneously decided to leave the highway and drive home via the inland roads. She had a lot to think about and moreover she felt driven by the traffic on the highway and became quiet from a drive through villages and past meadows.

She had spent the weekend with her friend Thérèse in Brussels and did not feel like coming home to her empty apartment yet. Thérèse had pulled all the energy out of her, by endlessly seeing through the new relationship of her ex-hander Bart. Now Emma could understand the frustration her friend had to feel, because Bart had moved in a year ago with the woman with whom he had had an extramarital relationship about twenty-five years ago from which, as Thérèse had discovered a little over a year ago, a child had emerged.

But Thérèse and Bart had been divorced for almost two years when he moved in with his daughter's mother. And that separation was mainly due to the fact that Bart had eventually come to see that Thérèse's career would always go before her relationship with him. Emma had always been surprised by their relationship and was not at all surprised that Bart had eventually moved back to the Netherlands and their divorce was final.

Emma was startled from her reflections because she was blinded by the low sun and was able to dodge a cyclist just in time, who drove onto the road out of nowhere and raised his middle finger at her, apparently in the opinion that there was nothing to blame him. Emma took a deep breath and soon found peace again to enjoy her car ride.

Since she had made the rigorous decision to change course and sell her successful business a few years ago, she had fully devoted herself to her new future in healthcare. Everyone had told her crazy that she wanted to throw her career overboard. But her work in communication no longer gave her satisfaction and since she had completed her 4-year HBO nursing education and worked in healthcare, she felt much happier.

Ernst-Jan had motivated her to follow her heart and despite the fact that as a nurse she only enjoyed a quarter of the income than she was used to, she had never regretted her decision. Although of course it helped her that she had sold her company well, so that she was not financially dependent on her current salary and could have paid off her apartment. John, a close friend of Emma's - who had previously worked for MercyShips - had once proposed to her to volunteer temporarily in Africa.

The MercyShips Foundation has been manning hospital ships with volunteers since 1978 and provided care in the poorest countries of Africa in this way.

"Showing God's love to the poorest in a practical way", Emma had read on the site and as an atheist she could not imagine that she would feel happy if she were surrounded by faith. At first, she had rejected John's proposal, but after Ernst-Jan's death, she had regularly thought back on his proposal.

Since Ernst-Jan had told her that he wanted to end their relationship, she had always had the silent hope that he would eventually realize that his happiness was with her anyway and not with his wife. But now that he was no longer there, she wanted to fill the void that dominated her life at that moment. And how could she indicate a better interpretation here than doing something right as a volunteer? And the more Emma thought about it, the more enthusiastic she became.

Working hard on a hospital ship for at least forty hours a week and then falling asleep tired - during her drive home - suddenly seemed to her the best idea in the world to forget her grief for a while.

John didn't seem surprised when Emma told him about her decision to volunteer and enthusiastically told him that his next trip to Sierra Leone - on the west coast of Africa, located between Guinea, Liberia and the Atlantic Ocean - would be and proposed to accompany him.

Before she made her decision to go with John to Sierra Leone, Emma had first delved into the history and circumstances of this country on the internet.

She had read in various articles that this country was characterized by the many spheres of influence that had begun in 1461, when the Portuguese arrived and the country proved interesting for Europeans as a source of slaves. In 1787, a settlement in present-day Freetown was founded by the former slaves. Freetown later became the capital of British West Africa.

The country experienced turbulent times through the centuries, which unfortunately did not disarray after independence in 1961. After the declaration of independence on April 27, 1961, the country became part of the Commonwealth of Nations with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. In 1971, the monarchy was abolished and the Republic of Sierra Leone was declared.

A military coup by the rebel army degenerated into a bloody civil war that lasted from 1991 to 2001, alternating coups and democratic elections for ten years.

A third of the population had to flee the violence of war in the period 1991-2001, and at the end of this civil war the country was

Largely destroyed.

Poverty had increased to an unprecedented low and the population had to make ends meet on less than forty cents a day.

In 1999, after a peace treaty was concluded, British troops arrived to restore order. But although the country has been working on reconstruction since 2002, poverty among the population was still unprecedentedly high and medical facilities were minimal. For example, the mortality rate among women who die during childbirth was one of the highest in the world.

The average life expectancy was only fifty-five years and no less than twenty-five percent of the children in this country were severely undernourished.

Emma was strengthened by this information in her decision to go along, and when she had informed John of her decision during lunch, he had looked at Emma with a reassuring look and said, 'Emma, you will get so much feel from the work you can do there to help these people. What are standard interventions for us, sometimes makes the difference between life and death. And the MercyShips Foundation not only offers help to the locals, but often gives volunteers from more than sixty countries direction to their own lives. And of course, faith is an important part of the culture on board. But trust me when I tell you that togetherness and mutual friendship and connection comes from more than faith.'

These words of John had removed the last threshold to give her decision a definitive shape. And for the first time since Ernst-Jan had left her, Emma felt a little confidence in her future again.

## Chapter 4

Emma had spent the night before leaving for Africa with Thérèse, so that she could travel from Brussels to Zaventem airport the next day.

Thérèse had repeatedly tried to show Emma her plans and believed that Emma would only feel more unhappy. Thérèse had little empathy and the mere idea that Emma would be surrounded by poor and sick people in an environment without any luxury or comfort, made her horrors.

But although Emma had not been able to convince Thérèse that this was something she needed, in the end Thérèse had shrugs and told her to do what she could not do, but not bother her with complaining, if it all turned out to be a bit disappointing.

After Emma got out of the taxi, her expectant Nervousness gave way to a rest she hadn't felt in a long time. Even the hustle and bustle of the airport, which often made her feel overstimulated, did not seem to hurt her.

On the information screens of the departure hall, she looked up the check-in desk number for her seven-hour flight to Sierra Leone.

John waited patiently for her at the check-in counter and politely placed her luggage on the belt, while Emma fished her travel documents from her hand luggage. The ground stewardess handed Emma her boarding pass, while her backpack was slowly moved through the baggage carousel, on her way to Africa.

'Come on, let's have a cup of coffee first before we go to customs,' John suggested, as he put his arm over her shoulder in a friendly way and pulled her against him briefly. 'I'm so glad you decided to join. I'm sure you'll love it in Africa.'

Emma was still not entirely convinced of that, but at least she had decided to enjoy it as much as possible and let them all come over her.

The lack of privacy was something she looked forward to the most and also having people around you constantly was something she was not looking forward to. In recent years it has been a lot better, but Emma was still easily overstimulated and often needed a moment for herself.

As if John could read her mind, he grabbed her hand with a reassuring gesture. 'Emma believe me now, you are made for this job.'

For a moment, John reminded her of Ernst-Jan, who had also had the ability to put Emma at ease, and she trusted that she could rely on John and he would protect her during this great adventure.

As soon as Emma got out of the door of the plane, she felt to the bottom of her deepest that she had entered another world and was overwhelmed by the smells that penetrated her nose, and despite being blinded for a moment by the sunlight, she could absorb the details of the airport well, as they walked to the terminal.

The trip had gone well and at the airport John and Emma were met by the rest of the crew members arriving that day. Some were there for the first time, others had already been several times, of which Joan, a nice woman from Australia, turned out to be there for the eleventh time. To Emma's surprise, she recognized one of the women and responded surprised to see her here. Ankie even turned out to have traveled on the same plane.

'How nice to see a familiar face. I think it's a very exciting adventure,' confessed Ankie, while she looked around a little dazed.

A man who introduced himself to them as Thierry warmly welcomed everyone in English with a heavy French accent, and handed them the MercyShips t-shirts, which everyone would wear with pride in the near future and ensured that the crew members were treated as VIPs at the airport.

The crew consisted of members from all over the world, but the crew members arrived today came mainly from the Netherlands, Germany, England, France and Australia.

After everyone in the VIP lounge had the opportunity to get to know each other, they got on the ready-made bus that would take them to the Seacouch, the MercyShips ship on which they would stay in the near future.

Ankie and Emma sat next to each other, while John took a seat next to a tall man, with a striking appearance, which he had apparently worked with before for MercyShips.

The bus left a trail of dust behind it, which was blown in through the open windows of the bus, making it seem to feel even warmer inside the bus than it already was. As the bus drove along the bumpy roads to the final destination, Emma and Ankie enjoyed the landscape that passed them, interspersed with huts with corrugated iron roofs where the locals, packed together, lived.

Loudly honking, the bus drove through a crowd of people who, adorned in colorful clothes, walked to the nearby market without paying attention to the bus. Emma looked her eyes out, and all the documentaries she had seen in her life about Africa did not do justice to what she now observed with her own eyes.

The previously exuberant mood on the bus seemed to be silenced by the fatigue, the new impressions and the heat, and Emma couldn't wait until they could board, and hopefully she could rinse off the fatigue and dust.

At the quay it was a hustle and bustle and it took both Emma and all the other crew members who arrived to make their way through the swarming crowds with their luggage.

As they waited at the quay until they could board, they were treated to a spectacular sunset and Emma experienced that moment so intensely that it seemed that her heart warmed up.

The ship was many times larger than Emma had expected. 'Our house and workplace for the coming time,' she said to Ankie, impressed by the size of the ship, who, like Emma, tried to steer her luggage to the ship with difficulty.

John had joined them again and introduced his Australian friend to them: 'Michael and I have worked together twice before and we hope that you will also be infected by the 'Mercy virus'.'

Emma looked at John, still with a huge doubt in her eyes, but John ignored her gaze or did not notice it. He seemed to be completely involved in the reunion with Michael, and Emma suspected that Michael meant more to John than a crew member he accidentally encountered again.

But once on board, Emma's doubt soon turned into a feeling of homecoming. The warm welcome, the cool drinks and the excited yet serene atmosphere certainly contributed to that.

After listening to the words of welcome, it was time to go to their cabin. Emma knew she had to share this with someone during her stay, and that was what she was most looking forward to. After meeting Ankie, she quietly hoped to be able to share the cabin with her. But her roommate turned out to be a quiet woman around forty years old, who spoke Dutch to Emma's relief, and had already worked several times as a volunteer for MercyShips.

Olivia quickly put Emma at ease and with some pride showed her the cabin, which consisted of a bedroom with a bunk bed and space to store her luggage, a small room with a refrigerator, a sofa, a kettle, coffee maker and a small sink where they could wash their dirty cups and glasses. Finally there was a toilet and shower and

Olivia gave Emma instructions on how to use it. 'I assume you would like to use the shower before you start the tour. Please note, you can only use the shower for two minutes,' Olivia warned. 'You still have plenty of time to unpack your bag and recover. I'll pick you up in an hour to take you to the meeting center.'

Emma was happy that Olivia seemed to understand that Emma needed time for herself to process all the impressions of the last few hours, turned on the shower and enjoyed the cool water jets she felt flowing over her body.

Refreshed and less tired after this shower, Emma took out her bag and fell on her bed for half an hour, where Olivia found her fast asleep when she came to pick up Emma for the tour.

The next morning Emma was woken up early, and after a joint breakfast she walked with John and Ankie to a meeting that was mandatory for all new crew members.

During this meeting they were welcomed, they received all the necessary information and time was set aside for a moment of reflection.

The latter, Emma would experience, would prove to be an important part of life on board.

Afterwards, Emma and Ankie were expected at her temporary workplace in the OR, where they were allowed to take even more information. It all felt a bit overwhelming and Emma softly whispered her fear, that she was afraid of not being able to remember everything. Ankie reassured her by noting that they would figure it out together.

After taking the security information in the afternoon, Emma was happy that she could leave for her cabin after dinner to read some more. Even before Olivia entered the cabin, Emma was in deep sleep.

The ship was much larger than Emma had imagined. There was a swimming pool, a gym, a basketball court, several conference and dining rooms.

In addition, there was also a school, where the children of parents who worked on the ship were taught. For these families there were even fully furnished apartments available. In a large kitchen, meals were prepared twice a day for 600 people.

Emma realized that it would take a while before she found her way on this huge ship. Fortunately, the various stairwells leading to the cabins were given different names, such as Alpha, Delta and Charlie, which helped you find your way to your own cabin.



## Chapter 5

Today was Emma's first working day on the ship. Together with Ankie, she was assigned to the ophthalmology department, which was completely new to Emma, but familiar territory for Ankie, although Ankie had confided in Emma that somewhere now felt new to her.

But before they went to work, there was also half an hour for reflection. Emma felt some resistance to this, but decided to use these moments to relax her head and body in her own way.

In the OR, they met an ophthalmologist, from the United States, a local ophthalmologist in training and two nurses from Freetown, two translators and two more permanent OR nurses from Mercyships, with whom Ankie and Emma would work together during their stay.

The language of instruction, both on board and in the OR, was English and although Emma spoke this language fluently and even almost without accents, she noticed that due to all the new impressions and working methods, it took her extra efforts to get used to the names of the instruments.

But when Emma was able to enjoy the sun on the deck at the end of the working day in company of Olivia, Ankie, John and Michael, she found the peace to take the impressions of this day.

On the third working day, a kind of routine had already arisen and Emma enjoyed the structure and gave a standard interpretation to the day on a daily basis. The long working days of sometimes ten hours - since the OR room also had to be cleaned by themselves - may have been tiring but also provided a daily fixed pattern, which made Emma felt most comfortable.

Emma and Ankie realized after two days of work, how easy it was for them to work on their own OR compared to here.

Upon waking up on the third day, Emma felt sleepy, but the sea was rougher that day than the previous days, and although the ship was moored, it was still a ship on the water. And despite the fact that Emma had become accustomed in recent days to assist in an operation on a moving ship, that day the cataract operations turned out to be a big challenge.

But the surgeon continued stoically, looking through the microscope, to perform operation after operation. With grateful patients as a result.

When John suggested one evening to leave the ship to eat somewhere, along with Ankie, Olivia and Michael, Emma initially wanted to reject his proposal. But his face soon makes it clear that saying no was not an option, and she reluctantly agreed to it.

Leaving the ship was not just done, because the safety measures and instructions were strict. Leaving the ship was at your own risk and it was advised to put your badge away properly, to prevent people from clinging to you for help.

The taxis, although the rickety pieces of can on wheels were barely allowed to bear that name, were already ready to bring them to their destination.

Along the way, Emma was once again seized by the visible poverty and although in her experience the situation on board could hardly be described as a luxury, she realized all too well that no one from the local population would agree with her. And that they were indeed in a luxurious position by having a good bed, three very tasty meals a day and clean drinking water.

The traffic along the way was a madhouse. The Keke's - a kind of tuktuk - slaloming loudly honking right through the people walking in the middle of the street. It therefore took the taxi driver great effort to wash through the crowd and other traffic, but in the end they reached their destination without shear.

In the restaurant they were received and treated as VIPs, just because they knew they were working on the ship that meant so much to the locals.

Michael, who had been here before, passed on the order and assured them that he had not ordered extreme indigenous dishes.

Emma was happy that there was a moment of relaxation and listened to Michael and John's stories about their fieldwork.

At Tasso, Michael had visited a small hospital with only three beds and a nurse. A doctor was not on the island and they depended on the visit that the ship's doctors made to the island. The walls and ceiling of the hospital were found to be full of mold and he found a woman with a baby. The baby had broken limbs, caused by a complicated delivery and it was a miracle that mother and child had survived under these conditions, which was often not the case.

John had visited an orphanage and promised Emma and Ankie that they too would make a field trip to this orphanage. Thanks to the good care of a couple from the Mercyship, the large house turned out to be clean and tidy, but there was no running water or electricity.

Despite these conditions, the children were best dressed for the Mercyships doctors with happy faces outside and waited for them. The generator was defective and there was no money to replace or repair it, giving a refrigerator and freezer a sad sight.

They hoped to soon have enough money to purchase solar panels.

After these words, Emma looked at her plate, where a delicious steak was waiting for her. What an inequality there was in the world and she decided to donate the necessary solar panels to the children's home. Emma couldn't think of a better goal to use a small part of her accumulated assets.

Olivia talked about her days off, so she could reassure Ankie and Emma a little that the bow wouldn't always be tense.

'We make trips to the beach. We leave early, because there are only a few sunbeds available. And we visit the local market, where everything is sold, from fruit to wood carvings. And there are also many stalls with the well-known colorful fabrics for the traditional garments. You do have to negotiate the price, because you don't have to pay the price that is asked. Prepare for a culture shock, because you see a lot of poverty and a huge amount of people along the way and at the market, Olivia had warned. 'But you can see the real life of Africa there.'

Emma had become increasingly curious about what was still waiting for her and whispered to John that she was happy that he had persuaded her to go with him.

A few days later, Emma walked with John to the railing of the ship to enjoy the sunset which, since her arrival two weeks ago, was still just as impressive as the day they arrived. She had worked for two consecutive weeks and felt that fatigue was getting the way. A fatigue that she embraced, because it prevented her from thinking of Ernst-Jan and his sadness.

But at times like this, she couldn't hold her tears. She felt John wrap an arm around her and rest her head against his strong shoulder for a moment, while the air filled with an unprecedented orange and red glow that reflected on the water. And at the same speed at which darkness then invaded, Emma felt the darkness fill her heart.

'Emma, it's done' Emma heard John say in a warning tone, with an irritation in his voice that she was not used to from him. 'Ernst-Jan is no longer there. And even if he had still been there, he had made his choice and the love for his wife turned out to be greater than that for you. And as hard as that is, it's time you accept that, get yourself back together. Pick up your life again.'

Emma looked at him angrily, and without saying anything she broke away from John and moved away from the deck, where the sunset had given way to an immeasurable starry sky. In the hallway, Emma was surrounded by people, on their way to prayer. There were many joint prayers on board, but Emma did not feel excluded as an atheist. Although she did notice a difference in dealing with each other.

Without being aware of it, she allowed herself to be carried away by the masses into the prayer room to listen to the prayers, the sermons and the singing. Although she did not believe in a God or the Bible - or any form of religion - she was seized by an enormous rest, and felt the tears roll silently down her cheeks.

She felt a kind of liberation from her grief and a desire to pick up her life again. Africa had shown her the light again.

## Chapter 6

Sunday, the day of departure. With mixed feelings, Emma looked back on the past month, which consisted of hard work, new friendships, but mostly new insights and the first day of the rest of her life.

Emma knew that her life would never be the same as before she left.

Together with Ankie and John, Emma walked through the hedge of honor formed by the colleagues with whom they had experienced so many intense moments in the past month.

Emma said goodbye with a smile and a tear and promised Olivia that they would keep in touch with each other. Michael could not hold back his tears when saying goodbye to John and it would not surprise Emma if she would soon meet Michael again in the Netherlands. This was now more than friendship, Emma was convinced of that.

Even before the plane took off, Emma already felt homesick for the secrecy of the ship. But as soon as she heard from the cockpit that the landing had started, she was seized by a new energy that she had not felt in a long time, and the desire to give another turn to her life.

As soon as they had passed the passport control and removed their backpacks from the luggage belt, Emma and John and Ankie walked through the sliding doors to the arrivals hall, where Thérèse was waiting for her to her great surprise despite the early time.

After a quick goodbye and the promise to keep in touch, Ankie walked on to her husband, who was a few meters away from Thérèse.

'I had to go to the Netherlands to arrange some business anyway, so I thought I could combine that nicely by picking up John and you', Thérèse explained to her presence.

Emma and John, happy that they were spared a train trip to the Netherlands from Brussels, thanked Thérèse, walked with her to the parking garage and got into her comfortable Tesla.

They were too tired of the trip to say much and Emma was happy that Thérèse understood this without having to say it.

After defying the traffic jams near Antwerp, Breda and Rotterdam, Thérèse dropped Emma off at her apartment, promising to have lunch together before her departure to Brussels.

Too tired to do anything else, Emma let herself plop on her bed with clothes and everything to fall into a dreamless sleep within minutes.

It was already around noon when Emma woke up because the sun was shining in her face because she hadn't closed her curtains. She stretched for a while and after an invigorating shower Emma felt more energetic than she had felt in a long time and enjoyed the cup of fresh coffee from her own Jura coffee machine - one of the few things she had missed during her stay in Africa - and the muffins Thérèse had brought for her.

With some resistance because this brought her back to everyday reality, she went through her post. To her surprise, there was a letter from a notary office unknown to her and curiously she opened the envelope.

With increasing surprise, she took up the contents of the letter, in which she was asked to contact the notary office regarding the handling of Ernst-Jan's inheritance.

She had no idea what this could mean and excitedly picked up her phone. After a few minutes of waiting, she was transferred to the notary who was handling the will, and without being able to hide the impatience in her voice, she asked if he could tell her what it was about.

The notary replied in a business tone that in the will of Ernst-Jan a special bequest was included in favor of Emma and he wanted to make an appointment with her for further processing.

Emma could not say a word of surprise and only after the notary had asked her if she was still on the line, she regained her voice and asked if it was possible to come by that same afternoon, as she was expected to return to work the next day. Because it was only a special legacy and therefore did not have to take much time, the notary agreed that she could visit at half past five that afternoon.

Emma thanked him and breathed a sigh of relief that she didn't have to worry about days, and especially nights, about what Ernst-Jan had left her.

## Chapter 7

The notary office turned out to be housed in an impressive building and as Emma walked up the stairs that led to the imposing entrance door, she felt that her curiosity was drained by a sense of restlessness.

Contrary to what the stately exterior facade suggested, the interior was sleek and modern. A receptionist stood up from behind a space-filling counter made of glass and shiny teak and went to a reception room ahead of Emma. This room also featured a huge glass table with the same teak wood that had been used for the reception desk and Emma took a seat on one of the comfortable looking white leather bucket chairs that stood around the table. She kindly thanked the receptionist for the coffee offered, but turned down her offer. Emma's hands vibrated so violently that she was afraid she couldn't drink the coffee without spilling.

Emma's gaze was drawn to a painting in which she thought she recognized the hand of Gerardus Hoogendoorn, a painter from the early twentieth century and one of Ernst-Jan's favorite painters.

Involuntarily, her thoughts wandered to the first time Ernst-Jan and she met and was startled by hearing a warm voice say her name.

Emma looked away from the painting and turned to the place where this voice seemed to come from. Emma had expected to meet a stately man of age, why she didn't know exactly. Probably a biased image that she had unconsciously about the appearance of a notary.

She was pleasantly surprised when she saw a sporty-looking man in his late forties and early fifties - his age was difficult to guess because of his sporty appearance - who reached out to her in greeting and introduced himself as Antoine Westervoort.

'Shall we walk to my office, then we can talk to each other undisturbed there,' he suggested, making an inviting gesture to a door that Emma had not noticed before because it was almost seamlessly hidden in a glass wall with photo print, on which the skyline of New York, London and Rotterdam flowed smoothly into each other.

Everything in this office exuded luxury and opulence and Emma wondered if Ernst-Jan had not been much more wealthy than she had suspected. Although Emma had always known that Ernst-Jan was wealthy, this would not have been a subject they had ever discussed with each other. Emma might have been his mistress, but not one who was maintained by him and she had never more than accepted an occasional gift in the form of jewelry on special occasions or a short holiday together from him.

Again she turned down the offer for coffee, while she took a seat on the offered chair at a table that was an exact copy of the table in the reception area, and looked at the notary with an expectant look.

'Shall we get down to business right away,' he suggested, looking at Emma with a reassuring look.

'Yes, please,' Emma replied and she herself heard how nervous her words sounded.

The notary held out his hand to a package wrapped in brown wrapping paper lying on his desk and a letter lying next to it.

'Ernst-Jan has given this in custody with me with the order to hand it over to you after his death. Although he probably didn't expect this to be more than a year after the date he gave me this assignment.

'What's in it?' Emma could no longer control her curiosity.

'Unfortunately, I can't tell you that, simply because I don't know this. Despite the fact that Ernst-Jan and I had not only a business but also a friendly relationship with each other and I was aware of your relationship, he never told me what was in it or what the content of the letter is. He only commissioned me as a notary that it should be included in his will as a special legacy and then gave it to my custody as a friend.'

'Wasn't his son curious why I was included in his will?'

'No, not directly. Ernst-Jan had recorded several legacies, from charities to some of his most loyal collaborators of the first hour. I assume his son also included you here.'

'Just say Emma, and you can tutor me, after all you were a friend of Ernst-Jan and I didn't meet much of that because of the situation, let alone know.'

'Friends call me Ant,' was Antoine's reaction, after which he continued after a brief silence: 'It must have been a difficult time for you I think. If I could be so free to talk to you about it?'

'Nothing better than that. If I have to be honest, I had not quite resigned myself to our breakup, despite the fact that I was aware of his renewed marriage promise to Miranda, when I read in the newspaper that he had been killed by a crime. And there was really no one with whom I could talk about this. At least not with people who knew him and loved him just as I loved him. And that felt quite lonely,' Emma confessed, while she made herself surprised by the openness with which she spoke to a complete stranger to her.

'That must have been very heavy for you, especially the way you had to take note of his death. For what it's worth, Ernst-Jan really loved you and you were certainly not an adventure for him. But I think you know that yourself, because otherwise your relationship wouldn't have lasted ten years. I have often been surprised that you have accepted this all this time and never urged him to leave Miranda. Or is this comment too free of me?'

'A little bit, after all, we don't really know each other. But I don't blame you,' Emma replied with a smile, while she didn't go into his comment and an uncomfortable silence arose.

Because there was nothing more to say, or perhaps because Ant was shocked by his comment and Emma didn't seem to want to trust him about her feelings, they said goodbye to each other, while Emma clamped the package and the letter as if she could be robbed of them at any moment.

On the way out, Emma took a deep breath and sucked her lungs full of oxygen, to then breathe for a long and calm breath. She repeated this five more times before she regained control of her breathing. Emma couldn't wait until she was home to open the package and walked with a firm step towards the park under the Euromast which was at the end of the avenue and took a seat on a bench despite the cold.

She impatiently tore off the paper and found Dante's novel *Inferno* and a book with a cover of soft brown leather without text. When she opened the book, she immediately recognized Ernst-Jan's handwriting. After reading the date and the first words, she realized what she was holding in her hands.

Ernst-Jan's diary, starting on the day of their first meeting at his office.





## Chapter 8

Emma had decided that she did not want to read the letter and the diary in the cold on a bench in the city park, but in the intimacy of her own apartment with a glass of wine and tissues at hand.

Although she had no appetite for food, she warmed up some soup from the freezer and baked a few sandwiches in the oven. She knew herself and knew only too well that drinking a glass of wine on an empty stomach would not work out well for her, as a very mediocre drinker.

Admiring herself because she could have had the patience to eat first before opening the letter, she took a seat in an easy chair with the letter, the diary and a glass of Pinot Noir. She had deliberately chosen this fruity wine that was known for its light body, because she didn't want to get a sentimental drunken mood.

She carefully opened the envelope and put the letter with Ernst-Jan's characteristic handwriting on her lap for a moment, as if she had to gather courage to read the letter.

*My dearest Emma,*

*If you read this letter, this means that I am no longer here. That I am buried under a layer of cold and moist earth. That I can no longer tell you how much I loved you and at the time I write this letter, still love you. How important you were to me, my buddy, my support and trust. My mistress. Yes, I know how much you hated that word: mistress. You were also so much more than that to me. It has always made me very sad that you could never be more than that. I could never call you my wife, or my girlfriend. I never told you how much I wanted this, but I let myself be held back from doing this by all kinds of reasons - and rarely the right ones. And although we didn't really meet in secret and also showed ourselves together in public, there was always something secret in our meetings and only during our short holidays together could we show our feelings for each other in public.*

*I know I made you very sad when I ended our relationship and chose to spend the rest of my life with Miranda. I left you with countless unanswered questions. Questions that I hope you will get answers to after reading my diary, which is entirely dedicated to our love relationship. I don't know if you're fifty or eighty when you read this. But I hope with all my heart that you will survive me in order to finally get answers to questions that I could not or dared to answer during my life. Or dared to ask you. I hope you can come up with the answer yourself, see the bigger connections and eventually understand why I left you and chose a life with Miranda.*

*Forever yours,  
Ernst-Jan*

Slowly Emma lowered the letter, while she took a big sip of her wine and let the words slowly penetrate her. Somehow the letter felt businesslike, not like the declaration of love for which it was intended. As if he didn't want to take a feeling of guilt into his grave, but wanted to defend himself after his death. What if he had lived another thirty years or more? Or had she survived? Then she had been sitting all these years with unanswered questions, questions that had been occupying her since the end of their relationship. Carefully, as if it were fragile, she put the letter on the table next to her chair by the window and poured herself another glass of wine. Her gaze stared aimlessly outwards, where in the darkness the moon shone its silver light over the water and ships seemed to cut the water in half like a knife, while her thoughts went through her head like a runaway merry-go-round.

She did not know if she was happy with Ernst-Jan's letter and diary, or that it was causing wounds that were slowly healing through her adventure in Africa, were being opened again.

She decided that she would take the time to figure this out before she would start reading the diary. Maybe that would be the next day, maybe in a year. Or: maybe never.

## Chapter 9

After a restless night - despite her tiredness of her return trip from Africa - Emma was shocked by the sound of the alarm clock. For a moment she did not know where she was, but soon it came to her that she was not in her single bed on the ship, but lying back home in her own spacious double bed, she had an early shift today and was expected to be in the hospital where she was working about just over an hour.

She cursed it at that moment that she had agreed to an early shift, so soon after she returned home. But it had seemed like a good idea to her at that moment, because she had expected to be still in that rhythm and the night of her return home to be tired and would have gone to bed early.

It seemed almost surreal to her that she had landed at Brussels airport not twenty-four hours ago, and the whole adventure she had experienced in Africa and of which she had been so full seemed to have been in the background by yesterday's events.

After an invigorating shower, Emma felt a little better and as soon as she saw her colleagues, the stories of her experiences on the ship came up again, and she forgot Ernst-Jan's letter and diary for a while.

She enthusiastically talked about the warm blanket she had felt around her by the people around her. The connection she had experienced with the crew members, despite the fact that she would have had a hard time getting used to the moments of reflection and prayer.

'It's such beautiful and grateful work. And I learned so much there, especially that material things don't really matter. We are so concerned about futilities, while these people are already grateful that they are seen by a doctor at all. A roof over their heads, daily meals and especially no more wars, those are the things they are working on and not how many likes they got on social media after posting yet another unimportant message or sharing selfies. And I met more happy people there in a month than here in the past two years. Despite the many poverty and misery I have seen, I felt richer there than ever and I don't mean this literally. I have decided to go again next year, maybe to another country, but again for the same organization. They do so much good work, with so much love and selflessness.'

'To be nothing for me,' one of Emma's younger colleagues remarked, while she picked up her iPhone uninterestedly, before her service began to look at the messages on social media.

Emma's service was barely over when she received a message from Thérèse that she had reserved a table for both of them that evening at the restaurant "In den Rustwat". A chic restaurant where Thérèse had always felt at ease.

Typically Thérèse to do this without any consultation and assume that Emma would have no other plans. Because she indeed had no other plans, had to spend the evening alone and the restaurant was within walking distance of her apartment, Emma agreed and promised to be there at the agreed time.

Despite the stringing wind, Emma decided to walk home from the hospital. The route that largely ran along the Maasboulevard, brought her to rest by looking at the passing ships and listening to the sound of the rattling water. Emma often chose to walk to and from her work at the EMC. Going by car was not an option, unless she had a late shift, and sitting packed up in a tram or subway was against her.

She regularly picked up her bike, but the bike paths also became more and more crowded and sometimes she felt unsafe because of youthful cyclists on fast fat bikes, who caught up with her recklessly.

In retrospect, Emma was happy that she went out to dinner with Thérèse tonight, so she could just get some necessary groceries for breakfast and the rest of the groceries could wait until the next day.

That will be a cart full, Emma realized, since the contents of her refrigerator because of her trip to Africa did not consist of much more than a bottle of water.

When she got home, she kicked off her shoes, grabbed a cup of coffee and plopped down on her favorite chair by the window. Her gaze was immediately drawn to Ernst-Jan's diary. Despite her intention that she would only decide later whether she wanted to read it or not, her hands were drawn like a magnet to the brown leather booklet. She let the book rest on her lap for some time, before she picked it up and started reading.

*september 15, 2012*

*Can you as an adult man confess without the shame on your cheeks that you have given in to an impulse purchase? Yesterday my eyes were drawn to a brown soft leather agenda. At least, I assumed it was an agenda, but when I took a closer look I found blank pages, and it turned out to be an expensive notebook. My first thought was: who still uses a notebook today now that we all seem to have an iPad? And then I thought back to a meeting earlier this week. A meeting with a woman that I can't get out of my head, but that I can't tell anyone about.*

*At that moment I decided to buy the booklet to write down my confusing feelings and then put it away well, so that no one would know about the existence.*

*When Emma came into my office, I immediately felt my heart rate speed up and knew I wanted to get to know her better. I had already been convinced by the management in advance that she had the right papers for the assignment and when I saw her I had already decided in an instant that I would offer her a contract, and every question I asked her was purely for the stage. Spontaneously, the idea came to me to add an extra element to the conditions, namely that she would personally lead the project and spend at least one day a week here in the office. A completely unnecessary requirement, but this was the only way to get to know her better. To my surprise, she agreed to this. I felt like a little boy who had been given an ice cream with the prospect that he would get more ice creams. Do I feel guilty towards Miranda? Well, not really! No idea what she's up to when she's out with her friends. But that there are serious flirts in between has been whispered in my ears more than once by people who had met her. And usually with a big bell of wine. Fortunately, I was assured again and again that they had never caught her leaving a bar with a man. Those flirtations are already embarrassing enough to hear. Although I'm not convinced that she never went beyond an innocent flirtation. So no, I don't feel guilty if I want to get to know a woman better.*

Emma put the book back on the table next to her. Ernst-Jan felt very alive again and very close. She could remember this day, which had changed her life forever in many ways, as if it had been yesterday.

Although this first page brought nothing that she did not already know, because later in their relationship Ernst-Jan had already confessed this, although he had never told that he had started to keep a diary, solely to be able to entrust his feelings for her to something, because it was impossible to share this with anyone.

It was moved by Emma that he had done this. She picked up the book to continue reading, but decided not to do so. She would be too full to keep quiet about it tonight at the table with Thérèse, and she wanted to keep this to herself for a while. Moreover, Thérèse was not really the right person to share this with or who would even understand anything about it.



## Chapter 10

Thérèse had already taken a seat at a table by the window and ordered a bottle of red wine when Emma came in.

Thérèse got up to hug her and beckoned the waiter to pour a glass for Emma as well. Emma always thought this kind of thing was a bit exaggerated by Thérèse, you could also pour a glass of wine yourself, but this would never occur in Thérèse's head and testified to the arrogance she had to a large extent.

When Emma had expected her to tell about her trip to Africa and the work she had done there, she was deceived, because even before Emma had taken a sip of her wine, Thérèse burned.

'He's going to marry that wicht,' and from the tone in which said these words almost spit out, Emma could conclude that this was not something she liked.

Emma suspected that Bart was the one who was getting married, but loved the stupid one and asked in a neutral tone who was going to get married.

'Bart, of course I still have to explain that to you? With that stupid wicht, the mother of that cute daughter of his.' Thérèse's voice went up an octave when she pronounced the word daughter.

'Well, I hope he's happy with her. And that it turns out to be real love, because you have never been able to give it to him and I think he deserved it,' Emma replied with a smile, while she took an olive from the bowl and prepared for the anger of Thérèse that she had probably gotten on her neck with this. But Emma had never succumbed to Thérèse and even now had no intention of doing so.

'I didn't love Bart, do you really mean that? I've always loved him, in fact, I still love him.' The anger had given way to surprise at Thérèse and she looked with a frown.

'Dear Thérèse, you have always shown that in a strange way. You have yourself, your needs, your desires, your wishes, your life and so I can go on for a while, always put his first. When he was still young and in love, he may have been blinded by you, but believe me when I say that even then he knew that you considered yourself more important than him and your relationship. That he stow it away and didn't want to face it is something else. But I could never imagine that your relationship would eventually not run aground. That you couldn't offer him what he needed in his life and it has always surprised me that your marriage has lasted for so many years. Thérèse, you are my friend and I care a lot about you, I even think I know and understand you better than anyone else in this world, but you have never radiated love and affection to Bart.'

Thérèse took advantage of the arrival of the waiter, and only responded to Emma's speech after his explanation of the dish.

'But that's not true. I was always as proud of him as he accompanied me on important meetings with government leaders and occasions like that.

We had the same interests, came from the same environment, could talk for hours about politics, books, developments in the world. And our sex life also lacked nothing.'

'Thérèse, I'm proud of you too, we can also talk about these topics for hours, okay we don't both come from the environment of old money and

We've never tried a sex life together, and I don't have one either

Need to try that someday, but we also have all those things in common and have nothing to do with love. You have never sacrificed anything for him in your life. Your career, your conviction that you didn't want children, your desire to move to Brussels: that's what your life was all about. His career, his social life in the Netherlands, his desire for children, it didn't even cross your mind that they were just as important to him as the way you wanted to live. He gave up everything for you. And you have never shown in any way during your relationship that you appreciated this. You never give anything back for it. And that

Thérèse, doesn't really testify to love now, and that's why he's now marrying another woman.'

After this fiery speech by Emma, they just looked at each other in silence. Emma feared for a moment that this would mean the end of their friendship, but to her surprise she saw tears in her friend's eyes and a desperate attempt to swallow those tears away.

Without saying anything, they ate their amuse, but could not enjoy it at that moment. Thérèse drank her glass in one go and immediately filled it again, after which she put down the bottle with a slightly too hard blow, causing the guests at the table next to her to look up in their direction.

"So I owe it all to myself. That Bart left me, when he had a relationship with another woman and made her pregnant?"

'Thérèse, Bart put an end to that relationship, which is inextricably linked to the fact that you chose a long-distance relationship when he knew she was pregnant. Despite the fact that he wanted children, he distanced himself from his child and chose you. He did it because he loved you. Or at least thought he loved you and his life with you more than that other woman and his child. That was a sacrifice he made to you, out of love. But he never got anything in return and although it took years for him to realize this, he finally realized this and that dear Thérèse, meant the end of your marriage. And that he met that other woman again and realized that he loved her, that's a fact you can't change. Go back to Brussels, live your own life as you have always done and maybe one day you will meet a man you will love and to whom you can also show your love. And give Bart his luck with that woman and especially with the daughter he has always longed for.'

'You really think I didn't love Bart, do you? The opposite is true and I still love him. And I will always love him.'

'No Thérèse, I know you loved him in your own way and think you still love him. But you have always put your own interests first. And true love, dear Thérèse, means that it is important to you that the other person is also happy. In a loving relationship is giving and taking. And you have always taken alone and never given. If you really love him, as you say, let him be happy with his current life and leave him alone. And now that I'm on my way, keep a mirror in front of yourself. What did that incredibly important career for you ultimately bring you? Steem, power, money, encounters with powerful men, superficial friendships? Or satisfaction, love, understanding, people who love you?'

"We're not all like you. I am very satisfied with how my life has gone, appart for the divorce with Bart. And I have you as a good friend and my work. That's more than enough for me.'

"Okay, I believe you, sadly enough. Do what you want with it, but think carefully about my words.' And with these words, this subject had come to an end for both of them and they talked about neutral topics for the rest of the evening, both of which they might have taken their own points of view, but which were many times closer together than subjects about their emotional life.

How different Emma would have imagined this evening. She had hoped that she could tell her story about her experiences, the poverty she had seen, the mutual affection and friendship she had experienced with the rest of the crew, the gratitude of the people there and the good work that was done for the population. Although Emma had known deep down that this evening would revolve around Thérèse and she would show little interest in Emma's work.

As it had always been and would remain since Emma had given up her thriving career and successful company to start working in nursing.

Despite Emma's disappointment that Thérèse hadn't even thought for a moment to ask about her experiences in Africa, Emma was somehow happy that this evening had been about Thérèse as usual, so that she could have forgotten everything for a while. And because Thérèse would not have understood anything of her stories about the good work that was done by MercyShips, she had ultimately only been annoyed by Thérèse's lack of

understanding. As was often the case, Emma once again wondered what the binding factor was in their years of friendship and again she did not know the answer to this.

Habit? Because of the good old days, when they studied together and later each pursued their careers? Or maybe because they were both a bit of outsiders, liked to be on their own and didn't like to have people around them for a long time and therefore needed each other?

But while this last thought came to Emma's mind, she also wondered if that was actually still the case. Because on the ship she had been constantly surrounded by people and there had not been a moment when she had Disturbed.

And despite the fact that these people had a completely different vision of life because of their faith, Emma had not left out for a moment

Felt or a strange duck in the bite. Even the crowds on the streets and markets in Sierra Leone had not made Emma feel unpleasant.

Emma realized at that moment that not only Thérèse had to hold up a mirror to herself, but also herself. Because was the image she had of herself right? Could she really not live with someone? Or had she simply not yet been ready for a relationship before she met Ernst-Jan and had she fooled herself for years by telling herself that a relationship with a married man fit perfectly into her life? For fear of losing him otherwise.

Why has Thérèse been her best friend for so long, or rather: her only friend? Although John also fell more into the category of girlfriend than boyfriend and not so much because he was gay, but because he loved 'girlfriend conversations' as he always called it himself.

Why couldn't Emma build friendship with her colleagues? As she knew, they regularly met with each other in their spare time. Why didn't she be friends at the gym? Where she often saw women drinking a cup of coffee together after exercising, while Emma went home straight after exercise. Where no one was waiting for her.

These were a large number of question marks that Emma suddenly poured over herself about her own life, and Emma decided to find answers to these questions. And she suspected that the answer to some of these questions was hidden in Ernst-Jan's diary and her experiences in Africa.



## Chapter 11

Emma had another restless night. Since her return from Africa, so much had happened that she could hardly imagine that she had only landed forty-eight hours ago. She felt absolutely not fit when her alarm clock went off and was glad that she only had an early shift once that week.

She felt a little better after showering and having breakfast, and then got ready for the walk to work. It was still dark and normally Emma would have taken the subway to work, but she felt a strong need to feel the fresh wind blowing around her head, in the hope that she could then concentrate again on her daily activities in the ward where she was temporarily scheduled due to a short of hands at the bed.

She loved this early hour, when the city around her slowly came to life, although it seemed as if there were more people on the road every day at this early hour, and Emma occasionally looked back with melancholy on the days she often seemed to have the city to herself at this time. But that time was now far behind her.

After changing her clothes, Emma still had plenty of time to drink a cup of coffee before her service started, and immediately decided to put her previous evening's intention to be a little more social towards her colleagues into action and spontaneously responded to the invitation to participate in the walk 'walk against cancer' that was organized by the Erasmus MC Foundation to raise money for cancer research. To her surprise, no one responded in surprise to her commitment, not even when she suggested training together in preparation.

'I walk quite regularly myself, but with each other we might be able to increase the pace a little earlier.'

Everyone responded enthusiastically to her proposal and to Emma's relief, one of her colleagues offered to draw up a training schedule that matched their changing shifts, so she didn't have to do this.

A first step was taken in her intention to open up to her colleagues. And a sporting step was easier for Emma to take than to participate in the monthly drinks.

Satisfied, Emma started her work and once in the ward she was in a more cheerful mood than she had been wrong in months, or maybe years.

Later that week, Emma met Janneke in the fitness center. The last time she had seen and spoken to her had been after the funeral of Ernst-Jan. Emma actually wanted to keep distance from her, due to the fact that Janneke was a friend of Miranda, Ernst-Jan's wife been. But Janneke apparently thought differently about that and deliberately walked up to Emma as soon as she had her in her sights.

Janneke greeted Emma kindly and noted that she hadn't seen Emma in a long time. Emma said that because of her irregular shifts she now started training regularly during office hours because it was a lot quieter then.

'And I've been in Africa for a month,' Emma continued.

Janneke suggested that we have coffee or tea with each other after training, so that Emma could tell her all about her work in Africa.

When Emma had finished her training round and had showered, Janneke was already waiting for her with a glass of fresh mint tea with ginger and Emma ordered the same for herself.

After Emma had told full of surrender about her work on the ship in Sierra Leone, Janneke asked with noticeably sincere interest how Emma was doing now.

Before Emma answered this, she stirred in her glass in thought, and watched as the leaves of the fresh mint seemed to wither in the hot water. She struggled for a while with opening the bag of honey and after she had managed to put the honey in the glass, she hesitantly answered Janneke's question.

"I honestly don't know. Does it sound very strange when I say that I'm discovering for myself how I'm doing?"

To her surprise, Janneke shook her head. 'Oh, certainly not. Two years ago I felt exactly the same. I more or less reinvented myself. My marriage turned out not to be as good as I thought and my husband suddenly wanted to do very different things with his life than I had in mind. Until I slowly but surely came to the realization that what he wanted might not be such a bad idea at all. Although there was still some water flowing into the sea before it was time that we were back on the same page. Frankly, I had already put a divorce in place before it finally went well and to be honest commands me to say that it was Miranda who made me realize that I had to find space for forgiveness and asked myself if I might not have to change myself, but my way of life, as she herself had done to save her marriage.' Janneke took a sip of her tea and before she continued she took a deep breath. "I was rather focused on our family. We had hardly any friends, except for the girls I had always exercised with, and Victor had a friend with whom he sometimes went fishing. Boring doesn't even come close to the life we led and I didn't realize that this was enough for me, but no longer for my family. The boys had grown older by now and they were no longer waiting for me to mother them or on the usual walking holidays in Tyrol. Maybe later I'll tell you how our marriage crisis came about, but for now

I just want to make it clear to you that I also had to find out how I was doing. And now - two later - I can say that I am doing very well. And with my children and marriage. We do have friends now, undertake much more, I have given the boys the space and confidence to live their own lives and they have enough self-confidence given that they can do this too. I owe a lot to Bente and the friendship that has formed between us. I miss her very much and find it terrible what has happened.'

Emma didn't seem to know who Bente was, but then she remembered that this was the woman who had been in an affair with a drug dealer, which eventually led to the death of Ernst-Jan and Miranda.

Janneke suddenly seemed to realize that she had exposed herself to a woman she barely knew.

'That I'm telling you all this actually surprises me to a great extent. But it also confirms how much I've changed lately. Because introvert was still mildly expressed if you would describe me, and although I am still not exuberant and will never be, I am certainly a lot more social in dealing with other people.'

Janneke was suddenly aware that the comment about Miranda's role in saving her marriage must have been extremely painful for Emma, but it was too late to take back her words and apologies would only make it worse.

Emma decided to ignore Janneke's words, although they had indeed cut through her soul like a knife.

'Actually, I only have one friend, but she moved to Brussels at the beginning of her career and although we still have regular contact, the distance obviously affects our friendship. Then there is John, my support and trust, and with him I have embarked on my adventure in Africa. There he met Michael and Michael lives in Australia. I'm afraid John will go there soon and think he will then decide not to return to the Netherlands if things continue to go well between him and Michael. Then all Thérèse remains.' Emma herself heard how sad her words must have come across.

Janneke frowned for a moment when she heard Thérèse's name. Would the world really be so small that Emma had not only been the lovers of the husband of one of her friends, but her best friend the ex-wife of the boyfriend of her friend Nanda? Janneke wondered in surprise. Too curious to ignore this fact, Janneke asked if her friend had happened to be married to a man named Bart.

Now it was Emma's turn to react in surprise. 'Yes, why, do you know him then?'

'It sounds unlikely, but he's going to marry a good friend of mine soon.'

'Really? That must be with Denise's mother, Bart's daughter and her.'

'Is totally right. And to confuse you even more, because then you had everything right away: Denise went to Limburg with us as friends for a weekend. And during that weekend a lot happened, but it started with Denise finding out who her father was. Or actually I'm not saying that correctly, because that only came later. She discovered that she was not the result of a one-night stand - as her mother Nanda had always told her - but that Nanda had had a months-long relationship with him - Bart. Don't ask me what exactly underlyed it, but that was at least the beginning of Miranda's behavioral change. And whatever triggered her, Miranda then made the decision that she would contact her son and restore their relationship, and eventually wanted to go for her marriage too.'

It was all too much for Emma. 'So if Thérèse hadn't separated from Bart, Ernst-Jan and I would still have been together,' Emma concluded.

"Sliding Doors," Nanda would say. But you draw the wrong conclusion, because Denise would have gone looking for her father anyway. No, I think it was mainly that Miranda saw that this discovery had not had a negative impact on their mother-daughter relationship, and their bond and love for each other turned out to be big enough to come out stronger together. And in that Miranda had failed to her son and I think she only realized that then. Why she decided not only to restore contact with her son, but also wanted to save her relationship, I really can't tell you. So, I wasn't close with Miranda.'

"Is Bart happy or do you know?"

'Emma, I have rarely met a man who shows so clearly how happy he is.'

'I'm happy about that. He really deserves that and I wholeheartedly grant him this happiness.'

'Our lives seem a bit intertwined, don't they? But apart from that, I would like to go out for dinner somewhere together soon or something, at least if you like this too, don't feel obliged or anything.' Janneke cautiously suggested.

Emma felt the doubt whether she was doing well in her coming up.

Somehow she had no need to befriend a friend of her lover's wife, even though they were no longer alive. And the intertwining with Bart's bride-to-be also held her back.

But she thought Janneke was a nice woman and felt related to her in a certain way, so she finally agreed. Although this was not quite what she had in mind when she set out to be more social and would open up to making new friendships.

When she got home, she picked up Ernst-Jan's diary and began to continue reading. After reading the diary for more than an hour, she had not yet been able to discover anything that had created more clarity about their relationship. He described their encounters - which in the first months had been purely business-like - and his budding infatuation with Emma. But even this did not bring any new facts to light, because he had confessed all this once their relationship had started. Here and there he briefly described the cold and distant relationship he had with Miranda had, but this always stayed with short sentences such as: she is going out with her friends again; when I got home I didn't find my wife but the babysitter again, or; I think she threw herself into a flirtation again. Sometimes he wondered why he didn't divorce, but the answer was always the same: my son makes this bearable and as long as I don't suffer from her, I'll keep it. And I can't even afford to divorce myself - if I look at it purely business - because of the community in goods, if I want to keep my company financially healthy and the employees to work. Until Emma finally turned a page and changed the tone of his words. That was the day they had left their business relationship behind and gave in to the passion that had been hidden under their skin for months.

*I couldn't deny it anymore and today I gave in. Is it love? Is it desire? I don't know, buddy what I do know is that I'm in love and that this feeling turns out to be mutual. I can't put into words how I feel now, but it's very much like my son's adolescent crush on his first girlfriend. I am thrown back and forth by a feeling of bliss and uncertainty. Because I am married and although my wife has probably been unfaithful to me more than once over the years, a relationship with someone else is something different from a one-time slipper. Then there is a third in your relationship, whether your wife knows about it or not. Although it won't be difficult to keep this hidden from Miranda, because her interest in me apparently doesn't go much further than my bank account. No, my insecurity mainly concerns Emma, because I don't want to hurt her and she deserves to be more than a secret part of my life. But if my feelings for her turn out to be more than a crush and this is mutual, then I will probably consider leaving Miranda. Whatever the consequences may be.*

These last words of Ernst-Jan hit Emma like a bomb.

Never, but really never, she had suspected that he had been willing to leave his wife for her. He had never said those words and Emma wondered what the reason for that had been. The answer to this was probably found somewhere in his diary.

But Emma kept her promise to herself and put the book aside.

At another time she would continue reading it, but for this moment it had been enough and she had to process his words first before she would continue reading.

## Chapter 12

Six weeks had passed since Emma had read that Ernst-Jan was considering a divorce if their crush would turn to loving.

She had not yet had the courage to continue reading and expected that Janneke had regretted her spontaneous invitation to go out to eat somewhere together, because she had not called her to meet since their last meeting a few weeks ago at the fitness center.

The first walking trainings with a number of her colleagues had taken place, and although Emma had not yet been able to bring herself to go with them to the monthly drinks, the contacts in the workplace were clearly less distant than before.

John had suggested to Emma to go to Africa again in 2025 and Emma had agreed to this, on the condition that she could go to the OR and also participate in the fieldwork. John still had a lot of contact with Michael and he had told Emma that after the work in Africa he would not go home next year, but would go with Michael to Australia for a few months, to find out if their relationship could last there. He had apparently already arranged everything and Emma was looking forward to the moment when John would definitely leave for Australia.

Meanwhile, spring had finally signed up and Emma strolled leisurely after work to the park opposite the EMC, before taking the walk home. She loved to sit aimlessly on a bench to watch the people who stayed there, whether it was the joggers who passed by, people who walked their dogs or children who ran by exuberantly on their way to the playground.

She had been sitting for a while with her face towards the last rays of sunshine of that day, when she heard a warm voice - which she could not bring home but still seemed familiar to her - mention her name.

When she looked up she saw the silhouette of a tall man and after he stepped aside so that she no longer had to look at the sun, she recognized Ant, Ernst-Jan's notary.

'Hello, Emma, can I sit next to you for a moment?' He asked with even more warmth in his voice than during his first greeting.

Emma smiled and knocked on the bench, sign that he could sit down.

'I go here every day after work. At least in the months when it's a little longer light, because in the dark it doesn't really feel safe to walk or sit here,' Ant explained his presence in the park.

'I work in the EMC and live at the end of the Maasboulevard. I usually walk home except when I have late duty, but today I had

Feel like enjoying the first spring sun of this year. But of course you also work around the corner here. I also sat here for a while after I had been with you for the will of Ernst-Jan.'

Ant looked at her smiling. 'You probably couldn't wait until you got home to see what he had left you?' It was a rhetorical question and Emma didn't answer. 'Were you happy or disappointed with what he left you?'

'Well more confused. It is a diary that he has kept from the day of our first meeting. And a book, *Inferno* by Dante. I understand why he left the diary to me, but I have not yet figured out why he wanted to give me this book. It's an old book and probably owned by his family for generations, so it would have made more sense if he had left this to his son I think.'

'Has he left you his Dante?' Ant asked in surprise, creating the kind of hissing sound between his teeth that people often make when they are impressed by something. 'That book is not a family property, but was given to him by his best friend during his studies. They often had hours of conversations about religion, both from the religious and from the scientific point of view. They were as if mesmerized by both the stories about hell and damnation, as well as about heaven. Dante's *Inferno* was one of their favorite topics of conversation and when his friend turned out to be terminally ill, he donated the book to Ernst-Jan. It has always been one of his most precious possessions, although he has never again - with anyone - had a conversation about these topics. That he left this to you doesn't

really surprise me, but the moment he gave it to me in custody for you. I assume he expected to live for decades to come. I hope you will keep this book with the same love as it did. Although he will never have expected you to read it, it is rather heavy.'

'I once read it, but never understood it properly. I would have liked to have Ernst-Jan explain to me what the deeper thoughts behind it have been. But he never talked about this book, nor about his friend and the conversations he had with him about it.'

'I also personally think that he was not so much about Dante, heaven and hell, but that he enjoyed the discussions he had with his friend about it. Ernst-Jan was too much of a scientist to believe in anything that was not substantiated by facts. But I think you knew Ernst-Jan that way too.'

Emma enjoyed the moment when she could talk to someone who had known and loved Ernst-Jan, and she realized that this was even the first time in her life that this had happened.

She had wanted to continue this conversation for hours, but Ant got up and told her that to his regret he had an appointment and had to leave.

'Nice to talk to you, Emma, and who knows, maybe we'll meet here again in the future.'

Emma looked at him until he had disappeared from sight and then also got up to go home. She was happy with the short conversation with Ant, which not only made her know a new side of Ernst-Jan, but also made her feel comforted.

Probably because of her conversation with Ant, Emma felt the urge to continue reading when she got home. She picked up the diary and lost herself completely in the written words of Ernst-Jan.

Two hours later she had read a large part. Memories of places they had visited, conversations they had had and feelings they had shared came back to the surface as if it had happened yesterday.

She was regularly touched by his words, but when she turned the page that followed his story about their short vacation to Berlin, she was seized by a feeling of intense sadness.

*Has it only been three days since Emma and I came back from our trip? I wanted to tell her in Berlin that I want to leave Miranda. Whatever the consequences of this may be. My love for Emma is too great to continue this relationship in secret. I want her to be one hundred percent part of my life and not a stolen hour here and there. I had already ordered the champagne, and Emma brought us a toast. Even before I could say my words, she continued that she was so intensely happy with me. That I was the ideal partner, because - because I am married - I would never completely seize her. That she could just stay living alone and we could only share the good moments with each other. That it would never be a rush like that. That she knew that living together would always be difficult for her and therefore the situation was ideal.*

*I swallowed my words, comforted her for our future together, told her that I was happy, love her and agreed with her that our life and relationship was the best for both of us this way.*

*I couldn't sleep that night and lay in bed worryingly waiting for the first dawn. What if I left Miranda? Will Emma eventually choose to live together? Will it scare her off and will she end our relationship as a result? Will I be happier without Miranda, whatever the future with Emma would bring?*

*In the meantime, I have decided to stay with Miranda until our son is an adult and will leave the parental home. Because otherwise our divorce will only know one loser and that is him.*

Emma felt the tears run down her cheeks unnoticed and eventually burst into a loud sob. She had spoken in Berlin to make it clear to Ernst-Jan that she was happy with him and that she would never pressure him to leave Miranda.

How wrong she had estimated the situation and how much she had not lost with this. And the realization that - if Ernst-Jan had no longer lived in the same house with Miranda - he would still have been alive now was intolerable.

*Sliding Doors*, Wasn't it Janneke who said something like that recently?

Emma woke up in the middle of the night. She didn't know where she was for a moment and realized that she had fallen asleep in her chair with Ernst-Jan's diary on her lap. She felt a feeling of woeness in her stomach, which was not only caused by her forgetting to eat. Slowly, stiffened by the uncomfortable posture in which she had fallen asleep, she got up and walked to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea and spread some crackers. That's all her stomach could stand at that moment.

She took a seat on her seat by the window again and while trying with difficulty to get her crackers inside, she looked aimlessly out of the window at the water.

There were no ships at this time and there were also no cars passing by on the always busy Maasboulevard. The silver light of the full moon reflected in the water, and Emma was almost hypnotized by the glare that resulted in it.

She knew she wouldn't sleep that night and decided to take half a sleeping pill, because in the dark of the night thinking back to the words she had just read was more than she could bear at that moment.

## Chapter 13

Contrary to her expectations, Emma was not startled awake until eleven o'clock in the morning by the sound of her phone. Still half sleepy, she picked up her phone and saw that Thérèse was calling her.

Emma couldn't get the courage to have a conversation with Thérèse at the time and left the phone on until he stopped. She saw that Thérèse had recorded her voicemail and listened to the message.

It turned out to be just an announcement that Thérèse would come back to Rotterdam next week and want to talk to her.

She had asked if Emma wanted to discuss a restaurant.

Apparently it didn't happen to Thérèse to ask if Emma arranged that evening. Emma suppressed the tendency to tell her that she was prevented and decided not to respond to Thérèse's request later that day.

After taking a shower, Emma felt more energetic than she expected. But when she saw the diary next to her chair, she felt the tears well up in her again. She picked up the book and put it in a drawer where she rarely or never entered. She didn't want to be confronted with whatever it was that had to do with Ernst-Jan.

Emma didn't have to go to work that day and she decided to use the day for the necessary household chores and only go to the fitness center later that day.

She filled a bucket with detergent and slowly filled it with lukewarm water. Emma didn't like housework, but today it seemed to have a salive effect, and when she emptied the last bucket at three o'clock in the afternoon she had a satisfied feeling.

She poured herself a cup of coffee as a reward for the work done, and spread a sandwich that she topped with a thick slice of old cheese.

Despite her fatigue, Emma then decided to go to the fitness center, where after a short tour of the equipment she would pamper herself by using the sauna and the hot tub.

Normally Emma had too little patience to relax in the sauna after exercise, but she knew that this would have a beneficial effect on her night's sleep and she did not want to take another sleeping pill.

Emma started with a warm-up on the dirt bike and meanwhile listened through her iPods to the beat of techno music that urged her to kick harder and harder.

She was startled when she felt a hand on her shoulder and saw Janneke standing next to her. She took the iPods out of her ears and greeted Janneke with a smile.

After Janneke had seated next to Emma on the dirt bike, she immediately started a conversation.

'If I propose to go out for dinner together, it might be useful to exchange phone numbers, because I haven't seen you here anymore, and had no idea how to reach you,' Janneke opened the conversation.

Emma looked at her smiling and confessed that the thought had come to her mind that Janneke had regretted her proposal, and had not thought for a moment that they had indeed had to exchange their phone numbers.

'Why should I think of it?' Janneke asked with surprise in her voice.

'When I propose something like that, I really mean it, I'm not the type who just suggests this to everyone.' After which they exchanged their phone numbers and immediately agreed on a date.

On the way home, Emma was satisfied with herself. She took another step to boost her social life. And to leave her years with Ernst-Jan behind.

When she got home, she remembered Thérèse's request and reserved a table at Chung restaurant, which was right in the center and easily accessible.



She loved the French-Eastern fusion dishes they served and there was always a friendly atmosphere, which was not least due to the owner who always seemed to recognize his regular guests and came to greet them personally.

She didn't feel like speaking to Thérèse and sent her a message that she had reserved a table. The words that Thérèse wanted to speak to her did not cause any curiosity in Emma, because over the years she had become accustomed to this way of communicating through her friend. Wanting to talk to her generally meant nothing other than that she wanted to catch up during a dinner.

But Emma also knew that Thérèse didn't like WhatsApp messages. That was below her dignity or something, but Emma didn't care about that.

After fifteen minutes, Thérèse replied with the cool-feeling words: then we'll talk to each other there. And as often, Thérèse gave Emma the feeling that she had done something wrong and Thérèse would appeal to her about it.

Emma discovered that this feeling was not just a feeling this time as soon as she saw Thérèse enter the restaurant and could read from her face that Thérèse was irritated by something. The drinks were therefore barely put down for them that she burned loose.

'Since when are you friends with that silly wicht of Bart?'

Emma didn't understand her, because she had no idea what Thérèse was talking about. She had not met Bart in years and knew almost certainly that she had never met Bart's future wife before.

'I have no idea what you're talking about, so I'd appreciate it if you moderated your tone a bit, otherwise I'm gone,' Emma warned.

Thérèse bonded to it, but Emma could see that this was only because she didn't want to make a scene in public.

'First, tell me who Bart's girlfriend is, and why you think I'm friends with her.'

This was followed by an incoherent story about friends from the past who Thérèse had spoken and they had told her that the world was very small and Emma was now part of the group of friends of Bart his wife, although Thérèse used another word for future wife, which made Emma secretly smile because this word was generally not part of Thérèse's vocabulary.

'I still have no idea what you're talking about,' but as Emma said this, she suspected that this had something to do with her contact with Janneke, who had been friends with Bart's girlfriend for years.

Emma could not place how the story that Emma had become friends with that woman had emerged.

'Thérèse, I exercise with a woman who also knows Bart's girlfriend, that's all it is. And you have nothing else to do with that. I have never met that woman before and the chance of me meeting her is extremely small, unless I would meet her somewhere together with Bart. And even if I would have contact with her, you have nothing to do with it. Bart is a closed chapter for you.'

'Yes, just like Ernst-Jan for you a closed chapter is for sure,' Thérèse sneered.

'Touché, you have a point. But I would never talk to you about it if you had contact with a friend of his.'

'That's different, I wouldn't have any problems with it if you were friends with a friend of Bart's. But with his girlfriend. I would never befriend Ernst-Jan's wife.'

'That will also be difficult because she is also dead,' Emma bit. 'Thérèse, what is this conversation? We look like two women from such a soap opera, this is not how you are at all. How we are.'

'Emma, I know. But I can't stand the fact that Bart is getting married and is happy. And when I heard that my best friend is also friends with her, the stops hit me.' There was still anger in Thérèse's voice, but Emma wasn't sure if it was directed at her any longer.'

'If you should be angry with someone, it's at yourself. If you had ever wondered if Bart was lucky and you had shown in any way that you loved him and had also taken his life and career into account, then we would not have had this conversation now. But I've told you this so many times that it's getting annoying. So you can choose, you keep your mouth out of it from now on, or this was our last dinner together. Thérèse, try to be a little more empathetic. Show genuine interest in someone. You will see that it will make your life much more fun.'

However, Emma's words didn't seem to make any impression on Thérèse and in a haughty tone she said she had no idea what Emma was talking about. She was convinced that she always showed interest in everyone.

'Thérèse, let's enjoy the food and from now on we will keep our topics of conversation with things that make us both comfortable, such as the books we have read, concerts we have attended and the political and social developments in the world. But I don't go into personal conversations with you. Not about your life and certainly not about my life anymore.'

Thérèse seemed to want to respond to this, but swallowed her words at the last minute, after which the conversation between them continued for the rest of the evening on general topics. And although the evening had continued without irritation, Emma knew that something had changed in their friendship that evening.

No, that wasn't the right conclusion, Emma thought to herself. I finally see what our friendship consists of. And that's very little.

## Chapter 14

Spring had passed into summer, although there had not really been any summer days due to the rain that had seemed to have been coming out of the sky continuously for months. Emma had - since she had been able to read in the diary that Ernst-Jan had wanted to leave his wife for her - not looked at the diary for weeks and then sporadically read a few pages.

After his shocking words, there were hardly any notable events mentioned in his diary, except for the fact that Miranda had apparently entered into a long-term relationship with a man, which had led to a breakup with her son and Ernst-Jan hoped that a possible discovery by his son that he had been in a long relationship with Emma would not lead to such a breakup either.

And then came the moment when Miranda had come to the realization that she wanted to save her marriage. And as unlikely as this may seem after reading the previous pages, Emma now knew that this had eventually happened.

A voice in her told her not to read this further, but she could not resist the temptation to do so. Even though she was aware that this would undoubtedly arouse a lot of emotions in her.

*Miranda contacted our son Niels. I am glad to hear that they want to restore their contact and have agreed to have lunch together. I've told Niels so many times that I don't care that Miranda had an affair with another man and that I don't understand that he cares. Two years of no contact with your mother is quite long and I sincerely hope that they will get out together. I think it would be nice if I could receive my son back in my own house and not always have to meet somewhere together.*

Emma knew how much Ernst-Jan had found it that due to the broken contact between Miranda and Niels, he himself had also had less contact with Niels and had been very happy for him when he told him that he saw Niels again a little more often.

The fact that he first wrote something in the diary that was not about his relationship with Emma proved once again how happy he was with this.

Emma wanted to put the diary aside, but after her eyes fell on the words: festively covered and good bottle of wine, she decided to continue reading anyway.

*Yesterday was the most absurd day of my life. I came home tired after a busy day with a busy schedule and found Miranda in the kitchen.*

*In itself, that's a fact that it's worth mentioning, but she had also prepared my favorite dish and picked out a good bottle of wine.*

*The table was festively set and I wondered if I had overlooked an important date.*

*Guests were not expected, because the table was set for two people. Actually, I was not in the mood for something like that and would have preferred to retire to my room, assuming that Miranda wanted to use my credit card soon for an indispensable purchase or a trip with one of her friends, and wanted to spawn me. But nothing was less true. The conversation began with her lunch with Niels. He had told her that her lover had only been the straw that had made the bucket overflow and made it clear to her how she had failed her task as a mother.*

*I could only be happy that my son had clearly stated the true reasons for the breakup, but that he was open to a cautious attempt to restore contact.*

*At first I assumed that this was the reason for this festive evening, but this turned out to be a stepping stone to the real reason: Mrs. has decided that she wants to save our marriage! That she wants to build a normal relationship and she even talked about a loving relationship.*

*No idea where this suddenly comes from and I have made it clear to her in no misunderstood words that it will take something more than setting the table and cooking for me. Whether she really expects that things could ever be okay between us. But especially that my love for her has died slowly but surely over the years and that I do not expect that I would ever be able to have any sense of love for her.*

*I saw the surprise and disappointment on her face, I didn't care about it and wished her a good night, after I had told her that I had a tiring day. When I got to my bedroom, I called Emma. I had to hear her voice and wanted to tell her what had happened that night.*

*But the words stuck in the back of my throat, I couldn't possibly tell her that Miranda wanted to revive our marriage. Because that would only make her unnecessarily restless and hearing her voice was enough for me to feel a little better again.*

*Because honesty commands me to admit that Miranda did unleash something on me tonight.*

Emma had read his last sentence three times, but it was really there. Ernst-Jan was apparently receptive to his wife's charm offensive from the first moment. And Emma knew before they read on, that it would not be long before she would read that Ernst-Jan would open up to the restoration of their relationship. At first, Emma decided not to read any more, but eventually she chose to do so. Tonight until the last page. Then take off the band-aid in one go, she thought to herself. Maybe she opened the wound with this, but then he could heal once and for all. A large number of pages followed in which Miranda's name was not mentioned and it was mainly about the relationship between Emma and Ernst-Jan, the things they had undertaken together and the conversations they had had with each other. But soon pages followed, in which Miranda's name seemed to occur more and more often.

*I'm going to be a grandfather, which automatically means that Miranda is going to be a grandmother. To my surprise, she is completely in love with this and not a word about how she will feel so old now. I have to admit that a completely different Miranda has revealed herself to me in recent weeks.*

*She now even works one day a week as a volunteer at the food bank and instead of buying unnecessary things and expanding her wardrobe, she is now 'unclogging' as it's so beautifully called nowadays. Together with her friend Bente, she will auction her excess clothes for charity.*

*Of course, this resolution got a bit out of hand and they are now also collecting clothes from other friends, and the front room is now furnished as a pop-up store.*

*Our conversations are also less tense and distant, although there are certainly no warm or intimate conversations. I notice that all this comes at the expense of the time I can spend with Emma and she has already made a comment about this a few times. I try to answer this a bit evasively, but know that Emma won't let herself be sent with a lump in the reeds much longer.*

Emma could still remember well that she experienced that Ernst-Jan seemed to make less time for her, but at first she had no suspicion, assuming that he was busy because he had managed to bind a new large account. She had been very happy for him that he would become a grandfather and there had already been the alarming thought in her head that this grandparenthood might strengthen the bond between him and Miranda. Emma warmed up a cup of soup, poured some drink and after devouring this simple meal, she continued reading.

Again, a large number of pages followed that were mainly about his love for Emma, until she stumbled upon what without any doubt meant the turning point of the relationship with Emma.

*Saturday evening Miranda came home late from a party she had celebrated with her sports friends. She didn't come down until late in the morning and it was clear that she had a huge hangover. Now I've been annoyed by her excessive drinking for years, but I couldn't help but say something about it this time.*

*To my surprise, she remained quite calm under my comment and even promised to limit her drinking to the weekends and during dinners and parties. Whether she also understands the daily meals by dinners left in the middle, and I let the subject rest for now.*

*Then she suggested that we go golf together. Emma is going to her friend in Brussels this weekend and I couldn't think of an excuse to refuse so quickly.*

*In the end it was not an unpleasant afternoon, although there was a serious conversation during a drink on the terrace, which ended in Miranda's question if I thought she should go into therapy. I admitted that maybe it wasn't a bad idea to find out why she always behaved the way she had behaved in recent years.*

*To my shock and surprise, I continued that we could only make something of our relationship if she adjusted her behavior, and only the words that she regretted her past behavior and that she still loved me were not enough.*

*She then asked me what made me happy. And I told him that a woman who when I get home from work asks with interest how my day has been would make me happy. And not a woman who paints her nails in the meantime.*

*A woman who spends her time usefully and not only shopping and lunches with her friends, a woman who understands that I have sometimes had a tired or difficult day at work. A woman who occasionally surprises me and fills the bath when I get up tired from work and who makes sure every day that there is a decent meal on the table and does not put a note on the table that I just have to order something through the internet or go out to eat.*

*That these simple things would make me happy. I think I said a lot more, but the essence was clear: Only last night when I had retired to my room something else became clear to me: that all those things I mentioned that would make me happy, Emma could not offer me in her role as mistress, and according to her own words, she could never offer me more than that.*

Without reading any further, Emma knew that had been the moment when their relationship changed, when Ernst-Jan realized what would really make him happy. Emma had dug her own pit by telling him several times that she liked to be on her own and would never be able to live with anyone.

And she also knew that Miranda had eventually managed to offer him, to where he had always longed for: a real family life.

*For the first time in years, I was able to listen with genuine interest to a story of Miranda and how she had spent her day. She now works for the food bank for several days and through a conversation with a lady who was dependent*

*Of the help of the food bank, she finally seemed to see what a privileged life she could always have led and what an aimless existence.*

*She said she was finally going to understand what being happy means. And after these words, I spontaneously gave her a kiss on her forehead for the first time in years. A small but intimate gesture that shocked me myself and gave me a huge guilt towards Emma.*

Emma let this last sentence sink in for a while. Of course she knew that Ernst-Jan had chosen Miranda and she had noticed that their relationship at that moment was no longer what it had been for the past ten years, but now she had insight into the process that had caused this.

And despite everything, she slowly but surely came to see how this could have happened. And that she had also been indebted to that.

*Yesterday I spent the evening and night with Emma. I only let Miranda know that I would not come home that night, without giving a reason, and she did not ask for this either.*

*When I woke up, I asked how Emma would feel if I woke up next to her every morning, but a spontaneous reaction such as: "great" or: "delicious" was not left.*

*She looked at me thoughtfully and then asked where this suddenly came from. I replied that that question had just spontaneously occurred to me.*

*'Dear that doesn't fit in our lives, that's just how it is. But that's why I love you no less.'* And after these words she jumped out of bed to go get coffee for us, leaving me desperate.

And once again Emma had the opportunity to choose for her let slip out of her hands. Why hadn't she responded spontaneously that she would like that?

She didn't know if it was because of her reaction, but the times he wrote about Emma became more and more sporadic and Miranda's name slowly but surely took over the story.

*Miranda had already hinted a few times on a joint holiday and although this is really a bridge too far for me, under pressure from Niels I admitted and booked a cruise.*

*This seems to me the safest way to spend the holidays together. You are constantly surrounded by other people during a cruise and we can also go a bit of our own way on board the ship.*

*The biggest problem for me is sharing the bed. We don't have our own bedroom, but we do have separate beds, and now sharing a bed together is really too intimate for me, so I reserved a cabin with two separate beds.*

*I haven't told Emma yet.*

And you never did that either, Emma, who had become angry with him by now, thought to herself. Why would she continue reading? She had found the answer by now.

She herself had not caught the signals that Ernst-Jan wanted a normal relationship. Again and again, Emma had given the impression that this was not her wish. They had never expressed their true feelings for each other.

Miranda had done this and she had won.

*The cruise I was looking forward to was actually very relaxed. Miranda and I agreed that we got a little closer and although I warned her that we are far from there and I can't make any promises for the future, I did come to realize that I have to make a decision for myself: If I want to give my marriage an honest second chance, then I have to be honest with Emma and I owe it to her, Miranda and myself to break the relationship with Emma.*

*If I choose a relationship with Emma, I have to be honest and divorce Miranda.*

*But I know I'm not suitable for a relationship like Emma has in mind with each having their own household and doing fun things together.*

*As paradoxical as this sounds, given the fact that Miranda and I may share a household, but for years no more than that: through Miranda I have come to realize that I long for a normal relationship. House, tree, animal.*

*Especially now that we are being grandparents. I enjoy the moments we spend as a real family with our son and future daughter-in-law. There is nothing more beautiful for me. And I started to love Miranda again. Maybe more than I've ever loved her in our relationship. But Emma doesn't deserve this and I can't afford to make her grief.*

'But you did Ernst-Jan', Emma whispered as the tears slid silently down her cheeks. She saw that only a few pages were written. She knew what was coming now, because after all she had been there herself.

*My heart is crying. I still don't know if I did well, if I made the right choice. Time will tell, but I owe it to all three of us to make a choice.*

*But this doesn't mean I don't love Emma anymore or can just delete the past ten years from my life with her. I will need a lot of time to fully open up to a new life with Miranda. But I can only give this a chance if I have put a line under my relationship with Emma, and that's what I did today.*

These last words let Emma penetrate. She remembered how surprised she had been, despite the fact that she had noticed that things were no longer as they had once been. But she didn't see this coming then. She really expected that Ernst-Jan and she would continue on the same footing forever and would have remained satisfied with that.

That they would age together this way. But nothing turned out to be less true. In his letter, Ernst-Jan had promised that after reading his diary she would understand things. Of course she understood that family life had been important to him and perhaps also the decisive reason for his choice.

But she could never understand the fact that the happy years with Emma had not weighed for him, against the whims of his selfish and fickle wife.

## Chapter 15

### 2025

Emma got up for the birthday party at Janneke's. Janneke had confessed to her that it was only the second party in her life - not counting her wedding party - that she had organized. And objectively, this was even the first party, because the housewarming party they had given last year was largely organized by Bente.

Emma had initially turned down the invitation, but Janneke had seen through the real reason for it. 'This of course feels uncomfortable for you, because my sports friends have also been invited and will undoubtedly all come with their partner. And they were also friends of Miranda and then one of them is also married to Bart and their daughter and son-in-law also come. So I get it, if you don't want to come. I really don't blame you. But your relationship with Ernst-Jan has been over for quite some time now. Think of this as a definitive confirmation that you were able to close that period for yourself a few months ago. And you don't owe your girlfriend Thérèse anything and I think you'll enjoy meeting Bart again after all these years. And honestly admit that you are very curious about his wife and daughter.'

Emma had let herself be persuaded after Janneke's argument and if she was honest there was some form of truth in it.

After reading the last pages in the diary, she had felt sad for a few days, but in the end it had worked like a liberation and she had indeed been able to leave that period reasonably behind, and did not think back to it too often.

She now met regularly with her colleagues, had built up a fairly close friendship with Janneke and opened herself up to a new relationship. Not that there was that at the moment, but she no longer felt the urge to run away from every man who paid a little attention to her.

John had told her that he was super proud of her and she honestly admitted that her work in Africa in particular had led to this. Because that had been the first step in the discovery that she didn't want to be alone at all. That she was not slightly autistic at all, as John had once accused her, when she once again refused to go to a party. She had seen the light in Africa not only literally but also figuratively. She was therefore very much looking forward to her next trip to Africa.

Although there was also a sad side to it, because John would not travel back to the Netherlands with her, but leave for Australia for a year, where he had received a work permit and would live with Michael, in the hope of obtaining a permanent residence permit.

Emma had dressed up three times before she left the door. Except for Janneke, no one knew about the relationship she had had with Ernst-Jan, and yet she wanted to measure herself with Miranda in terms of appearance.

Miranda may have been an outgoing and exuberant woman, Emma knew that she had always dressed expensive and chic, but simply. Emma therefore chose black jeans and a white silk blouse. Finally, she put on her white leather sneakers, because she would probably spend much of the evening standing.

Emma called Nervously. She already heard some voices so she was fortunately not the first guest to arrive, but still early enough so that she did not enter a room that was already full of guests.

Janneke introduced her and told her that they knew each other from the fitness center. Fortunately, no one seemed to remember that she had also been to the funeral of Ernst-Jan and Miranda.



To her regret, Bart had not yet arrived, because then at least she would have seen a familiar face with whom she could talk. But soon she got into an animated conversation with a woman who had introduced herself as Liberra.

'What a special name', Emma had noticed, followed by a pleasant conversation about Italy, where the original name came from and Liberra told Emma about her Italian roots.

Slowly but surely more and more people trickled in, and Emma saw a big attractive blonde man walking up to her. She had known Bart since her twenties, but she was surprised to see how relaxed and visibly happy he looked now. For example, she had never known him and his second marriage, or perhaps the family life he had always needed so much, had clearly done him good.

'Emma, how nice to see you,' he greeted her, as he grabbed her to give her a well-meaning hug, and introduced her to his wife Nanda.

When Nanda asked what they knew each other from, he was by no means embarrassed and said that Emma had been friends with Thérèse since her studies.

Emma looked at Nanda expectantly how she reacted to this, but like Bart, she didn't seem upset by this and only asked how she had ended up here at this party. Emma said she knew Janneke from the fitness center and Nanda noted that she liked that Janneke really seemed to have crawled out of her shell and made new friends.

'Janneke was always very much on her own and had difficulty making contact with people, but fortunately that has changed. Although a few things have preceded this,' Nanda said, without going into further detail.

Janneke had told Emma about her marital problems not long after their introduction and that Victor had been in a relationship with another woman. Victor had also eventually chosen for his family, and although his demands on Janneke had been of a completely different nature than those Ernst-Jan had set for Miranda, Janneke had also realized that she could not continue to live on the same footing.

If Miranda had to become a bit more homely and pay more attention to her family, it was necessary for Janneke that she had to let go of her children a little more and open up to a more social life.

The evening was fun and Emma never had the feeling that all those people around her were too much for her and she wanted to go home.

When the bell rang at ten o'clock, Janneke looked surprised, because she no longer expected anyone. She hoped that there were no angry neighbors at the door because of the nuisance of too loud music, but Victor reassured her because they had informed the neighbors in advance and even invited them. Victor walked to the door to see who had called, and when he came back there was a painful silence.

'Bente?' Janneke walked to the tiny woman who had appeared shyly in the doorway.

When Emma heard this name, she looked up in horror. Emma felt like the ground was sliding away under her. She could have met Miranda's friends. She had enjoyed meeting Bart's wife and daughter, even though she knew Thérèse would blame her for this. But suddenly there was the woman who was indirectly responsible for Ernst-Jan's death.

Suddenly everyone seemed to start talking at the same time and the sound was sucked into Emma's ears like a vacuum. She heard a voice next to her whispering asking if the bullets would soon fly around their ears, but this misplaced joke was clearly not appreciated.

In the meantime, a number of Janneke's friends had surrounded Bente and she was brought in as a lost sister.

Janneke had told the whole story surrounding Bente's romance to Emma, and it soon became clear to Emma that Bente had also been a victim in this whole affair and that she had nothing to blame. But this science was not consistent with Emma's feeling.

Emma regretted that she had accepted Janneke's invitation and knew that she should never have allowed herself to become part of Miranda's life. It all came too close, while she

had just distanced herself from her life with Ernst-Jan. But why did the friendship with Janneke and her friends feel so familiar?

Emma was shocked by Bart's voice asking her if she was okay.

'Yes, thank you. I think maybe I drank a little too much,' Emma replied not entirely according to the truth, after which Bart told her that Nanda and he would take her home, because Nanda had not drunk alcohol, so she could play nicely for the Bob.

Emma did not dare to refuse this and thanked him for the offer, after which she poured herself another glass of wine. If she had told me that she had drunk too much, she might as well have a few more wines.

Janneke was visibly happy that her friend was back and put her arm in Bente's and so they walked together to the rest of their friends, who fired a fire of questions at Bente, but Bente told them briefly that she didn't want or could tell anything about the past year.

Mirthe asked if it was safe to be back in the Netherlands, but Bente assured her that she did not have to worry about that and her return had been fully in consultation with the police.

Emma heard Bente ask why Ana was not at the party and she was told that she was staying at the Costa del Sol for a few months to spend the winter there. Emma saw Bente shudder and knew that the words Costa del Sol would evoke in her memories of the holiday she had spent there with her boyfriend and he had hidden drugs in Bente's luggage. Fortunately, it soon became clear that she was innocent, but her testimonies had led to the cases escalating, resulting in the death of Miranda and Ernst-Jan after a fatal attack on their house, which the criminals thought Bente was staying there.

Bente replied stoically that she was surprised that Ana had given in to her husband's desire to spend the winter, since Ana had always resisted this because she would miss her grandchildren.

As if nothing had ever happened, the friends seemed to continue their conversations.

'So Emma, I think we also have a lot to discuss,' she heard Bart say next to her and Emma looked at him gratefully.

'Yes, it's been a long time since we talked. But I was able to hear the whole story about your new happiness from Janneke. Or should I say, your old happiness? Have you ever regretted the choice you made in the past, or would you rather not talk about it?'

'Yes, I even think I'd like to talk about that with you sometime, but only if we can talk together undisturbed during lunch or something.'

'That sounds nice to me, but won't Nanda find that annoying? I mean, I've been your ex-wife's best friend.'

'No, she won't mind at all. But what do you mean by been? Surely there has been no end to your years of friendship, has it?'

'Also a long story. But I'll tell you all that during lunch,' after which they exchanged phone numbers with each other and Bart promised to contact her soon to make an appointment.

Janneke came to Emma and whispered in her ear asked if she wanted to be introduced to Bente. Against her will, Emma agreed to this and walked back to the group of women together with Janneke.

'Bente, this is Emma, I met her at the fitness center you were also a member of, Emma this is Bente. Bente, if you become a member of us again, you will undoubtedly meet there'

'Hi, Emma, nice to see you again. I still recognize you from the period you worked at Ernst-Jan,' after which all eyes were focused on Emma in amazement.

Emma felt the blood flow to her head and had to get up for a while before she could answer this.

'Oh yes, Ernst-Jan. It's been a long time since I had him as a customer,' Emma tried to answer in a calm voice. 'That's certainly, think about it, about twelve to fifteen years ago. That you still recognize me. I must honestly admit that I can't remember you.'

'Ernst-Jan was always full of praise for you and regularly said that the company was put on the map internationally thanks in part to you. As a result, I was curious about you and our meeting during a Christmas drink always stayed with me. We then talked to each other for quite a long time about the changed international business climate. Our work had quite a lot of interfaces and I then invited you for lunch to see if we could do something for each other in business. But that never happened.'

Bente had sounded very neutral and Emma did not get the impression that she had ever suspected that Emma had been more than a business relationship of Ernst-Jan.

She felt that Janneke - who was aware of her relationship with Ernst-Jan - was a bit uncomfortable with the situation and tried to give the conversation a different turn.

'Girls, when is our next joint trip planned? At the end of the summer again?'

'Janneke, this is really the first time you're the first to start about it. But now that we are together and this does not happen very often anymore, what did you think of going to Hamburg or Berlin together in early September?' Mirthe suggested that - as it soon became clear - was generally the one who organized the trips.

'Well, I'd rather be a little closer to home. I still don't have a money tree in my garden,' grumbled Tooske, who was the oldest of the couple and was preparing herself financially for her approaching retirement.

Emma listened with interest to how the discussion about where and when unfolded and was surprised that they so easily agreed with each other within fifteen minutes that they would go to Friesland on the weekend of the end of June to cycle part of the Elfstedentocht there.

'Are you going too?' Mirthe asked spontaneously to Emma and Bente.

Emma and Bente didn't seem to immediately understand that the question was intended for them. Bente immediately reacted enthusiastically, but Emma was a little more conservative in her commitment and said that she had to think about it for a while, while she wondered how Miranda would have reacted if she had known that her friends seemed to include her husband's mistress so easily in their group.

And it almost felt like revenge on Miranda for Emma, when she spontaneously said: 'Oh, why not. I think it would be nice to get to know you better.' Emma noticed that not everyone responded equally enthusiastically to the fact that she had accepted Mirthe's invitation, and quickly said after it: 'if at least you all agree with that, because I understand that Mirthe is not the only one who decides on this.'

'Well, then you don't know Mirthe yet, because her will is law when it comes to our annual trips,' Tooske remarked, after which everyone nodded in agreement and Mirthe, ignoring Tooske's comment, indeed said that that was arranged and she would get to work with it.

## Chapter 16

The next morning Emma woke up with a hangover, which had not happened in a long time. She looked back on the evening with mixed feelings, because it had been pleasant only the arrival of Bente had unleashed quite a bit, and she also regretted her commitment to go cycling in Friesland. But she could still change the latter. Bente's return was a different story, and because she was convinced that Bente would become a member of the fitness center again, Emma would undoubtedly meet her there regularly.

She looked at her watch and saw that it was time to get ready for her appointment with John, who was always punctual. They had agreed to prepare today for their new trip to Africa, which would take place next month.

As expected, John arrived neatly at the agreed time and Emma poured a cup of coffee for both of them.

'Honey, you look so wrinkled.'

'Mmm, yes had a party yesterday and it was not only late, but

I also drank a little too much. My car is still at Janneke's door and you can drop me off there this afternoon so I can pick it up.'

John wanted to know everything about the birthday party and Emma told him that Miranda's friends were also there and that they had invited her to go with them to Friesland in June.

John laughed and wanted to be a fly on the wall to be there. 'Emma, it's very good to finally live a normal life with parties and friends. But is it wise to choose Miranda's friends for that?'

'John, it's getting even worse, because do you know who was there and is also going along? Bente, the ex-girlfriend of that drug dealer and Miranda's best friend.'

John, who did like some excitement, looked at her in horror. "Emma, you don't mean that. In what kind of farce have you maneuvered again? I don't know if you're doing that wisely. You are finally rid of that grief for Ernst-Jan and then you suddenly surround yourself with people from his life. Or at least, his wife's life, 'God have her soul',' John spoke with the necessary sense of drama.

'Well I liked the women and really felt a click with them. And the name Miranda didn't fall all night. Although I felt a little uncomfortable when Bente recognized me from a party at Ernst-Jan's a long time ago when we were just in a relationship. Or proportion, as you have always continued to call it. It seems that we talked to each other for a whole evening and we even agreed to have lunch together. I can vaguely remember something about it and I suspect that I stopped the boat at the time, because I had discovered that she turned out to be not so much a business relationship of Ernst-Jan, but a friend of his wife.'

'And then you're going away with her for a weekend,' John noted in surprise.

'Yes, and Bart's wife is going too,' Emma added.

'Thérèse will like to hear that,' was the graying reaction of John, who had never been very fond of Thérèse.

'I only speak to her sporadically and if you keep your mouth shut she doesn't have to find out.'

'I'm silent like the grave,' John promised, making a gesture of closing a zipper along his mouth. 'But Emma, think carefully before you continue with this.'

Emma promised that, after which they bowed to their new trip to Africa. John and Michael had decided to put another two weeks of vacation on the trip to get to know the country better before they left for Australia, and John asked Emma if she wanted to consider going with them. Emma didn't have to think long about that and she promised that she would see the next day if she could plan this in her schedule.

Bart called a few days after the party and they had agreed to have lunch at restaurant Zeezout, a haute-cuisine fish specialty restaurant in the shipping district of Rotterdam. Emma had dressed for the occasion in a black sleeveless dress with a matching white jacket that she had recently bought, but there had been no suitable occasion to wear this before. Gallant as always, Bart was waiting for her at the door and they walked inside together, where the waiter accompanied them to their table.

They both decided to order the chef's surprise menu, with the matching wine arrangement. After the waiter had taken their order, Emma told how nice she was to see Bart again after all these years. And that she was happy for him that he seemed so happy with Nanda.

'Thank you, Emma, for getting straight to the point: I've never been as happy and satisfied with my life as I am now and I don't understand how I was able to let her go and abandon her and my child. Sometimes I still can't believe that Nanda was able to forgive me for this and Denise opened up from the first meeting to admit me as a father into her life, when I didn't deserve all this.'

'Bart, you are the nicest and nicest man I know and you have earned this happiness like no other. And you were so young when it all happened. The most important thing is that everything turned out well for you. And Nanda knew you were married, so there was always a risk that you would choose your wife. Although your moment of choice was a bit badly timed when Nanda turned out to be pregnant.'

'I'll be honest with you: no, Nanda didn't know I was married. I had never told her and the chance she would find out was minimal since I lived my life in Rotterdam and Thérèse in Brussels. Which in itself was of course a very unhealthy situation. I was also not at all ready for fatherhood at that time and that must have been partly the cause of my eventual flight to Brussels. The good thing about it was that Thérèse and I finally came to a normal relationship together as husband and wife. I don't have to tell you how that ended. And I didn't meet Nanda again until well after our divorce. I think my sister Juliette was indebted to this, but I can only be grateful to her for that. I still regret missing so many years of Denise's life, but I'm grateful for the years I still have with her. And Nanda has delivered a top performance by raising her on her own.'

'Was Nanda still a single mother?'

'Yes, she says she never forgot me and no man could match me. Although she was in ancipient relationship when we met again. But that would never have become a successful relationship even without my intervention. Nice guy, that Joost, but not the right person for Nanda. But he is now very happy with a sister of Tedje, one of Nanda's friends, who was not present at Janneke's party. End good, all good I will say. And how is it with you? I hardly dare to ask, but had your relationship with Ernst-Jan already ended when he came to death? At the time, I assumed your relationship was over when he asked Miranda to resume their marriage promise with a big party. But that wasn't really based on anything, because I never showed him that I was aware of your relationship.'

Emma had not realized until that moment that Bart had obviously been aware of her extramarital relationship with Ernst-Jan. And she began to realize more and more that their lives seemed to be intertwined like a tangle of wool.

'Yes, he dumped me first and only then dive back into the suitcase with Miranda.' Emma herself heard the sarcasm in her answer resound, but sarcasm was much better than sadness.

She saw that Bart couldn't get a smile after her last comment.

'Well, that was kind of neat of him.'

Emma didn't know whether or not Bart meant this mockingly, but to her own surprise she did agree with him. 'You're right. That was neat of him I think in retrospect. Both to me and to Miranda. Although I would never have admitted this two years ago. But you do have a point, he was correct enough not to eat from two wallets at the same time.'

'I don't know the nice thing about Emma, but I did understand that he didn't go over one night and didn't just throw himself into Miranda's arms, although she could be very convincing to others. I think the fact that they became grandparents and family was the most important thing in his life, made him make this choice. But that was just my view of the situation, I never talked to him about it. I was too busy with my own love life. Although I once considered meeting him, because I realized what the shoe was wrong for him and I was the only one who could suspect that he was struggling with the fact that Miranda wanted to save their marriage and his relationship with you. Although it took me a while to understand that your Ernst-Jan and the Ernst-Jan of Miranda were one and the same person.'

'Bizarre, isn't it? I mean how the events in our lives turn out to be connected and I'm here having lunch with you now.'

'Ah, the world is small and mathematical research by Johan van Leeuwen of TU Eindhoven has - if I remember correctly - shown that everyone is only six handshakes away from every world citizen. That was already a suspicion at the beginning of the last century, but I believe they have been able to prove this due to the arrival of Facebook.'

'That you know all this, Bart, but it's true when you look at my life.'

'Yes, this is such a fact that I have ever read somewhere and have stuck. And I had a teacher who was also called Johan van Leeuwen, so I think that's why I saved that name in my memory.'

Meanwhile, their first dish was served and they enjoyed the fresh raw tuna with cucumber and wasabi ice cream, and the glass of chablis served by the sommelier.

'So, and now tell me how it is with Thérèse, because I understood from you on Saturday that your friendship has cooled.'

'Yes, I think that's the right wording, cooled. We don't have a fight, but there have been too many irritations lately. I couldn't stand her selfish behavior anymore. That she never really had any interest in another, she looks at her whole life from her own ivory tower. And when I approached her about that a few months ago, she didn't seem to understand what I wanted to make clear to her, and that was that she would never be happy this way.'

'I don't think there is anyone walking around this globe who can make Thérèse realize that happiness is more than wealth and power. That your career is only a part of your life and not the main goal. How many years have I not tried to show her that our love was more important than her work. I never succeeded, you will never succeed and made me, perhaps far too late, make the decision to divorce. So put up with it and don't bother with it, or distance yourself from your friendship. Friendship should not be maintained because of the good old days. And just as a man and a woman can grow apart, this can also happen with friends. You shouldn't be dramatic about that, just accept it.'

'I do agree with you, but you don't tell friends that you want to divorce them, then you get more the situation that a friendship is slowly dying. But Thérèse and I have been each other's only friends for years, as bizarre as this sounds. And now that I've spread my wings, as it were, I see it as a betrayal to abandon her.'

'That's your own choice. But don't bother her anymore and don't try to change her mind. Because then you are disappointed and she will never understand that other things in life are more important to you than your career. She will never understand why you sold a thriving company and she thinks you wasted your talents by working in healthcare. And it's a waste of time trying to convince her that she's wrong.'

Emma realized that Bart knew her girlfriend like no other and he was right. She will have to accept Thérèse as she was or the friendship must indeed die a silent death.

'You're right, and now I want to hear the whole story of yours about how you met your daughter and how the romance between you and Nanda was revived.'

Bart spent the remaining time of lunch extensively to comply with Emma's request.

She thought it was one of the most romantic stories she had ever heard and gave her hope to believe that a new love was in the way for her too. And although it was too late to start her own family, maybe she could one day be a nice mother.

Janneke had called Emma to say that Bente, as she had already suspected, had renewed her membership and so they could meet each other in the fitness center. But Janneke had also suggested telling Bente about Emma's relationship with Ernst-Jan.

'Bente was Miranda's best friend, but she never closed her eyes to Miranda's flaws and got rid of all her escapades. So she will never blame you for your relationship with her best friend's husband. And it may be a little less uncomfortable when she knows the truth and you never have to be afraid that you will be pronounced.'

Actually, Emma didn't care whether Bente knew or not, but she didn't feel like telling her.

'I'll tell her,' Janneke promised and Emma said that this was fine as far as she was concerned.

When she found Janneke at a yoga class, Janneke said that she had spoken to Bente and that she had reacted laconically as expected. In fact, she had been happy for Ernst-Jan that he had more or less found his happiness with a woman. With that, the stocking seemed to her, they didn't think it was necessary to talk about it again, but Emma could just tell her story if it fit in a conversation, without feeling uncomfortable.

## Chapter 17

John and Emma had checked in their luggage and walked to the long line that had formed for security and customs.

Despite the fact that the work on the ship was not entirely unknown, Emma felt a healthy tension about what awaited her. She had been able to get along very well with the crew members in Sierra Leone and also this year Michael and Olivia were part of the party again, but the crew in the OR with whom she was going to work closely was made up of new faces for Emma. In addition, the destination this time was Madagascar instead of Sierra Leone, so the area was also new.

And despite the fact that Emma was able to open up more easily to new encounters and impressions over the past year, she still didn't feel completely natural.

It would be a long flight of more than fifteen hours, because there was no direct flight to Ivato International Airport near Antananarivo - the capital of Madagascar.

Emma, who didn't like flying and certainly not a night flight, had wanted to book business class tickets for her and John, but John had resisted this and thought you couldn't make it to the other traveling crew members. And although Emma had completely agreed with him, once she arrived at the refuge she still felt something of regret about this. Because on board the ship there would be little room to rest after arrival.

John had therefore brought a Lormetazepam tablet. If they both took half a tablet of this sleeping pill, they could sleep on the plane for a few hours, according to him. 'But only take it after the stopover in Paris, because otherwise you are in deep sleep when we land there and maybe we have to leave the plane.'

Emma didn't feel like taking anything, but was eventually persuaded by John's argument that she would get a little fitter.

And because they still had to travel more than 350 kilometers over land from the airport before they arrived at the Mercyship in Toamasina, that was a not insignificant fact, since that trip would also take about nine to eleven hours.

Emma had hoped that they would continue their journey via a domestic flight of about an hour to their destination, but they had received a message that there would be a bus ready at the airport.

Whether they would continue traveling immediately or spend the night in Antananarivo first was not announced, but John had warned her that it would probably be the first.

Emma was looking forward to getting to know the island better. She had never realized that this island on the east coast of Africa near Mozambique was the fourth largest island in the world, after Greenland, New Guinea and Borneo.

The renovated ship had only arrived in the port of Madagascar in February 2024. Although MercyShips had already had a decades-long collaboration with the government of this island, it still felt a bit like they were pioneers to Emma and John.

And because only 20% of the population is able to get medical help such as surgical procedures within a two-hour distance, their presence felt more than necessary. Not only to carry out procedures, but also to further train doctors and nurses in practice. Not only volunteering, but also sponsors were an important part of performing successful operations and providing dental assistance. Even small actions and donations could literally make the difference between life and death.

In addition to her contribution as a surgical nurse, Emma and her running team from the EMC had therefore registered for the first "MercyShips Obstacle Run" to be held in May under the smoke of Rotterdam in Bergschenhoek. Emma was happy that in this way - in addition to raising money - she could also contribute to give some more awareness to the beautiful work that was done from MercyShips.

Emma was startled from her thoughts when she felt two hands beating before her eyes and behind her she heard Olivia's cheerful voice shouting: 'surprise.'



Although Emma knew that Olivia would also be present on the ship, she had kept quiet from her that she would accompany John and her on the journey.

Olivia hooked her arm into John and Emma's and the three of them walked towards the gate, while Olivia cheerfully told about what awaited them in Madagascar, since she had also spent four weeks there in the fall.

'It has a fantastic nature. I visited the coral reefs there and really, this was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life and I look forward to showing it to you.'

Invoked by Olivia's cheerfulness, Emma felt the tension for the trip slip away from her and she was happy that Olivia was traveling with them.

Emma had slept reasonably well during the flight, but felt an urgent need for a real bed. The flight had run without significant delay and thanks to their MercyShips t-shirts, they were welcomed as VIPS at the airport as well as in Sierra Leone and luggage handling was more efficient than they had expected.

There was indeed a van ready to take them to their destination. Despite the fact that the roads in Madagascar were often unpaved and in poor condition, the routes nacionalis from Antananarivo to Toamasina proved to be easily passable.

Emma was too tired to absorb the surroundings, but when they reached the final destination she noticed that this city seemed much more modern than she had imagined. Although she knew only too well that there was poverty here too and they had not yet seen it because the driver had avoided driving the slums of Toamasina.

Toamasina - located on a peninsula in the Indian Ocean - was surrounded by sail-white beaches and Emma was already looking forward to spending her scarce free hours here.

By now it had been almost thirty hours since they had left home and Emma could only think of one thing and that was a bed. Fortunately, it didn't take long before they were on board, where they were greeted by a volunteer from the hospitality team who accompanied them to their temporary stay. Olivia had made sure that Emma and she could share a cabin together, but John responded disappointed that he had not been assigned a cabin with Michael.

The rules for showering here were the same as on the ship in Sierra Leone and Emma couldn't wait to use them. Fortunately, there were no welcome meetings scheduled for the rest on this day, and they could return to their cabin after a simple meal.

It didn't take long for Emma, exhausted from the journey, to fall into a dreamless sleep, as the ship gently ended up on the waves of the Indian Ocean.

Within a few days, Emma was used to life on board the ship again, and she was adapted to work in the OR with her temporary colleagues. She took part in the moments of reflection, which she used as well as during her stay in Sierra Leone as the moments to reflect on her personal feelings and to reflect and process the events of that day in peace.

During the moments when the believers came together for prayer, Emma had come to a different understanding regarding the faith.

Faith offered comfort, a sense of togetherness, belonging somewhere, But above all it offered strength, and the confidence that something was watching over us.

Emma believed that this could help people make life a little more bearable, although the belief in a Creator remained something that her scientific brain could not accept.

She also saw a lot of suffering passing by here in Madagascar, but just as much joy and gratitude. She felt at her place here on the ship, because she felt useful and was happy to have done something in her life that went beyond a donation.

Of course, her daily work in the Netherlands as a nurse in the OR was also important, but with her work for Mercyships, she could actually change something about the even heavier life that would lie ahead for these people if they were not medically helped.

And once again Emma realized how everyone had it in the welfare state that was the Netherlands.

And although in the Netherlands the welfare state was increasingly crumbling and Emma was also seriously concerned about this, compared to what she saw and experienced here, the Netherlands was still a paradise and put everything back in the right perspective.

She often spent her scarce free hours on one of the tropical white beaches, whether or not in the company of John or Olivia. Although Toamasina consisted mostly of slums, it was also the largest port city in Madagascar and to Emma's surprise there were several good restaurants to be found. The contrast between these two worlds in one and the same city seemed even greater than in Freetown, although Emma knew that this was only appearance and the poverty and slums here were no different from Freetown.

Emma enjoyed the colorful local market 'Bazary Be' and the trips they could make during their scarce free time, although as in Freetown caution was also advised here and they always went on board in groups for their own safety.

They strolled along the wide avenues, protected from the sun by the shade of the trees, and where the Malagasy pousse-pousse carts were ready in long rows to bring passengers to their destination.

They looked at the stilt-built Creole houses in the old town and enjoyed local drinks in the shade under the centuries-old Banyan trees.

For sunset, they sometimes took a walk along Independence Avenue, which was lined with palm trees, and then enjoyed a meal at one of the restaurants on the scenic promenade along the beach, after which they were brought back to the ship in one of the pousse-pousse carts.

The time she spent on the ship and in Toamasina flew by, and before Emma knew it, the moment of farewell had come.

Olivia's farewell was particularly difficult for Emma, as Olivia had decided to continue her work on the ship for half a year longer. Although this farewell was not half as hard as the farewell that would soon follow from John, if he left for Australia with Michael for a year.

John had previously arranged for them to spend a few days in a hotel in the area - to make some short trips from there - so that they could first recover from the hard work of the past month. After that, they would continue their journey from Mozambique to South Africa, after which John and Michael would leave for Australia and Emma would return to her life in the Netherlands.

## Chapter 18

Emma woke up from a deep sleep because of the sounds that were audible around her Lodge and did not know where she was for a while. Last night they had arrived at their Lodge - which was only a kilometer from Kruger Park - and had enjoyed a delicious dinner under the starry sky that evening.

Earlier that week they had made a walking safari accompanied by a guide. For both Emma and John, this had proven to be an exciting and exciting but impressive experience, although Michael seemed a bit more comfortable.

'You're an Aussie or you're not,' Michael had noted with a laugh as Emma spoke out her surprise at the ease with which Michael seemed to be merging into the area.

Today there was a boat trip on the "Olephant River" awaited, and Emma was looking forward to the many birds they would see, but especially the Hippos and crocodiles.

This would be followed by a visit to an animal shelter, after which they would end their stay at the park with an evening safari and a traditional 'braai'.

Emma stretched out a few more times and then walked outside to the terrace of her Lodge armed with a cup of coffee, enjoying the tranquility of the early morning, when the nocturnal animals withdrew and nature slowly awakened. The first dawns became visible and it promised to be a warm day again, but in the early morning it still felt pleasant due to a gentle breeze.

In the Lodge next to Emma's sat a man who reminded Emma of Bart, although Bart was blessed with a full bunch of blonde hair and Emma noticed that with this man's hair fell sly down his face.

The man sat with his eyes closed in the rocking chair in front of his Lodge and it looked like he had fallen asleep. On the other side of her was the Lodge of John and Michael, but there everything still seemed to be in deep peace.

Emma looked at her watch and saw that the clock had just clocked at six o'clock. The rising sun shone on the man's face on the terrace next to her and gave it an orange, almost fairytale golden glow.

Emma smiled to herself as she secretly looked at the man more closely. He wore a white linen shirt on a sporty ecru colored pants and Emma wondered if he had spent that night in bed, or the night before

Had fallen asleep in the chair and hadn't bothered to go to bed.

She hoped that in the latter case he had lubricated himself well with an anti-mosquito drug like Deet, with the missing protection of the mosquito net above his bed.

When the man moved slightly, Emma felt almost caught because she had been peeking at him and quickly looked the other way. She no longer dared to look up at the man's side and was shocked when she heard a heavy voice greet her in English.

Slowly she turned her head towards the sound, and saw that the man from the terrace next to Emma came strolling out of her direction.

He greeted her again and asked if she might have a coffee cup for him. Emma got up and took out a coffee cup from her Lodge. The man thanked her and told her that he only became human after a cup of coffee, but had no more cups himself. He spoke with a light accent and she asked where he came from.

'From the Netherlands. Sorry, how clumsy of me, I'll introduce myself first,' he apologized, while reaching out to Emma. 'Matthew Bosch, but people call me Matt, and I live in Rotterdam.'

'Nice, Emma van Reeuwijk, from Rotterdam Netherlands,' Emma replied in Dutch, shaking his hand that felt pleasantly cool.

'Did I have to travel almost ten thousand kilometers to meet you?' Emma couldn't quite bring home whether this was meant to be flirtatious or just an observation of a fact.

'The world is small and Rotterdam is big,' Emma spoke in an almost philosophical tone and Matt laughed.

'If I just make a cup of coffee for you, I'll take another cup myself while we can continue talking,' Emma suggested and she herself was shocked by her words. She hoped she hadn't sounded too rant, but Matt responded enthusiastically to her invitation.

After Emma returned with their coffee, Matt asked if she was traveling alone. Emma said she was here with John and Michael and about her work for MercyShips. Matt listened with interest and expressed his admiration for the work she had done selflessly in Sierra Leone and Toamasina.

'And what will you do when you get back in Rotterdam soon?'

'I am an architect, so I also ended up in Rotterdam about twenty years ago, because I am originally from Laren. But Rotterdam has a lot to offer an architect and honestly I also feel more at home in Rotterdam with the "don't dick but brush" mentality, than in the snobbish Laren.

Emma wanted to ask more about his life in Rotterdam, but was interrupted by the sound of opening a door, and she heard a woman asking where Matt was.

'Elza calls me, so I'm going back to my own Lodge. Nice to have spoken to you and maybe we will meet here, or in Rotterdam.'

Emma felt a slight disappointment because their conversation was interrupted, and a somewhat heavier disappointment because he turned out to be married. The story of my life, Emma sighed to herself, after which she went into her Lodge to shower and get ready for breakfast.

John and Michael were already having breakfast when Emma took a seat at the breakfast table, which was richly filled with fresh bread and fruit. At the other end of the table, she saw Matt sitting with an attractive woman, staring in front of her. John also noted this and wondered aloud how it was possible to sit at the table in a visibly bad mood in this beautiful environment. Michael suggested that she might have had an argument with her husband and Emma felt her heart jump for joy at that idea.

'Inside fun?' Asked John, who had observed the smile on Emma's face and Emma felt he blush.

'I had to remember that Michael could be quite right about the marital quarrel, because I found him sleeping early this morning in the rocking chair in front of his Lodge.'

'Well, I hope he didn't regret it, with all those mosquitoes here,' John noted with pity in his voice.

Their conversation was interrupted by the guide who would accompany them on their trip on the "Elephant River" and asked them to be ready for departure in half an hour. He made the same announcement to a few other guests, including Matt and his wife.

'I hope they have put their quarrels together before we leave, otherwise it can still be cozy on the road,' Michael remarked.

'Don't prowl guys, she may also have received annoying news, had migraines or something like that and I can still name some causes. And he just wanted to enjoy the sunrise and missed it because he fell asleep,' John pointed out to them, after which they got up to get ready for departure.

Emma looked over her shoulder at Matt for a moment, who apparently didn't care what it was that made his wife so grumpy. She suddenly realized that this was the first time since her breakup with Ernst-Jan that she was interested in a man. The fact that it was only a fleeting meeting did not matter to her feeling.

Matt appeared without his wife at the minibus that would take them to the boat, and sat down next to Emma as a matter of course who could not fail to ask why he was alone.

'Elza didn't feel like going along and stays at the Lodge to read something,' was Matt's short meaningless statement.

Emma then decided to just enjoy his company and thought it couldn't hurt to spend this day a bit together, since only couples participated in the excursion and she also gave John and Michael some time for themselves. John's questioning and warning gaze did not escape her, but she completely ignored it.

Although she knew that in an unguarded moment John would not fail to make a comment about it.

Also on board the boat, Matt sat on the wooden bench next to Emma. Despite the early time, it was already quite hot and Emma regretted that they had not gone along with the excursion that had been possible during sunrise. Not only Emma suffered from the heat, the animals might also be less active at these high temperatures. But Matt reassured her by telling her that they would see enough without a doubt. Even if it might be dormant.

And with that he had said nothing too much, because during the more than two-hour boat trip they not only observed beautiful exotic birds along the green banks, but also crocodiles, buffaloes and hippos showed themselves. Unfortunately, the elephants did hide, although their trumpeter could be heard in the distance.

Emma had not felt as happy and relaxed in a long time as during this boat trip, which was followed by an extensive lunch. And all this in the company of an attractive and entertaining man.

During lunch, Matt told more about his work as an architect in Rotterdam and she heard the pride echo in his voice when he talked about his involvement in designing one of the tall residential towers, which were so decisive for the Rotterdam skyline.

Emma, in turn, talked about her business that she had built and which she looked back on with pride.

'But you know Matt, the work gave me no satisfaction. Actually, it felt like a created addition to business, which was actually completely redundant and managers and CEOs were capable enough to perform this task. A customer believed that I had helped to put his company on the map internationally,' said Emma, referring to her work at Ernst-Jan. 'But the truth is that if he had appointed the right people, I would have been redundant. And in the end I decided my

Company and to follow a training in healthcare. Of course it deserves much less, but I now get satisfaction from my work. And that is the most important thing for me. A person works so many hours in his life, how can you do work that doesn't make you happy, just for the money?'

Matt looked at her with an unconcealed look of admiration.

'If only more people thought about it like you. I sometimes go crazy with all those nonsense jobs these days. Fortunately, I get a lot of satisfaction from my work and it also pays well,' Matt laughed.

'I don't think I had a nonsense job or company that acted in nonsense, but in my opinion was still unnecessary. But you're right, nowadays you come across functions that make you wonder what exactly those people do and what their use and necessity is.'

Their conversation was interrupted by John, who suggested taking a short walk before they took the bus for a short safari and the return trip to the Lodge. With some reluctance, Emma got up and walked with John and Michael to a fenced path where they could take a short walk. John immediately fell with the door in the house.

'Are there no nice unmarried men in your world?' The undertone of his question was certainly not humorous and there was a certain anger in it.

'What are you talking about? I'm just having a nice chat with a man without other intentions, who, just like me, is participating in an excursion without a partner today, so that Michael and you can also spend time together without me bothering you. That man is

also from Rotterdam and we had a nice chat about our work. What do you think is wrong with that?'

'There's nothing wrong with that, but Emma, I see how you look at him. Don't deny it now, because I know you too well. I'm just warning you. Find a nice bachelor and forget about Matt again soon.'

'Tomorrow we leave again, the best man is here with his wife and I'm having a nice day with him now. Don't mess with it, John.'

John shrugged his shoulders after her last words and suggested walking back so that they were in time for departure.

On the bus, Michael sat next to Emma and John took a seat in the chair next to Matt.

Emma occasionally looked furtively at John and Matt, who seemed to be in conversation with each other animatedly.

Emma then concentrated on the short safari and together with Michael admired the surroundings and the animals they encountered along the way.

## Chapter 19

After dinner, Emma immediately went to her own Lodge, with the excuse that she was tired from the past day and wanted to read some more. She wished John and Michael a good night and walked along the sparsely lit path to her Lodge. The silence was only interrupted by the sounds of the animals.

Emma realized that she was indeed tired and decided not to pick up her book, but to go to sleep right away. She would probably wake up early the next morning, but that allowed her to look forward to the beautiful sunrise and the awakening of nature.

Emma was already in deep sleep, when she woke up startled by a slight knock on her door and a voice calling her name. Surprised, she got out of bed and walked to the door to see who came to wake her up in the middle of the night.

She opened the door, and before she could say anything, she felt a pair of hands draw her face towards her and her lips were surrounded by a passionate kiss.

Emma knew she had to break free from his embrace, but couldn't resist when she felt Matt's hands slowly go from her face to her breasts. She answered his kiss and offered no resistance when he pulled up her t-shirt and placed her on the bed, with a tenderness in stark contrast to the passionate kiss. He took off his shirt and while untying his belt, Emma was hit by his muscular and tanned body.

A burning desire swelled in her and the consequences of the deeds they were about to take did not matter to her at that moment. She had only one wish at that moment and that was to feel those strong arms around her and to entangle his naked body.

His touches were both tender and rough and Emma could not remember ever feeling so much passion. He took the time to satisfy her before he came into her and Emma had wanted that moment to last forever.

Exhausted and still confused about what had happened, Emma let her hand slide over his chest. He took her hand in his and kissed it gently. Without saying anything else, he then got up, dressed and then carefully closed the door behind him to make as little noise as possible.

Emma's body still glowed from his touches. She knew this had been one-time sex. Sex that had unleashed something in her that she had not known before.

She let her slide over her body in the places Matt had just touched her, as if that way she could preserve and relive his touches. She didn't feel guilty, why should she? His marriage was not her responsibility.

The next day at breakfast, Emma had the feeling that everyone could tell from her that she had spent a wild night with Matt. She didn't dare to look at John, for fear that he would know right away. There was no trace of Matt and his wife and Emma felt both relieved and disappointed.

She took some fruit and yogurt, poured a glass of fresh orange juice and took the cup of coffee that had been poured for her with a grateful smile.

She saw John's eyebrows frown, but swent away from his gaze.

Today was their last day in South Africa. A visit to an animal shelter was planned and tonight the part she had been most looking forward to would take place: the evening safari at sunset, followed by a traditional Braai, a South African barbecue.

Tomorrow they would be picked up in the course of the morning and then spend two days until their departure near the airport of Hoedspruit, in a B&B with Dutch owners.

From there Emma would fly to Schiphol and Michael and John to Melbourne.

Emma felt sad when she thought of John's approaching farewell, but also granted him his happiness. Michael was a great man and she was convinced that if John did manage to get

a permanent residence permit, he would only return to the Netherlands to sell his house and handle things in the Netherlands.

Their taxi jeep was ready to take them to their next destination. Matt hadn't shown up and maybe that was better. Emma hadn't told him they were leaving today, but that may have come up in the conversation John had had with him during their ride in the minibus. Emma didn't want to ask John about it, so she would forever remain in ignorance whether he had deliberately not been present at the braai the night before and this morning at breakfast to avoid her, or that he had assumed that they would still meet each other that day. Emma looked back once more before getting into the taxi, but when there was no trace of Matt, she got in disappointed.

It was even warmer that day and the dust from the road descended on them during the drive to Hoedspruit, and Emma eagerly drank from her water bottle to rinse the dust out of her mouth.

They arrived sweaty and dusty in Hoedspruit, where they were welcomed by the hospitable owners with a cool drink. Emma was grateful for the air conditioning that was available in her room and took a quick refreshing shower, after which she walked refreshed to the terrace where their hostess had prepared even more cooling drinks for them.

Not much later, John arrived with the announcement that Michael would join them later, but with a headache, he had been lying in bed in the coolness of the air conditioning.

'So, Emma, tell me honestly. What exactly was going on between Matt and you?'

'John, honestly not much. I was sitting on my terrace watching the sunrise, he was sleeping on his terrace in a rocking chair and when he woke up he asked if I had coffee for him because he didn't have it himself, or maybe he didn't want to wake up his wife. We sat down and had a nice chat and when his wife was awake and called him, we said goodbye and I went to shower and have breakfast. I don't think his wife felt okay, maybe that's why her bad mood that morning and decided not to go on the boat trip and mini Safari. You've been there for the rest. And yes, John, I thought he was a very nice man and if he had been single I would have certainly worked on it, but he is not. End of story.'

John seemed to swallow her story and only responded with the words that Matt was indeed a very nice man and that he felt sorry for Emma that he was married.



## Chapter 20

'Emma, what a story, it looks like a scene from a movie.'

Emma had met Janneke in the fitness center and when they were drinking coffee together after exercising, Emma had told her about her meeting with Matt. She had to tell someone and knew that her secret would be safe with Janneke.

'But, Emma, if I can be honest, I understand that you couldn't resist the temptation, but did you think it was fair to his wife? I mean, how lonely she must have felt when she had discovered there in a foreign country, far from her friends and family, that her husband had cheated. When I think back to how I felt when I found out Victor was cheating and how much I needed my family and friends then.' Janneke did not finish her sentence and that was not necessary, because Emma also understood what Janneke was trying to make clear to her.

'It wasn't my responsibility. I mean, I'm free to do whatever I want and he's married, so he shouldn't have done it,' Emma defended herself, although she herself heard how weak her words sounded when she said them out loud.

'Irene will undoubtedly have thought that too, but for me she was just as guilty as Victor. Look, for your relationship with Ernst-Jan I will never condemn you. Miranda had said that about herself and I just like that Ernst-Jan was able to feel happy with you. I can't judge Matt's marriage, I've never met him or his wife. But you don't know them either and I think you've made yourself believe that he has a bad marriage because she didn't go on the boat trip, and because of the fact that he was sleeping in front of his Lodge. But he was on vacation with her Emma.'

Emma knew Janneke was right, morally speaking. But after all those years since the moment Ernst Jan had left her, she had felt the desire for a man for the first time. Partly because of that, she could not have resisted him when he knocked on her and kissed her.

Her whole body had been screaming at his touch. And Emma didn't want to think about what it must have done to his wife, if she had known about it. She only wanted to remember that blissful day she had spent with him during the excursion and the fire of his touches.

She wanted to see his muscular body in front of her and not the image of a wounded woman. And that image slowly penetrated her mind after Janneke's words and Emma was still seized by a feeling of guilt. A feeling of guilt that she had never felt during all her years with Ernst-Jan.

Was it because of this that his wife had looked so sad during breakfast, prior to the boat trip? That she knew her husband was cheating, she was not happy with him, but kept trying to give her marriage a chance.

Hadn't Emma been a little naive to make herself believe that he was overwhelmed by sudden feelings for Emma and this was the first time he cheated on his wife? Now that Emma thought about this, this seemed very unlikely to her and it was more plausible that he was a notorious cheater. With his charismatic appearance and muscular body, it would certainly not be difficult for him to conquer women.

'It was really one-time, Janneke, I didn't even look him up on social media,' Emma defended herself against her better judgment.

'Emma, do what you want, I'll just tell you what the consequences can be, even after just one time.'

Emma sighed and finally proved Janneke right. It had been very selfish of her, even though it was Matt's responsibility and not hers.

'Are Victor and you completely okay again now, or do you mind that I ask about that?'

'I really don't like to talk about it anymore. Not that we put it away and act like it never happened. But it's something between Victor and me and when it happened everyone liked it, although everyone thought it was different. One said I should leave him, the next

thought it was my own fault that he had cheated. That didn't really help me to get things clear for myself. But we are completely fine now and realize all too well that something shocking had to happen before we realized where the shoe was wrong in our relationship. But it still makes me sad that there has been another woman in Victor's life. The sharp edges are off and our relationship is better than ever, but the pain I feel when I think about it will never completely go away.'

'Do you find a long-term extramarital relationship as bad as a one-night stand?'

Janneke had to think about this question for a moment before she replied: 'yes, I think so. In both cases, something is probably missing in the relationship. Sly, bad sex, growing apart, there can be many underlying reasons. That's also why I forgave Victor. There was something wrong in our relationship and I had stuck my head in the sand, but on the other hand: Victor had never told me that he was missing something in our relationship. That's why it's so important that you dare to speak honestly to each other when you feel like you no longer happy with the way you live or with your relationship.'

'Do you think that's why Ernst-Jan chose Miranda? I mean they had spoken to each other - although this was only after years - why they were not happy.'

'I don't know Emma, I only know the side of Miranda's story and never talked about it with Ernst-Jan. But I honestly think he always loved Miranda somewhere. Otherwise, he would have chosen you without any doubt once their son had reached adulthood.'

'He had that too,' Emma confessed and told Janneke what she had read in Ernst-Jan's diary. That he had been about to tell her that he would leave Miranda, but Emma had unfortunately chosen that moment to tell him how happy she was with him. And because he was married she could also continue to live her own life in this way, their relationship was perfect for her.

'I have only recently come to realize that this was not true. That I had indeed wanted to wake up next to him every morning and I was unfair just out of fear of losing him otherwise not only to him, but also to myself.'

'That's what I meant to say. Only a relationship in which you are honest - and can be - with each other can become a lasting relationship. And otherwise it's doomed to failure anyway or you'll be stuck in a miserable relationship for the rest of your life.'

'You are a wise and brave woman, Janneke. Thank you for listening to me.'

'That's what we're friends for. But now I'm going home, before Victor starts to wonder if I'm in a relationship now. And, Emma, happened happened. You can't turn it back anyway so now enjoy your delicious wild sex with Matt,' Janneke laughed, as she put on her coat. Emma sat for a while and thought about her conversation with Janneke and decided that married men were taboo from now on. No matter how attractive and charming they may be.

## Chapter 21

Emma kicked off her shoes, poured herself a glass of cold water and was on her way to her favorite window chair, when her phone rang and saw her mother calling.

Her parents had moved to the south of Spain after their retirement more than ten years ago and - although they had regular contact with each other via FaceTime and her parents flew to the Netherlands a few times a year - the relationship with her parents had changed over the years.

'I'm in the Netherlands,' her mother immediately fell with the door in the house,' and before Emma could ask the reason for this, her mother continued: 'I'm away from your father and don't go back,' her mother's voice sounded determined and Emma understood from this that the situation was serious.

'Mom, I can't follow you for a while. Why did you leave and not go back to Spain?'

'Why do you think I'm not going back to Spain anymore? I just told you I'm away from your father. Whoever of the two of us stays in Spain is taking care of later. But for now I'll stay here.'

Emma felt her anxiety increase. Did her mother now tell her that her parents divorced after more than fifty years of marriage?

'Mom, now calmly tell me what's going on, so I understand what you're trying to make clear to me.'

'I'm more than fed up with your father, and really believe me when I say that I've done my best in recent years to make the best of it, but I can't stand it any longer. That man drives me crazy.'

Emma, who knew her father as a sweet, quiet and cozy man, could not imagine what her mother meant to say. Of course, her parents also knew their problems, just like in any other relationship, but Emma had always had the impression that they had a good and harmonious marriage. And now her mother told me out of the blue that she had left him.

'I'm coming to you now, I'll eat a sandwich quickly,' Emma promised with regret, because the pasta dish she had been looking forward to seemed to pass her by. "I'll be with you within an hour."

But her mother said she was tired from the flight and didn't feel like talking about it tonight. 'I ordered a pizza and go to bed early. I'll call you tomorrow and then I'll tell you all about it. Or at least the part I want to share with my daughter, and I'll tell you in advance that this won't be all. That's what I have my friends for.'

Emma was too surprised to respond and said she would talk to her mother the next day. 'I have a late shift, so be at your disposal until two o'clock.'

Then she wished each other a good night, although Emma doubted that would be the case, and she still went to warm up her pasta dish. She doubted for a moment whether she would call her father, but first decided to wait for the full story of her mother. At least, that part her mother wanted to share with Emma.

Emma had taken a shower and wanted to prepare a light breakfast for herself, but even before she took a cup of coffee from under the coffee machine, she heard the familiar sound of the ringtone she had set for her mother. She answered the conversation, while walking to the living area with a cup of coffee.

'Shall I wake you up?' Her mother sounded more cheerful than Emma had expected.

'No, I just poured a cup of coffee and if it had been like that, it wouldn't have mattered.'

'I'll be with you around ten o'clock, is that okay? Or would you rather come to me?' Her mother's voice still sounded cheerful and it seemed more like she

Wanted to come over for fun and not to explain the reason for her departure from Spain.

'No, you just come to me. That's easier for me because I have to work this afternoon.'

'Well, see you later. I'll bring some goodies for coffee.'

After they ended the conversation, Emma looked at her phone, as if she could find in it the answer to what all this meant.

Not much later she received a Whatsapp message from her father, in which he said she didn't have to worry about him and asked her if she wanted to call him after she had spoken to her mother.

Not before!, he concluded the message mysteriously.

It became increasingly unclear to Emma what was going on between her parents, but waited patiently for her mother to ring the bell just before ten o'clock.

Emma expected to see her mother come in with red eyes from crying and circles of a bad night's sleep. Her mother was perfectly laid out, her hair was in model and her eyes shone earlier than Emma could speak of the dull eyes that often reflected the sadness.

She had experienced divorces in her environment before and the partner who had finally made the decision to continue a divorce also looked generally sad and drawn. Certainly not as radiant as her mother.

They hugged each other, and her mother looked at Emma with a critical look.

'Youri getting too skinny and look gray,' she noted, without asking Emma if there was a reason for this, and if so, what the reason was.

Emma therefore decided to ignore the comment and looked at her mother with a smile, while she pushed a lock of hair back with her hand as if she wanted to make it clear with this gesture why she looked a bit gray. Did it really not come to her mother that she hadn't slept much last night?

While Emma served them coffee, her mother carefully placed the cakes on the saucers that Emma had prepared, and put them on the cooking island, after which she sat on the bar stool in front of it.

Her mother was small in state, but still slim and flexible for her age, so it didn't look too cold when she climbed on the bar stool and her legs dangled far above the ground.

Emma made the coffee next to the dishes with pastries and took a seat on the bar stool next to her mother. She would have preferred to sit at the dining room table so that she could look at her mother while she told her story, but understood that her mother wanted to prevent this in this very way.

'So, now tell me what happened.'

Her mother carefully put down her cup and turned it around.

As directly as she had spoken yesterday, she now seemed to be turning around it - just like her head.

"If I'm honest, nothing happened. That's it right now. Nothing happened anymore. Your father thinks everything is fine with that. He gets fresh bread in the morning, reads the newspaper, goes for a walk and sits under the umbrella with a book for the rest of the day. For dinner, he then takes a walk at ease and then the TV turns on. Only on Sundays he jumps on his road bike to go cycling with friends. Whatever I suggest, I get the standard answer to everything: "dear, the weather is nice today, enjoy the sun. We can finally take it easy and now we are gradually getting to know the area." Yes of course, but that doesn't mean I have to spend time until our death on ten square kilometers. This was exactly what I was so afraid of when we bought the apartment in Spain. That for the rest we would not get anywhere else. And I miss my social life that we have always known in the Netherlands.'

Emma knew all too well that her mother had always had her doubts and had finally only given up buying an apartment in Spain if they also kept their house in the Netherlands - so that they could return from time to time - and leave Spain in the hottest months of the year.

Emma also knew that her mother would miss her social life in the Netherlands, but had never said anything about that. It had been her parents' choice to leave and Emma had always kept her doubts to herself. Maybe she should have given her opinion as a daughter.

But her parents had always released her to make her own decisions, so who was she not to let them do that?

'But you certainly talked to him about that, you didn't pack your suitcase from one moment to the next and tell him that you're returning to the Netherlands, did you?' Emma asked in a tone that did not disguise that she found her mother's act incomprehensible.

Her mother looked at Emma with an irritated look. 'No, of course not. But it just seemed like he couldn't or didn't want to understand me. He was satisfied with his life and thought we deserved to enjoy our peace and the sun after so many years of hard work. As long as he averages ten thousand steps a day, he thinks we are active enough.' There was a certain contempt in her mother's voice, which not only surprised Emma, but also saddened.

Her parents always seemed so happy with each other and their lives, and now things seemed to be going completely wrong in the last years of their lives. And Emma had no idea what she had to do with this.

'What else would you like to do, Mom? Make far trips? Climbing a mountain, abseiling, finishing a Bucketlist?' Emma hoped that she had let some interest resound in her voice - instead of the irritation she felt coming in her - but knew how sarcastic it had sounded.

'I don't have big wishes, Emma, it really isn't. But your father and I are largely dependent on each other there. Social life there is just not as we know it here and we both don't master the language well enough. So it is limited to what people who have also moved there after their retirement. But most people are tourists who come for a few weeks to bake, eat and drink in the sun. I miss playing tennis with my girlfriends, dinners with good friends and I miss my daughter.'

The latter surprised Emma the most, because the rest did not surprise her in any way. Emma had always been jealous of the convenience at which her mother had made friendship and her loyalty to her friends.

Emma probably looked more like her father, who didn't seem to have much need for other company either. This may have always been the case, but Emma had never noticed it because he never complained about the full agenda that her mother had always taken care of. The poor man was probably happy and relieved that in Spain he no longer had to meet the high demands that their social life and hard work had always placed on him.

'Don't you do golf anymore? You always liked to do that and you were looking forward to the many beautiful golf courses that Spain is rich in? And you also meet people there, right?' Emma asked somewhat surprised.

'Yes, but much less. Your father thinks it's all way too expensive and too busy.'

'Well, for me you don't have to keep your money, so I would say: go playing golf. And then fly to the Netherlands a little more often, visit a theater performance again, go out for dinner with friends. It can't be that hard, can it? Shall I talk to dad, maybe I can convince him that he needs to be a little more active and be allowed to take your wishes and desires into account a little more?' Emma suggested.

'I'm in love.' Her mother spontaneously flapped out, a con consit she probably wanted to keep for her friends, but didn't want to do to Emma.

Emma was too perplexed to respond and looked at her mother with wide eyes.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to tell you this. But I want you to understand that there is no point in talking to your father.'

'Do you know daddy this, I mean you fell in love with another man?'

'No, I didn't tell him that. That's not necessary either, because I have no relationship or anything, you have to assume that from me. But the fact that I could fall in love with another man, something that has never happened to me in all those years that I have been with your father, was the last push for me

To reach this decision. We're not happy with each other anymore, Emma, it's just like that and I can't change that.'

'Nothing to change?' Emma breathed unexpectedly. 'Of course you can change something about it. You just have to want both. Do you really think you will be happier if you spend the last years of your life in solitude? Or do you think you are better off if you can travel with one of your friends who are now a widow? Well, check with them first. Ask how happy they are when they sit alone with their plate on their lap watching TV, longing for the time when they could enjoy the food, a glass of wine and a conversation together with their husband. Even though the conversations were not about anything other than what they had read in the newspaper or about the children and grandchildren. How they wake up in the morning, with an empty spot on the other side of their bed. How cozy they find it when they sit lonely in the morning with a cup of coffee thinking about who they can do something with that day. Even if it's just a walk.'

Emma didn't seem to bump and her mother gently waddled her arm to calm her down.

'Do you talk about me or yourself now, Emma? Don't you think I realize that very well too?'

'Promise me you won't make hasty decisions. Suggest to dad that you stay in the Netherlands for a few weeks. Alone. And then see if you're still determined to divorce.'

Emma suggested, still emotional.

'Emma, I will never divorce your father. That only involves hassle and the only thing we get along with is a little more AOW (*pensioen by The gouvernement*), because we then get it for singles. I'll think about what you said, I promise. But I can't promise you that I still want to live with your father. Or that I'm going back to Spain, other than for a short vacation.'

Emma realized that at that moment she could not achieve more than this with her mother, but was satisfied that it already sounded a little less definitive than at the beginning of their conversation.

Emma poured another cup of coffee for them, while her mother put her fork in the still untouched pastry, although she didn't seem to intend to take a bite.

'Are you happy Emma?'

Emma was shocked by this question and could not immediately give the right answer. She wanted to be honest with her mother, but hadn't thought about this for a while - whether consciously or not.

'I'm not unhappy, mom, I have my job and that makes me happy. I have some new girlfriends and I'm happy about that. I miss John and that makes me sad sometimes. I don't miss Thérèse and I'm actually just relieved that our contact has cooled down a bit. Although I don't think that's the right one

Expression, because a friendship with Thérèse is always cool,' Emma remarked smiling.

'But I don't miss Ernst-Jan anymore. Somewhere I will always love him, but my life no longer stands still, and that makes me happier. Fortunately, I think it's too big a word. But I am satisfied with my life as it looks now. I'm not lonely, but I'm open to a new relationship now. Although I still don't know if I would be happier if I lived with someone, I don't rule it out in advance.'

Emma could not remember ever having such an intimate conversation with her mother and suddenly she was filled with a feeling of joy that this was now the case.

Emma felt that her mother grabbed her hand, and so they sat next to each other in silence for a while, until her mother took the floor again and told her that Emma was not only the most important thing in her life, but also the most beautiful thing that had happened to her.

'Motherhood is such a beautiful thing, Emma, only if you have been allowed to experience that can you understand what I mean. I have always found it very sad that you have never been able to experience this feeling of happiness yourself. And I have always had the feeling that it was Ernst-Jan who took this away from you, because his son was the most important thing in his life and therefore he never really chose you.'

Emma had never looked at it this way and she wondered if she would have wanted to have a child of Ernst-Jan in other circumstances. But the answer to that question was too

intense for Emma at that moment. There was no room in her head to think about it further. Although the fact that her heart was crying at that moment was probably already an answer to this question.

After her mother had said goodbye to her and she had promised her not to interfere with her parents' relationship at that time, Emma called her father.

'Did you talk to her?' He opened the conversation without any kind of greeting.

'Good morning, daddy, good to hear your voice,' Emma ignored his question.

'Yes, yes, sorry, good morning, honey. I am also happy to hear your voice. I'm still a bit upset as you'll probably understand.'

'Of course I understand. But before I say anything, I want to hear your side of the story.'

'Emma, I don't have a side of the story. I don't understand it at all either and I was hoping you could tell me a little more after you talked to your mother. She had been behaving strangely for a few weeks, suddenly wanted to do everything. It started since we have new neighbors. That man acts like he's forty, when he's only a year younger than I am. He goes surfing, horseback riding, playing padel and is training for his fortieth marathon. Since then your mother has been whining that I need to become a little more active, that I have become an old man and that she has no intention of continuing to spend her life as an old woman in, she really said it Emma: the waiting room of death.'

Emma didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this story. Her sweet hardworking father who wanted to enjoy his well-deserved rest, her social and sparkling mother, clearly charmed by her new active and sporty neighbor, probably with ditto appearance.

'Is there also a neighbor and is she as active as the neighbor? Maybe mom can pull her up a little more?' Emma tried to ask him the question as neutrally as possible so as not to cause further unrest in her father.

'Yes, but she is at least twenty years younger than the neighbor, and I don't think she's immediately waiting for your mother's company.'

Emma breathed a sigh of relief. This significantly reduced the chance that her mother would start an affair with the neighbor, or rather: the neighbor with her.

'What did your mother tell you?'

'Not much more than you just told me. She wants to get more out of life than you do now. I didn't get the impression that she wanted very special things or that you should go surfing like the neighbor or anything like that. I actually think she especially misses her life in the Netherlands and wants to go home a little more often.'

'But Spain is our home now, right? We now live here about ten months a year, have our own apartment and built a new life here in recent years.'

Emma soon understood from the conversation with her father that her parents had had no eye or understanding for each other's needs. Of course her parents had always been opposites, but this was magnified after their Retirement and departure to Spain.

Actually, Emma could have thought of this in advance, but she was probably too preoccupied with the events in her own life to pay attention to it.

'Dad, I had to promise mom I wouldn't interfere with it. And I respect that. I also think you have to figure it out on your own, but on the other hand I'm afraid this won't work. I suggested mom to stay in the Netherlands for a few weeks, while you stay in Spain. Then you can think in peace what you want with the rest of your life. And I quite agree with mom that you can be a bit more entrepreneurial. More enterprising does not mean that you should go surfing or training for the marathon. But take a cruise, book a city trip, take a train trip through Spain. Daddy, you now live largely in Spain, but I think you see this as one big consecutive holiday, so you don't have to go anywhere else. But that's not how it works for mom.'

After her words, it was quiet for a moment. She heard her father's brain

Crackled after her words, but in the end he replied that he didn't know it all very well.

Emma said she understood that, but that if he loved her mother he had to be open to her desires and not just his 'If you open yourself to that, then your chances will all end in a hiss. Be honest with each other, daddy, but also open up to the way the other person sees the rest of your lives in front of them. Mom is right when she says that you have started the last phase of life. Don't waste it.'

'So it's all my fault,' it sounded indignantly.

'No daddy, you're both not open to each other. And I actually find that unimaginable after more than fifty years of sharing life with each other.'

'But I can't stay here alone for a few weeks, can I? What should I do all this time?' Her father sounded insulted.

'I think you should use that time to think in the sun what needs to change in your life and what you can do about it yourself. Come to the Netherlands in a few weeks and then talk to mom. Hopefully you will still figure it out,' Emma suggested and her father promised that he would think about it.

'I have a favorable schedule in two weeks, then I will fly to you after work with the late flight and can then stay for two days if I take the early flight back on the last day.'

'What would you do for me?' Her father sounded both relieved and pathetic. 'I'll pay for your ticket.'

'That's not necessary, fortunately I can pay for it myself. Keep those pennies for an extra round of golf,' Emma couldn't help but notice, and after these words Emma said goodbye to her father and let out a deep sigh. That she had to act as a marriage mediator between her parents was the last thing she ever expected.



## Chapter 22

Emma blinked at the bright sun as she walked out of Malaga airport looking for a taxi. Her mother had initially reacted disappointed when Emma had told her to go to Spain for a few days. But Emma had made it clear to her that her father was just as entitled to her company as her mother had. Eventually, her mother had resigned herself to it, but not before Emma should have promised her not to give her father false hope.

'I don't know what I want yet, and as long as I don't know this, you can't give him advice on what to change, so that I'll come back to him.'

The tone at which her mother had said this sounded disturbing to Emma's ears, because she had indeed assumed that if her father admitted that he had to become a little more enterprising, her mother would automatically go back to him. But her mother didn't seem to plan to do that at all and Emma could only hope that she would eventually realize that a life as a single woman at her age was not everything.

Emma regretted not having booked a taxi in advance via the internet, because there was a long line of people next to their suitcase waiting for a free taxi. While waiting, she got into conversation with an elderly couple who, like Emma, turned out to be going to La Carihuela, and suggested sharing the taxi. Emma happily agreed to their proposal.

The couple, like Emma's parents, has lived largely in Spain since their retirement, but had returned to the Netherlands in February due to the heavy rain.

'The world is upside down, we fled the bad weather in Spain, to enjoy the sun in the Netherlands,' the woman laughed.

It turned out that the couple knew her parents, which in itself was not strange, since La Carihuela was a kind of refuge for retired Dutch people who had bought a house there or rented it for a long time.

Arriving at her destination, Emma said goodbye to the couple, after promising them to convey their warm greetings to her parents.

Emma rang the gate and then walked through the courtyard to the entrance of her parents' apartment.

The pool looked cloudy and unattractive, probably because of the many rain that had fallen there lately, sometimes accompanied by sand from the Sahara. It was determined by the government that the swimming pools were not allowed to be used during the winter months.

This is because of the lack of water that had arisen during the drought of the past year.

Emma hoped for the residents that this embargo would not be necessary again in the coming winter, now that more rain had fallen in recent months than they were used to and the water basins and reservoirs seemed to be well filled.

Her father was already waiting for Emma at the front door and it seemed as if he had shrunk since the last time she had seen him and in his eyes the sadness and loneliness could be read.

He took Emma's suitcase and brought it to the guest room, while Emma walked to the terrace from where she could see the sea in the distance.

Her parents' apartment was located as the crow flies about 500 meters from the promenade and the beach and was built against a hill, giving them an unobstructed view of the sea. Her mother sometimes complained that they had to climb up a bit from the road to the apartment, but her father believed that this kept their condition on the arrow.

Her father came on the terrace a little later with two chilled beers in his hand and Emma gratefully took one of his. Although she hoped that this beer would not be wrong on her empty stomach and first decided to eat some of the snacks her father had prepared, before she drank her beer.

A delicious smell of garlic and herbs reached Emma's nose from the kitchen and she was happy that her father had remembered that she had gone straight from work to the airport and had not eaten anything since her lunch. And she didn't have enough energy to eat out after a day of work and the trip.

While enjoying their cold beers and snacks on the terrace, her father asked with interest about her last trip to Africa for Mercyships. Emma was happy that he did not immediately inquire about her mother and enthusiastically told about her work as a nurse in the OR.

'On the third day I had to assist with face surgery. Seeing all the strange instruments for me, the courage sank into my shoes. But it soon turned out that this was not necessary at all,' Emma said proudly, to which her father responded that he had every confidence in her, after which Emma continued her story. 'After such an intensive day, we also received a clinical lesson on patients with facial abnormalities caused by Noma. That is a bacterial infection that is common there and eats away the whole face, as it were. Really terrible to see, daddy, but if you then look at the results after the reconstruction, also in tumors and tumors, then that gives such satisfaction. I was therefore very impressed with the work done by these surgeons.'

'I'm also very impressed with your work as a volunteer, Emma. And proud of all your hard work there.'

'But I learned a lot and enjoyed it very much. Also of the - albeit sporadic - free time. We had movie nights, including popcorn and ice cream and I was also able to visit the city regularly. John and I even ate in very good restaurants a few times. And the white sand on the beaches was phenomenal. There we could still enjoy the unspoiled beach and the sea, without tourists around you.'

'Yes, that's different here,' her father admitted. 'That's why I don't often want to go to the beach here, and I prefer to enjoy the tranquility and view from our terrace.'

'I honestly wouldn't feel like all that hustle and bustle and I'm right with you. I was able to enjoy the unspoiledness there. I did a hike in nature with a few colleagues from England. Despite the heat and the height differences, it was a great experience thanks to the guides who accompanied us. I thought it was surprising how green everything was in the time I was allowed to spend there, and all that made us persevere to be able to handle all those conditions and poverty.'

'I'm glad to hear that. I don't think you can keep it up otherwise. Especially when you experience those poor sick children.'

'That is certainly true. I rode the ambulance for a day and saw a lot of suffering, and many children with orthopedic complaints and with legs and arms in plaster.' Emma shivered for a moment at the memories her story evoked in her, but smiled when she thought back to the enthusiastic greetings of these children. 'But you know, dad, I'm lucky to be able and allowed to do this work. And I've kept good friendships about it. The night before you go home, you get an exit interview and a certificate, which feels a bit like you have passed and you receive your bull. And later in the evening there was an African party. When you have said goodbye the next day, you feel completely full of new energy again and you are already looking forward to the next time.'

'You traveled to South Africa with John and his friend afterwards, didn't you?'

'Yes, those were a wonderful few days,' and Emma talked about the excursions and the wildlife they had spotted.

She hid her meeting with Matt to her father, knowing that he would not only not understand this, but would also condemn it. His comment on her relationship with Ernst-Jan had never lacked clarity. And only after years, when her parents had met Ernst-Jan and seemed to understand the situation a bit, had he more or less resigned himself to it.

Their conversation was interrupted by loud voices, those coming from the terrace next to them.

'The new neighbors,' her father explained, while a slight annoyance resounded in his voice. 'You'll meet them, I think. But now we're going to have a nice dinner together,' her father remarked cheerfully, but this comment seemed to articulate all the loneliness of the past period.

The next morning Emma woke up early and decided to go for a run along the boulevard and on the way back at bakery Tahona bring fresh bread for breakfast. This bakery was parallel to the boulevard located on Calle Bulto, called "Het Straatje" by most Dutch people, because much of the Dutch hospitality industry was located here.

Her father was apparently still asleep and Emma put a note for him on the table with the message that she was running and would bring bread, after which she cheerfully started her round.

It had been a while since Emma had visited her parents and she had forgotten how busy it was in the morning on the boulevard with people who - for it would be too hot later in the day - were walking or running.

A few ladies stood in a circle in the sand and brought the sun salute during their yoga class. Boats of fishermen sailed close to the coast and the puffing monotonous sound of their motorcycles caused a sense of peace in Emma, as did the screaming seagulls that accompanied the fishermen, hoping to catch some of the catch.

The rising sun seemed to rise like a fireball from the sea and Emma suddenly understood why her father felt so happy here. She knew better than anyone why her father preferred to spend time on his own terrace in the afternoon, when the tourists strolled in large numbers along the boulevard, or - on one of the many beach beds that the beach was rich in - like sandwiches baking in the sun. It was hard for Emma to imagine that her mother loved this hustle and bustle, but she had discovered at a young age that her mother was different from her father and herself in this.

Emma walked down the boulevard until she arrived at the stairs to the center of Torremolinos, and then walked back the same route. It soon got warmer and Emma decided to walk a bit towards the bakery after walking eight kilometers.

She was not surprised that there were already people waiting outside. Not only because this bakery offered little space to enter with more than three customers at the same time, but also because the staff was friendly and the bread was deliciously crispy fresh.

Emma was patiently waiting for her turn when she heard a voice - which sounded vaguely familiar to her but she could not directly place - in a surprised and asking tone calling her name.

Emma turned to the voice that had spoken to her and felt her legs become limp and the blood flow to her head. Happy that the latter probably wouldn't stand out because she must have had a red and sweaty head from running, Emma replied with a voice that didn't seem to come off her: 'Matt, what are you doing here now?'

'I could also ask you the same thing, but I do want to answer your question: I'm visiting my parents here. And you? You don't seem like the type who spends her vacation here.'

'I'm visiting my father,' Emma replied, slowly recovering from the reunion with Matt after their wild night in Africa.

'Well, that must have been the way I guess,' and Matt smiled broadly as he said this.

'I don't know exactly what you mean by this, but I don't think we'll spend much time together here,' Emma replied killy.

It was Emma's turn, she passed on her order and settled with her phone, while she noticed to her frustration that she couldn't open the Wallet on her phone and offered Matt to pay for her. Because Emma heard the customers who were waiting for their turn sigh in impatience, she accepted Matt's offer against her will.

As if it were the most normal thing in the world, Matt walked with Emma on the way back to her father's apartment.

'I think I owe you an apology and a statement,' Matt opened the conversation.

'I don't think we owe each other anything. We enjoyed the sex, had a nice day, end of story,' Emma replied, while the tone at which she spoke her words testified to the opposite.

'Emma, at least let me explain.'

'Let it rest Matt. I really mean it, I had a nice day with you and enjoyed the sex. I don't regret it and the only thing I regret is that we did injustice to your wife. I don't want to hear an explanation from you, no excuse and certainly not a beautiful story that moved you to cheat. Save that story for your wife, if she ever discovers it. I wish you happy days with your parents and if you don't mind, I'd rather say goodbye now.'

After these words, Emma held out her hand to Matt to reinforce her words of farewell and in a failed attempt to come across casually.

Without saying anything else, Emma then turned around, and continued her way back without looking any further. If she had done this, she would have noticed that Matt was running after her at an appropriate distance.

## Chapter 23

Her father had already set the table on the terrace and grabbed Emma's bag of fresh sandwiches.

'Are you going to take a nice shower, I'll make coffee in the meantime. Or do you prefer tea?'

'Coffee is fine and would like a glass of water. I have to replenish my fluid balance after running,' Emma replied with a smile, after which she walked to her room to shower and change clothes.

As she enjoyed the cold water jets of the rain shower on her body, she thought back to her meeting with Matt and felt regret about the way she had reacted. Because she knew only too well that Matt realized that her words were at right angles to what she really wanted to say. And want to hear. But it was precisely the latter that had ensured that she had reacted as she had reacted, because she had been afraid of the consequences if he had her in front of him again with beautiful words want to take.

Because a look at him would have been enough to make her heart beat faster, although she would never allow herself to enter into a relationship with a married man again.

Emma tried to distract her thoughts by telling herself that she could no longer avoid a conversation about her mother with her father.

Last night he had shown interest in her stories about her time in Africa, now it was her turn to listen to him.

After Emma had put on some comfortable clothes, she took the coffee her father had made on her way to the terrace. She gave her father a kiss on his cheek and complimented him on the delicious breakfast he had prepared. She greedily emptied the glass of water, after which her father filled her glass with freshly squeezed orange juice.

After they had eaten the sandwiches and her father had served another cup of coffee for them, Emma took her father's still powerful hand.

'So, and now tell me how you're doing and don't hie anything from me. I don't think mom does that either, so you don't have to spare me.'

'Emma, I'm not doing well at all, I don't think I even need to explain that to you. I've even reached the point where I want to sell things here, if that would make your mother happy. But I think there is much more to your mother than homesickness for the Netherlands. Or the fact that she thinks I'm behaving like an old man. Because I don't behave differently from what I have behaved in recent years since we moved to Spain. And for a few months she suddenly thinks I have to change. But Emma, my age is closer to eighties than seventies and I can't change anymore.' The latter was not a question, but a finding and Emma did not respond to it, but did give her a new insight into the crisis her parents were in.

'Daddy, I think you just put your finger on the sore spot. Mo sees that you have started the last stage of your life and wants to get as much out of life as possible. And for her, that is not just enjoying your apartment in Spain. She wants to see some more of the world, and I don't think that really has to be a trip to Australia or something. But she thinks your world has become too small and if I have to be honest, I actually agree with her,' Emma honestly admitted. Because as she spoke to her father, it became increasingly clear to her where the shoe was wrong and what could have gone so terribly wrong.

Her father did not answer immediately and stared out in front of him with an empty look, as if the answer would blow towards him from the sea.

'It's all because of that new neighbor,' her father spoke in a tone that was halfway between indignation and despair.

'No, daddy, it's not because of the neighbor. Okay, I admit that mom may have started to compare your behavior a bit with that of the neighbor

And that this did not speak in your favor. But he may have been an eye-opener, but not the cause. The cause is hidden in your lack of communication and in the fact that after fifty years you have come to take everything for granted. Convenience, that's it, Daddy. After fifty years of thinking that everything will remain as it was and you no longer have to put energy or effort into your relationship. That goes for both of you, let there be no misunderstanding about that. I can't guarantee you that mom will come to the realization that you can still have a very nice time together, if you dare to be honest with each other. But don't give up too quickly, daddy, and try to win her over to you again, without making yourself too short. Don't promise things you're not going to keep, but see how far you can meet each other. And talk to each other, not about each other.'

'I know you're right, Emma, but I have no idea what to do. Will you please help me with that,' he asked in a pleading tone.

'Of course, dad, to begin with, we are going to work together these few days to see what you can still do together. Things that you both like and will both enjoy. And then we're going to see how you can conquer mom's heart again. Because even if I don't want to give you false hope, I don't think it's a lost business yet,' Emma tried to upry her father a bit. 'And now we clear the table and go for a walk and then have lunch somewhere.'

'I really don't know what to do without you, Emma, I'm so glad you're here.'

'You have always been there for me and now it's my turn. And you're lucky that I only have to give mental support and don't have to push you behind a wheelchair.'

'Oh, Emma, if I had to choose between the rest of my life in a wheelchair or a life without your mother, I would really choose the wheelchair.'

'Dad, not so melodramatic. God forbade it, but it is also possible that one of you will die and even then you will have to find your way. But think positively now, because that's the only way back to mom's heart.'

After promising this, Emma filled the dishwasher and they both put on their sneakers to go for a long walk and then enjoy a daily fresh fish meal, in the shade on the terrace of one of her parents' favorite restaurants.

The waiter greeted Emma's father warmly and it was clearly noticeable that her parents were regular visitors. Point for daddy, Emma thought to herself because her mother had made it look like they were never going anywhere again and her father just wanted to sit on his own terrace.

Her father started a conversation in Spanish and the waiter answered in Dutch. Emma smiled when it became clear to her that this was a game for both of them to show that they more or less mastered each other's language.

'Bruno wanted to learn some Dutch words and I helped him with that,' he said proudly.

'And did he teach you the Spanish language?'

'No, certainly not. I took a course here with a Spanish lady with a Dutch mother. She has lived here all her life, but her mother always spoke Dutch with her at home, so she was raised bilingually. She has started giving language courses to the people who have come to live here or have largely stayed here like your mother and me. In the meantime, she has built up great brand recognition and has recently been able to give up her job in the hospitality industry to devote herself fully to teaching Spanish. And you know what's so nice about this course, it's completely focused on daily conversation and communication. And this basic knowledge is enough to have a chat with the people here. I don't have to write letters or anything, if necessary this woman will also help you for a small fee. For example, she went with me to the hospital a while ago when I broke my finger, after your mother closed the door and got my finger between the door. That was nice, that she went along I mean, not that I had broken my finger, because I don't understand medical terms well. But I'm glad we speak a word of Spanish.'

'And learning a new language in your old age is good for your gray cells,' Emma added.

Their conversation was interrupted when a good-looking man with a clearly younger woman by his arm came up to them and greeted them amicably. Even before he had introduced himself, Emma knew that this must be the neighbor her parents - albeit both with completely different words - had spoken of.

Emma immediately understood why her mother was so charmed by this man, and despised her father. With his tanned face, full hair and a strikingly muscular body for his age, he certainly managed to make women's hearts beat faster - apart from his charismatic appearance.

However, his dominant presence would most likely hit others. And those others were without a doubt her father and Emma, although it soon became clear that they could not avoid it without being rude that the neighbors, who had introduced themselves to her as Maarten and Isabelle, join them for a joint lunch.

Bruno also brought them cutlery and a menu and Emma saw how he exchanged a look of understanding with her father over Maarten and Isabelle's head.

Maarten indeed dominated the conversations at the table and although Emma had to admit that he could tell very fascinating about the many trips he had made, she could hardly hide her irritation.

Maybe because because of the situation with her parents she looked at him a bit through colored glasses.

Whether Isabelle had felt this - whether she was so used to it that her husband prevailed and knew it was time to intervene - Emma did not know, but before Maarten wanted to start a new subject about one of his many adventures, she intervened and asked Emma with interest what she did in her daily life.

Emma looked at the woman in surprise but relieved and talked about her work in healthcare. Why she didn't know herself, but she suddenly felt the compulsion to also tell them about her studies and her previous successful company.

'But after years I found out that money is not satisfying and I turned the wheel. And after carefully orienting myself to what would make me happy, I ended up in care.'

With pride - as probably only parents could talk about their children - her father added to her story and told about her volunteer work for Mercyships in Africa.

Isabelle showed genuine interest and Emma began to like this woman more and more. But it was clear that if the stories did not contain an element of adventure, excitement or sport, Maarten's interest quickly waned and he took over the conversation again.

Emma therefore thanked for the dessert and suggested her father to continue their walk and ask for the bill. There followed a short fight about who would pay the bill between Emma's father and Maarten, which was settled by Isabelle who indicated that she would pay the bill and

The men would send a tip.

Emma smiled at her with a wink, after which they said goodbye and continued their walk.

## Chapter 24

During their walk and they discussed extensively with each other how they had experienced the company during lunch.

'And your mother thinks that's a man I have to take an example of,' Emma's father sighed, while Emma burst out laughing.

'After fifty years, mom should know that Maarten and you have no similarities, except that you love Spain. And I think mom could never be so patient with you if you did have some of Maarten's character traits, as Isabelle is with her husband. I thought she was really nice and sometimes felt a little sorry for her. And in any case, I admire her for her ability to occasionally point Maarten to his place respectfully and in peace. Not everyone is given that, and mom certainly wouldn't have the patience for that.'

Her father suddenly seemed to get a lot more cheerful after Emma's words, and suggested having another cup of coffee before they walked back to the apartment.

'And then we go to a real Dutch store, where they have homemade apple pie. I know you can't really appreciate that, but then you also experience a piece of Dutch culture in its Spanish.'

After she agreed to this, they walked to the terrace of the Dutch business where her father apparently wanted to take her so much.

Here, too, her father was greeted as a regular visitor and proudly introduced Emma to the staff. Emma immediately saw why her father had wanted to take her to this terrace: he wanted to prove to Emma that her parents had indeed built a social life in Spain, although this was perhaps not the social life they had been used to in the Netherlands.

The hospitality immediately struck Emma, and immediately saw the difference with the average hospitality staff in the Netherlands. At least on the terraces of large cities, where the staff often did not even speak the Dutch language and you were addressed in English. Something Emma didn't mind, but she basically refused to place her order in English. In her own opinion, this was the only way these people would learn Dutch. And if a waiter in Spain took the trouble to learn a few Dutch words for his customers, why shouldn't the staff in the Netherlands be able to do this, the language of the country where they had gone to live and work.

Emma noticed that her father was a lot more cheerful during her stay had become and had come back to look a bit like the man she knew as her father. The mischievous glints in his eyes, which were so characteristic of him, returned a bit and he had his shoulders right again.

The waitress brought their order and asked with interest about her mother.

'Oh, Sigrid is going to her friends in the Netherlands for a few days and now Emma is keeping me company. Then Sigrid can enjoy Emma's company for a few more days when Emma is back in the Netherlands. Didn't you go to Limburg together for another ten days?'

Her father looked at Emma questioningly but with a clear message. He wanted to give Nicolette - as the waitress had imagined to Emma - a plausible reason why his wife would stay in the Netherlands for a while, because of course he didn't want to tell her the truth.

'If you don't mind, that was indeed the plan,' Emma replied with a steel face.

'I don't like it, but I can have a lot of fun without your mother. If it's not that long, but I assume you'll put her back on the plane to Spain after your vacation in Limburg.'

The double message did not escape Emma and she muttered something back that would be unintelligible to the Nicolette.

'Well then I wish you a good time with your father here in Spain and I'll see your mother again in a few weeks. And Aad, I think I'll see you back soon for your apple pie, now that your cholesterol watchdog is in the Netherlands,' Nicolette laughed.

After these words, she walked to a new customer who had taken a seat on the terrace, and enthusiastically waved at her to get her attention.



Emma looked at her father indignantly. 'Dad, it's not up to me whether mom comes back or not. That will have to be her own choice and it will be up to you to let her make that choice, not me. I will only show her the direction I think you should walk, just like I'm trying to do with you. But the rest is up to you, let me be very clear on that.'

Her father looked at her in shock and Emma could see from him that he had cherished the silent hope that Emma would ensure that everything would be fine again. But that would be impossible and only backfire on her mother. Emma should very tactically and strategically - but above all with a lot of patience - make her mother realize that she really wouldn't be better off without her husband. And that she should come out of the pink Maarten cloud with her head again and back with her feet on the ground. Because Maarten was not half as nice as her mother wanted to believe and her father was not nearly as boring as she had made Emma appear. That had become clear to Emma after all the warm greetings to her father by the staff during lunch and in this business - also by the regular customers.

Then they sat side by side in silence, watching the people of various feathers strolling by. Among all those people, Emma saw Matt walking in the company of an older couple, presumably the parents he was visiting.

Emma made himself small in the hope that he would not notice her. For a moment, it also seemed that they would walk by, until Matt's father caught her father's eye. Of course, Emma thought with herself, those elderly people all know each other here.

Enthusiastically, they walked up to their table, and Emma praised herself happily that they had taken a seat at a double table and there were no free seats, so that in any case they could not sit at their table or near it.

Her father introduced them to each other and Matt told with a wide grin that Emma and he had already met in Africa.

'Is it real?' Asked his mother, and without waiting for an answer she determined that the world was only small.

Emma agreed to this and tried to distract attention from their meeting in Africa by noticing that she had noticed that in La Carihuela everyone seemed to know each other.

'That is more or less the case, only in the high season when there is mass tourism, then we do not meet each other again. Then we flee to the Netherlands or stay in our own apartment with the air conditioning on,' Matt's mother admitted.

'That's a luxury, isn't it? I mean that you can avoid the masses and the heat by going back to the Netherlands. Those poor Spaniards are robbed of their homes by the tourists and have nowhere to go.'

Emma looked at Matt in surprise after his comment and wondered what the underlying motives were. These soon became clear to her when his mother made it clear that Matt felt that their generation consisted largely of spoiled baby boomers, who had no eye for the problems of today.

'Something I never agree with him and ask him if he has any idea of the problems our generation has had to deal with and is now dealing with.'

'And,' Matt added to his mother, 'then I am told that their money is in stones and our generation can eventually make it all valid after they have died.'

Emma didn't know if she should laugh at their conversation, or feel annoyed. She was glad that no one asked about their previous acquaintance, but she was also not waiting for a conversation that was apparently their hobby horse. Or maybe they were just loving teasing towards each other, which were only understood by the family itself.

Fortunately, her father apparently didn't feel like listening to that conversation either, and after his comment that he liked talking to them again and they had to go for a drink with the four of them when his wife was back, they seemed to understand the hint and said goodbye.

'Niche people,' her father began. 'But you're only here for two days and I don't want to spend that time with others.'

After ordering another glass of beer from Nicolette for them, he asked curiously about her meeting with Matt in Africa.

'I can be brief about that, he was in the same place with his wife where John and I were and we met on a joint excursion. There is really nothing more to say.'

'With his wife?' Her father asked in surprise.

'Yes, what's strange about Matt being in Africa with his wife?'

'Nothing, I just think I remember his mother telling me about a year ago that Matt and his wife had separated. But then I was probably wrong and it was someone else who told me that her son was getting divorced.'

'Yes, I think that will be the case, because he was really there with his wife, I'm sure.'

Emma noticed that her heartbeat had risen after her father's comment, although she knew only too well that there was no doubt that Matt was there with his wife. So probably her father did indeed confuse the story about Matt with someone else.

'Too bad, I mean, I think Matt is quite a nice man don't you think?'

Emma was briefly confused by her father's comment and felt that she blushed. There was no point in denying that she was attracted to Matt and she agreed with his comment with a simple: 'I totally agree with you.'

Fortunately, for her father, this ended the conversation about Matt and he suggested going home, to make a plan for the campaign how he could win back his wife's love.

## Chapter 25

Emma had agreed with her mother to have lunch together, so that they could discuss the past period together in peace.

Her mother had reserved a table at her favorite restaurant Nova in Bleiswijk. Emma had doubted the location for a while because it was a bit more difficult for her to reach by public transport, but her mother was happy to come there and now that they recently served lunch again on Friday, she had finally let herself be persuaded.

The sun was shining exuberantly that day and Emma praised herself happily with this wonderful weather so early in the year.

It would undoubtedly not be good for the farmers and the Water Board that it had been dry for such a long time, but Emma had thought to herself that she could not change anything about it anyway, and so it was better just enjoy it.

Because of the good weather, she had turned down her mother's offer to pick her up and decided to go on the bike. It was a nice bike ride right through the Kralingse Bos and a bit through the Lage Bergse Bos along the Rotte.

'I've come to a decision,' her mother began in a tone as if she wanted to tell her whether or not she would buy a new car.

'Mom, the amuses haven't even been served yet. But tell me.'

'I'm going back to your father, but on my terms.'

That starts off nicely, Emma thought to herself. Her father's opinions and feelings seemed to be ignored in advance by her mother and did not matter.

'Shouldn't you have a normal conversation with each other first? I mean, dad certainly has something to contribute, right?'

'Oh, don't worry. That conversation will come and I will even listen to him. But first you listen to what I have decided.'

'Okay, I'm listening and won't interrupt you,' Emma promised, thinking to herself that this didn't mean that she would go along with her mother's story and save her comment for later.

'I love your father and I miss him,' her mother admitted and Emma breathed a sigh of relief. This was in any case a good opening sentence. 'I also love our life in Spain, but something has to change. From now on I will return to the Netherlands from mid-June to mid-September and not only in July and August. I fly to the Netherlands for three days every month and want to be here for Christmas. And I want to travel somewhere at least twice a year. By train a few days to Barcelona, Madrid, San Sebastián or a cruise from Malaga to the Canary Islands or so,' Emma's mother said her decision as a package of demands out of her mind.

Emma couldn't suppress a wide smile, because this was exactly in line with what she had discussed with her father and she knew he would fully agree with this. Although perhaps the consecutive period that her mother wanted to go to the Netherlands would be too long for her father. But there must have been a mauw to be adjusted. Either her mother put a little water with the wine or her father stayed alone in Spain for a few weeks a year. The latter was perhaps the best option, as it also offered her mother the opportunity to make up for the time with her friends, whom she had missed during her stay in Spain.

Emma decided to be just as brief in her response as her mother had been, and only asked when she would fly back to Spain.

'Tomorrow, I already have the ticket and I'll send your father a Whatsapp in no time.'

'Mom, you can't just send a Whatsapp out of the Blue. Call that poor man and tell him you're coming back.'

But her mother held on and Emma decided that she would call her father herself to prepare him a bit. Although she would leave it to her mother to tell her story herself. She did hope that her mother would present it a little less as a package of demands to her

father than that she had done this to Emma, and would leave her some room for a healthy dialogue.

There seemed to be nothing else to add to their conversation about the return to Spain, and they relaxed and enjoyed their delicious three-course menu of the chef, the sun and the view.

The crisis was averted and Emma was able to go on with her own life. And secretly she was happy that she would now see her parents a little more often. Because she had missed it more than she would have liked to admit to herself. And as sad as it all might have been, the bond with her parents had become closer and they had started to look at each other with different eyes.

After she dropped her mother off at the airport, Emma took a deep breath. She was glad that it all ended with a hiss and her parents were back together without having suffered too much damage.

Emma had given her mother the advice not to stare too blindly at Maarten's activities, and to pay more attention to how Isabelle reacted to all those stories of her husband.

It had been two very long weeks, which had been completely in the context of her parents and Emma had almost come to consider her work as a distraction. She was therefore happy that she had time to exercise again and the much-needed time for herself.

Last night Emma couldn't control herself and searched social media for more information about Matt.

But she had only found a business account on LinkedIn. She couldn't have made up much more than she already knew. He turned out to be an architect who worked for a well-known architectural firm in Rotterdam and was involved in the construction of famous projects. Just as he had told her during the excursion in Africa.

The only private related message she could find was the request to sponsor him during the Roparun and Emma decided to transfer an amount.

She could choose whether to sponsor Matt's entire team or just him, and she chose the whole team. Then she filled in the space where she could fill in a message for something neutral and only stated: €500.00 for each kilometer run one euro.

She then chose to transfer the amount anonymously, without mentioning her e-mail address, although her name would of course be traced back to the bank statements.

Disappointed that she had not been able to find anything else about his private life, she then put away her iPad and called her father to tell him that he could look forward to her mother's return, but left it to her mother to tell her story.

'You can breathe a sigh of relief, daddy, and you don't have to go surfing or anything. But if you don't retreat into your shell and remember what we discussed, then it will be all right,' she gave him the last advice.

Then she had watched a movie on Netflix, but couldn't concentrate, after which she decided to look at the photos she had taken in Africa and have the nicest and most beautiful photos made into an album.

Between these photos had, to her own surprise, found a photo of her and Matt together on the boat. Was it her imagination or was it really that he looked at her with an intense look? Emma got a warm feeling inside and added the photo of them together to the album without thinking about it. After all, he had been part of her journey. And thanks to him, Emma had realized in Africa that she had not only found her way in life, but could also open her heart to a man other than Ernst-Jan. That this turned out to be a married man was the irony of fate.

## Chapter 26

After the surprisingly sunny periods of recent months, the weather had been drizzly last week and Emma had used this week to do some overdue chores around the house and subject her wardrobe to a thorough inspection. She decided that she would take all the clothes she hadn't worn for a year or more to the clothing bank.

With the point of a few items, Emma had finally managed to fulfill her resolutions and with a satisfied feeling she looked at the bags of clothes that were ready to be taken away.

She was just about to reward herself with a glass of fresh ginger tea with lemon, honey and mint, when her phone rang off. It was a number unknown to her and for a moment she doubted whether she would accept the conversation.

You've heard so many alarming reports about scams lately that Emma always looked at an unknown number with appropriate suspicion. But it was a song from the Netherlands and although that offered no guarantee, Emma was a little less suspicious of this and answered the conversation.

She could not place either the name or the voice directly and wanted to end the conversation before it had started, but suddenly realized that this was one of Janneke's friends, whom she had met at the party Janneke had given a few months ago.

Curious about what Mirthe had to tell her, Emma greeted her enthusiastically.

After some mutual exchanges on how they were doing, Mirthe asked if Emma was still interested in joining the annual outing that Mirthe would organize for her friends.

Emma - who had forgotten this whole outing - had to switch because she had spontaneously shouted that she would go along, she had not thought about it for a second.

She remembered John's comment, that she should not enter Miranda's old life, and wanted to kindly but definitely reject the invitation, when Mirthe continued that they had talked to each other and everyone liked to let some new blood into the group.

'But Janneke pressed my heart not to insist if you refused, so I promise you I won't do that either,' Mirthe concluded her story.

Dear Janneke, of course she had understood the reason for not wanting to use the invitation. But what to lose Emma? Hadn't she decided to no longer behave like a loner and open up a little more to friendships.

And this friendship was offered to her on a presentation tray. Wasn't this the ultimate opportunity to determine for herself whether she could distance herself from her need to be alone? Although she had probably already proven this during her work in Africa, during this outing she would really spend twenty-four hours a day - and this for three days - with the same people and that was quite different from on the ship, where the variety between the contacts in the workplace and the people you spent your free time with was much greater.

'Maybe you want to know where we're going first and think about it for a while?'

'Yes I would like to know where we are going and when. I still have to discuss it at work whether it can fit into the schedule anyway. I'm already causing the schedule enough headaches with my absence during my volunteer work in Africa.'

'We plan to cycle part of the Elfstedentocht with each other on the last weekend of June. Today I was able to take an option on an insanely beautiful house, a converted barn on a mini-campsite'

'That's soon, but I think it would be a lot of fun to go along. If you wait a while, I'll see which shift I have that weekend and whether I think it's possible to swap a shift with a colleague, because the schedule is already fixed.'

'Of course, I'll wait a while, no problem.'

Emma opened her work agenda and saw that she was not on duty on Friday and Saturday. That Monday she was scheduled for the night shift. That would be hard after such an intensive weekend, but not impossible if no one could exchange service for Sunday.

'I can arrange it, so I'm happy to join. Although I find it a bit exciting to go along with such a close-knit group of women I don't know, except Janneke of course,' Emma admitted.

'Don't worry, I think you fit our group perfectly. We are all completely different, but you will soon discover that for yourself.'

'Why did you actually invite me? I mean, you didn't feel obliged to do this because I happened to be there when you discussed with each other at Janneke's party that you wanted to leave each other again?' Emma couldn't help but ask.

'I will never have asked you for that reason. And if you don't believe me, you should ask our old football team, because we never invited anyone from them to join us. Only the girls who were involved in the team from the first hour went along. But we have become a bit older and wiser and I had the feeling that you felt comfortable with us and needed new friendships. I don't know what you've been through recently, and you don't have to explain that to us at all, but we all have our backpack to a greater or lesser extent. I don't really know exactly what I mean by myself, but it just felt good to ask you.'

'Mirthe, I actually want to tell you something first before I finally agree to come along. Because what I've been through can affect how you look at me. But I'd rather not do that over the phone,' Emma confessed. Because friendship had to be based on honesty and she didn't want to make a false start.

One day they might find out that she had been in an affair with Ernst-Jan and that would undoubtedly mean the end of friendship.

'Should I come to you in an hour? Or would you rather meet somewhere else?' Mirthe suggested.

'No, it's fine here,' Emma agreed to the proposal and passed her address on to Mirthe.

'Oh, delicious, you live near the center and then also with a view over the Meuse, to be jealous of. See you in an hour, if I can at least park somewhere,' Mirthe laughed.

Emma felt a strange mixture of relief and fear. Relieved that she did not want to keep a secret of her relationship with Ernst-Jan, afraid at the thought that they would condemn her for this.

Mirthe entered after just over an hour and Emma went to the living room in front of her. Mirthe immediately walked on to the window and expressed her admiration for the view. Because the apartment was built right after the bend in the Meuse, Emma looked out at the skyline of both the north and the south side.

'I still enjoy this view every day and prefer to sit here by the window with a book,' Emma said when she saw Mirthe's admiring gaze.

After Emma had spiled coffee for them, Mirthe immediately fell into the house with the door. 'You will discover that I am always very direct, so I don't think about it now. What is your great secret, of which you think we will condemn you?'

'I've been in a relationship with Miranda's husband, Ernst-Jan for about ten years,' Emma replied as directly as the question had been.

Mirthe looked at her speechlessly for a moment and finally burst out laughing.

'Really, Emma? What I like to hear that. And we always feel sorry for that man, while he himself had a mistress.'

Emma was shocked by the word mistress for a moment, because she had never considered herself that way. She always made the link with women who were supported by a married man, while in their case this was absolutely not the case. She therefore felt compelled to correct Mirthe in this.

'I think mistress is not the right word, Mirthe. I know it was an extramarital relationship, but there was indeed a relationship that consisted of mutual respect, friendship and love.'

'Don't blame me, I didn't mean anything by that. But, dear Emma, if you think there is anyone in our group who will condemn you, then I dare to reassure you. We were all

always aware of Miranda's amorous escapades and the only thing that surprises me is that he

In the end, she chose her, not you. Or was your relationship already over then?' Mirthe's voice sounded interested and was weaned from any kind of curiosity.

'No, it was like a thunderbolt for me in clear heaven. Although I later understood why he came to this decision, but I'd rather not talk about that. I just wanted you to know this and not carry it as a secret with me when we are together.'

'Does Janneke know?'

'Yes, I told her right after the funeral ceremony. Not that I was planning to do that at the time, but that just happened. But she actually reacted the same as you did now.'

'And so the rest will react. Especially if Janneke has not already condemned it, given the fact that her husband has been unfaithful to her and she may deal with it a little differently than we do. But we all knew that Miranda was a huge flirt and she especially seemed to love Ernst-Jan's credit card. You don't want to know how surprised we were when she suddenly announced that she had discovered that she still loved him.'

'No, I don't really want to know that,' Emma smiled.

Mirthe understood this but honestly said that she could not guarantee that Miranda's name would not fall during the cycling weekend in Friesland. 'We all loved her and we still miss her. It is our first weekend away without her and there will undoubtedly be many memories of her. If you don't think you can deal with that, it might be better if you don't go along.'

'I think I can handle that. Miranda is something abstract to me and in my head your friend Miranda is someone other than Ernst-Jan's wife. I can't explain that properly, but I think it's because Ernst-Jan and I lived in a kind of parallel world. Miranda was rarely mentioned. I knew he was married and also that they had been living their own lives for years. If that hadn't been the case, he would never have been in a relationship with me. But his son always came first and that was also the reason he would never leave Miranda in the beginning. I think Miranda knew that herself. To be honest, I think all three of us were happy with our lives. I don't know if Miranda ever suspected he was in a relationship with another woman, and I never asked myself that.'

'I'm pretty sure she never knew, because Miranda wasn't the type who would have kept this quiet for us. But now that I think about it, maybe she somehow found out after years and that was the reason she discovered that she still loved him and wanted to revive their relationship. But I don't think we'll ever find out again.'

'No, I honestly don't think so either and that's no longer relevant at all. They both are no longer alive and I have found my way back in life.'

'Thank you for being so honest, Emma, I sincerely appreciate this. And after our conversation, I also have confidence that our friendship with Miranda and your love relationship with Ernst-Jan do not have to get in each other's way. But I still want to know from you what your feelings are towards Bente. After all, she was indirectly involved in Ernst-Jan's death through no fault of her own.' Mirthe looked at Emma with a penetrating look and it was clear that this worried her more than their friendship with Miranda and her relationship with Ernst-Jan.

Janneke had told the tragic story of Bente to Emma and the feeling of resentment she had initially felt had given way to pity.

'Don't worry about that, Mirthe, this might as well have happened to me. Bente was seduced and deceived by a man who thought she had found love again. Maybe she was a bit naive, but from what I understand Miranda and Ernst-Jan were not suspicious of him either and they were happy for Bente. There is no one who accuses Ernst-Jan or Miranda of taking Bente into the house after her house was turned upside down by a drug criminal. And even after it became clear that Bente's new love was part of a violent drug organization and was also convicted for this, they provided Bente with shelter. So you can also accuse

them of naivety because they themselves - at a time when drug-related attacks dominated the news every day - did not think that Bente could be a possible target.' Emma realized as she said these words out loud, she had unconsciously blamed Ernst-Jan that he, and not Bente, had been so naive not to see this and had not taken any measures.

Mirthe, who was not quick to shut up, looked silently at Emma, while she was overcome by new feelings, because she had never looked at the cause of her friend's death in this way, but it dawned on her that Emma - with both an emotional and rational view of the events - had assessed the situation correctly.

'We have never looked at any of them that way, but I think you're right when you say they've been as naive as Bente. But for the sake of completeness, I have to tell you that the detective who was handling the case had convinced Bente that she was not in danger.'

'I hadn't really looked at it like that before,' Emma confessed. 'While reasoning while I spoke, this became clear to me.'

'In any case, it is clear that you will not blame Bente. But if I may give you some advice, you don't have to follow this up, talk to Bente before we leave that weekend. Tell her personally about your life with Ernst-Jan. And I don't think you have to be afraid that Bente will blame you. Because she knew Miranda better than anyone, and regularly witnessed Miranda's amorous adventures.'

Emma promised that she would think about this and said that she still had something to confess. 'Uh, it may sound a bit strange, but Bart's ex-wife, who is now married to Nanda, has been my best friend since I was a student.'

'Ah, we had already heard that from Bart and Nanda could only laugh about it, so I wouldn't worry so much about that. But you say: been?'

'Yes, we still have contact, but I think a few years ago we each took a different turn in life and grew apart. And I have come to see that a close friendship with Thérèse is not possible. Without going further out of school, I called her an ice queen and advised her to look for her happiness in things other than in her career. Not the fact that she got angry about that - which she didn't even even - but that she didn't seem to understand what I was trying to make clear to her, made me realize that our friendship was not based on the values of life that are important to me.'

'You are a beautiful person, Emma, and I would like to get to know you better.'

Emma looked at Mirthe with a surprised look, no one had ever called her a beautiful person. And these words meant more to Emma than she could ever have imagined.



## Chapter 27

A few days after her conversation with Mirthe, Emma had contacted Bente and told her about her relationship with Ernst-Jan. Bente reacted laconically to her confession as Mirthe had already predicted, and like Mirthe and Janneke, she also seemed to find it a nice thought that Ernst-Jan had had a happy period with Emma.

It was soon clear to Emma that Bente had also been closely involved in the reconciliation of Ernst-Jan with Miranda, and could probably answer many questions. But because Emma had decided to leave her life no longer in the sign of the sorrow of her lost love, she did not ask for more and seemed to feel good about Bente.

Bente knew Miranda's friends quite well by now, but she also found it exciting to go away for a weekend with women who had been a close-knit team for so many years.

'Then at least we are the outsiders together,' Emma reassured her, which Bente agreed.

Bente told Emma that Janneke had also been the link between her and the acquaintance with the rest. 'And if you see that Janneke was always the outsider of the group and hardly had a social life until her marriage crisis, this is quite something she can be proud of.'

'I don't know much about the other women and I don't know them at all. I actually still find it a bit strange that they invited me.'

'Just as a bird's eye view, Janneke knows you. And you also know that her husband had a relationship with someone else because he was tired of their narrow-minded life, although he still loved her.' Emma answered affirmatively, after which Bente continued her short introduction, without Emma interrupting her.

'Mirthe is the regulator. Widow and for a few years now happy again with her Mark, whom she met at their football club FC Omnes. She has a grandchild, with whom she flirts. She is very close with Tedje. Tedje has had breast cancer, from which she was cured but which she has suffered from heart failure due to chemotherapy. Tedje was divorced after her illness and got a new relationship around the same time as Mirthe, and is completely happy again. And it's great to see how she deals with her heart failure. She knows her limitations, but her motto is: if what I want is not possible, then I only want what I can. Tooske is the mother of the team. She is by far the oldest and as everyone knows: a huge interference. But thanks to her meddling, Janneke and her husband Victor are back together. Although Liberra also played a role in this. Liberra is difficult to gauge. She lost a brother at a young age and then her mother seems to have completely lost her grief. Her mother had Italian roots and abandoned Liberra and her father when Liberra had another adolescent was.

She then left for Italy and later her father remarried. I don't think she had a nice stepmother. But Liberra's greatest sadness concerns her stillborn child and the fact that she could no longer have children after that. That even resulted in a divorce, but she has been happy with her second husband and a good bonus mother and grandmother for a long time now. Can you still follow it all?' Bente interrupted her story.

'It's quite a lot of information and I can't promise you that I'll know which story belongs to whom, but tell me further,' Emma urged curiously.

Diana is the stable factor of the group. She lost her parents shortly after each other, after taking care of them for years as a caregiver. And her husband has also been very sick, but that all seems to be going well now. Diana is always very caring, but also quickly worried about someone else. But never about himself. And then we have Ana. Ana fled with her parents from the former Yugoslavia to the Netherlands at a young age, although she doesn't talk much about it. Ana is first and foremost mother and grandmother. After her law studies - which she completed cum laude - she only worked for a short time and hung her career on the willows after the birth of her first child. She had a kind of relationship crisis after the corona pandemic. Ana is a lot younger than her husband and when he retired, they both didn't seem to be able to get along well with that new situation. But after

many conversations with her husband and as Ana called it: a spicy conversation that Tooske had fed with her - in which she accused Ana of behaving like a selfish and spoiled woman - it all went well. Finally Nanda. Nanda is the most romantic story of all. She has become pregnant with Bart, with whom she is now married, but who has only started playing a role in the lives of Nanda and her daughter for twenty years or more. Nanda has always been alone and just as she had a relationship with Joost, Bart reappeared on stage. Actually because she talked herself during some game that Tedje had taken with her during their weekend in Valkenburg, because she had always claimed that she had become pregnant during a one-night stand and did not know who Denise's father was. Through that game, her daughter Denise caught on the fact that Nanda knew who her father was, after which Denise went in search of her father. To make a long story short, Denise found her father, he was now divorced and was back to Nanda's work, although a lot of water flowed to the sea before Nanda admitted to being in love with Bart again. Eventually she broke up her relationship with Joost and Bart and they are now married and very much in love and happy. To complete the story, Joost is now in a relationship with a sister or friend, I don't know exactly, of Tedje.'

'You hear you can write a book about those women,' Emma concluded. 'Although you can do that about your life, I think you can. I don't know the good thing about it and you don't have to tell me that, but your last relationship was also very intense.'

'I'll tell you that story sometime. But now I can only tell you that I gave the whole event a place and thought back to it as little as possible. I went through life as a widow for ten years and that can take a few more years as far as I'm concerned. Since I returned to the Netherlands - because I had to flee because of my own safety - I have been looking for what I want with my life and a new partner is not on my wish list for the moment,' confessed Bente.

Emma, who could only well imagine this, gave her great reason.

'It took me a very long time before I fathered my breakup with Ernst-Jan and his death. But since I've been to Africa and volunteered for MercyShips there, I've found my way back and got to know myself better. I'm even open to a new relationship, although I think I'll be very careful about that.'

Bente inquired with interest about her volunteer work and the work of MercyShips. Emma told this very enthusiastically and passionately and Bente replied that she was sorry that she had no medical background, because she not only thought it would be fun to work as a volunteer, but could give the substance to her life she was looking for at that time. Emma immediately responded that Bente did not need a medical background at all, because volunteers were also needed in the kitchen, the household, at the reception and administration. 'And so there are more features, just take a look at their website. There you will find all the information you need.'

Bente said she would definitely do this and they agreed to go somewhere to eat somewhere soon, so that they could get to know each other a little better.

After they had ended the conversation, Emma somehow felt more connected to her after just one conversation with Bente than she had experienced the twenty-five-year friendship with Thérèse. And she had the feeling that she had gotten to know the women she would spend the weekend with in Friesland a little through Bente's short explanation.

Emma felt like life was smiling at her again. The bond with her parents was more intimate than ever before, her colleagues were not only more people she worked with, but who she had also gotten to know better during the walking and now also running training. She was looking forward to the weekend in Friesland and she missed John a little less than she would have done if she hadn't met Janneke and her friends. Even her one-time wild night with Matt now dared to think back with a smile and Emma could not remember feeling so good about herself as this was the case at that time.

## Chapter 28

From work she walked home through the Markthal, bought a bunch of flowers at the flower stable on the way on the Meent and decided to treat herself to a cup of coffee with apple pie on the terrace of café Pol, where she and her fellow students had been a regular visitor in her youth.

She was lucky that there was still a table available in the sun and she ordered a cup of coffee and a point of homemade apple pie.

The waitress had just put this down in front of her, when she heard a familiar voice say: 'do the same to me.' Without asking anything, the voice took a seat at her table.

'This round is mine. To thank you for your generous contribution as a sponsor of the Roparun.'

So the anonymous contribution had not been so anonymous, Emma sighed to herself, while greeting Matt coolly.

'What a wonderful day huh?' Matt opened the conversation as if it was the most normal thing in the world that he had come and sit with her unsolicited. 'I just got out of a meeting and decided that I deserved to skip the rest of the day and enjoy this early spring sun. We have nothing to complain about the weather this spring, don't you think?'

'Yes, spring started early this year. And after the past lousy and foggy autumn and winter, we were also ready for that.' Emma didn't plan to have a nice conversation with Matt, as if they were old friends who had agreed here, and her voice sounded cool.

Matt didn't seem to notice, or ignore this, and continued the conversation in a friendly tone.

'And you, Emma, also trunting? Or are you allowed on the terrace?'

'My shift is over, so I'm sitting here completely legally,' Emma still replied briefly.

The waitress came to bring Matt's order and Matt rewarded her with an exuberant smile, to Emma's annoyance.

'Still equally charming,' she remarked sarcastically and Matt looked at her in surprise.

'What's wrong with smiling at people who make sure you get your drinks served?'

'There's nothing wrong with that, but your smile speaks volumes.'

'Emma, can we please start again? Or pick up the thread where we left it during the excursion? I already told you in Spain that I owe you an explanation, but you don't give me the chance to explain things.'

'What is there to explain Matt? I knew you were married when I opened the door for you. As I said before, keep your statement and apology for your wife, should she ever find out.'

'It's not my wife,' Matt confessed bluntly, while Emma's mouth opened in surprise.

'What do you mean, isn't it your wife? You really gave me the impression that she was your wife.'

'She was too. Ever. But not anymore and not anymore when we were in Africa.'

'Matt, do you really think I believe that? You told yourself that you had to go inside because your wife called you when we had had coffee on my porch. And you told me that your wife wasn't feeling well and therefore didn't go on the boat. You sneaked out of my room like a thief in the night to be back in your own room before your wife woke up. You didn't show up until I left. And now you want to make me believe that this was not your wife, or was no longer?' Emma spoke irritated, while with an impulsive gesture she stirred the spoon through her coffee containing neither sugar nor milk.

'Let me explain it to you then,' Matt almost begged her.

'Okay, come on with your story,' Emma eventually admitted not very enthusiastically.

'To begin with, I told you that Elza called me, and you yourself drew the conclusion that she was my wife. But we've been apart for over a year. Only so far only separated from table and bed. We had somehow grown apart. When I had made the decision to separate for myself, we had already booked a trip to Africa and agreed with each other that we

would take a break in our relationship and finally decide after the trip through Africa whether we would formally go to each other or give it another chance.' Matt took a sip of his coffee, while Emma listened to his story with increasing surprise, not knowing if he was telling the truth or hung a beautiful story, although she suspected the latter because it seemed rather unlikely to her that - after living apart from table and bed for a year - would then travel through Africa together for two weeks to come to a decision whether or not you wanted to continue with each other.

'Already after a week we came to the conclusion that it had been a mistake to go on vacation together. Actually, we had both already become convinced in the past year that we no longer wanted to go through life together. But we had to finish the trip, because it was not possible to book an earlier return flight. Unfortunately, at some point we had a fight about something trivial and that was the night before I met you. That's why I had also slept outside in that chair and she had decided not to go that day. But thanks to your company it was still a fantastic day. However, I couldn't resist the temptation to go to you the next night. I admit that I should never have done that. And I certainly shouldn't have left like that, but I didn't want to let it escalate further with Elza and found my behavior towards her disrespectful in retrospect. Even though we hadn't lived together for a year and had already made the decision to divorce. I should have realized that my behavior towards you was equally disrespectful and perhaps even more disrespectful. I should have gone to you, asked for your phone number and explained the situation to you. But I didn't and I'm sorry.'

"No, you didn't. And with that your opportunity wasted. I don't regret our night together, Matt. And if you had handled it differently, things might have gone differently, but now it's too late. But thank you for your explanation and feel free to drink your coffee,' was Emma's reaction to his story.

'Will you give me another chance, Emma? I'd really like to get to know you better.'

'Sorry, Matt, but that's not going to work for me. I have no confidence in your intentions and trust is for me the basis for every relationship or friendship I enter into.' Emma's voice left nothing to be desired in terms of clarity.

"I respect that, Emma. But at least let me give you my phone number. Please call me if you ever think of it.'

Because Emma didn't feel like continuing this conversation any longer, she put Matt's number in her phone.

The apple points were still untouched on the table and Emma had lost her appetite during their conversation. Why didn't Matt just leave her alone?

The waitress came by to ask if she wanted something else to drink, while she glanced at the apple points. Emma thanked, but Matt ordered another cup of coffee for himself. Emma decided to eat her cake as soon as possible so she could say goodbye to Matt. All the tables around them were now occupied, and having a conversation without being bugged had become almost impossible.

As if they were having a fun afternoon together, Matt started talking about the short vacation he had recently spent with his parents. He told animatedly about the restaurants they had visited, his visit to Malaga and how he had hit the weather, because the weather before he arrived was very changeable.

To her surprise, Emma got carried away in his story and told him about her days with her father. By now they had both consumed their apple points, Matt had his second cup of coffee and ordered a glass of wine for both of them, ignoring Emma's not too convincing counter-sputtering.

Emma knew she couldn't handle alcohol, especially when she drank in the afternoon, but she was tempted to leave his company for a whilee genieten niet weerstaan.

She hated herself for her weakness, but also convinced herself that spending an afternoon with him on a terrace could not hurt.

She secretly watched him as he spoke. His eyes reminded her of Bart, as well as during their first meeting. They radiated the same warm look. The black t-shirt he wore on his jeans made his sun-tanned skin look good. His trained body had an undeniable attraction to her, and she felt his strong arms around her again in her mind. Thoughts that she quickly threw away from herself and she focused on his story again.

Fortunately, Matt kept the topics of conversation neutral, allowing Emma to relax a little more. He talked about the special Roparun during the corona pandemic and explained his training schedule for the upcoming Roparun. 'Actually, I shouldn't drink alcohol now, but I don't think one glass of wine can hurt.'

Emma, in turn, told about her planned bike ride through Friesland and lost all sense of time, until she discovered that she had been cold.

'I think I'll go home one day, it's cool and I still have to walk for a good half hour before I get home.'

'I know we had a false start, Emma, but can we go back to the starting point and start over?' His voice didn't sound pleading, Emma would have loved that too, but nevertheless had a penetrating undertone.

'I have to think about that, Matt. Give me some time to think about what I want. I promise I'll call you when I'm out. Even if the answer will be that I'd rather not meet you anymore.'

'I can live with that right now. But believe me when I say I really want to get to know you better. And I hope to convince you that the negative image I apparently created is far from how I am.'

'We'll see. You'll hear from me, but I can't tell you when that will be right now.'

After these words, Emma said goodbye and walked home. She felt confused and had no idea what to do with the situation.

## Chapter 29

Emma regretted her glass of wine, because she had agreed with Janneke that evening to go exercise together. She called Janneke under the excuse that she had a tiring day behind her and could not have energy to exercise. Janneke accepted her apology without further questions and they agreed to exercise the next day, followed by a round in the sauna.

She needed a conversation and called Thérèse. The chance that she would talk to Thérèse about something other than what Thérèse found interesting was nil, as was the chance that Thérèse would find her meeting with Matt interesting. As Emma rightly expected, Thérèse told about her meeting with the ambassador of Ukraine, the banquet she was invited to, and some gossip about colleagues.

Emma listened to it all patiently and without really being interested, but was happy with the short-term distraction.

At no time did Thérèse seem to think of asking how Emma was doing, if she was calling for a reason, or because they had been talking to each other for some time.

After they ended the conversation, Emma again wondered how it was possible that she had considered this woman her best - if not the only - friend for twenty-five years.

Didn't this fact tell as much about herself as about Thérèse? Emma hadn't hidden behind a concrete wall all these years. Afraid of being hurt and being abandoned out of fear. What was the reason for that fear? She had grown up in a loving family, with parents who may not always be able to make enough time for her, but who loved her and each other.

Emma's parents had raised her independently and taught her that if she wanted something in life, she had to take care of it herself. Of course, her parents had always taken good care of her, but on the day she went to high school, her parents had given her an allowance, which she had to do anything for. Whether it was school fees, money for clothing, external and hygienic care or later when she got a little older, to go out, she had to pay for everything from this allowance.

She got a bicycle for her birthday and a scooter when she passed her exam. She had to drive for work lessons, as well as for holidays or other luxury expenses. Classmates had always been jealous of her, because Emma never had to ask for permission if she wanted something. But Emma had also quickly learned that you could not buy everything unhindered and her allowance quickly shrank if she was tempted to make an unnecessary purchase.

Emma still remembered when she was one year old at eight and was on vacation in Spain with her parents. She asked if an ice cream was allowed and her father gave her some pesetas.

'But I don't speak Spanish anyway, then I can't buy it myself,' Emma had proclaimed, but her father had laconically replied that he didn't speak Spanish either and if Emma wanted an ice cream, she probably could come up with a way to get that ice cream. Which of course had succeeded.

But these kinds of things couldn't explain why Emma had become overstimulated so quickly in her college days and had so much trouble to make real friendships. Had that had to do with the fact that she had suffered from jealous classmates and she was bullied at school? Or that in the first year of her study at the University she had already unconsciously sensed that this study - and the future she had mapped out for herself - would not make her happy? Emma didn't know the answer and actually didn't think it was important anymore.

Thanks to John and volunteering in Africa, Emma had discovered that she was much more social than she had ever expected and even that she needed those social contacts. Although the death of Ernst-Jan would undoubtedly have had to do with that as well.

Thérèse no longer fit into her life. Just as Ernst-Jan would not do this anymore. And this realization voiced Emma both relieved and sad. Because hadn't she wasted a lot of

opportunities for real happiness in her life, through a long-term relationship with a married man?

Emma was determined not to let something like this happen again and realized that her search for herself and the belief that she was who she was had been the problem and not the solution. But above all: that her continuous search for herself had prevented her from being herself. To see who she really was.

Emma had slept badly and felt anything but rested when her alarm clock went off. Today was her last early shift of that week and Emma felt an unprecedented need to turn around again. She had dreamed about Matt that night and although she could no longer remember exactly what her dream was about, images of Matt already surfing on high waves, still wandered like a pink fog in her head.

With due reluctance, she got up and went to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee first. With the coffee in one hand and her iPad in the other, she took a seat on her beloved chair in front of the window and opened the digital newspaper

The coverage focused mainly on President Trump, the daily accusations back and forth of the opposition to the governing parties and vice versa, attacks on Ukraine, protests by action groups regarding the climate, the Palestinian question and the nitrogen issue.

Everyone seemed to be against something or someone and Emma put her iPad aside. Every day the same news brought nothing new and Emma felt more and more resistance emerging in herself over the current heads of government, anywhere in the world.

According to her opinion, the world as we had known those decades no longer existed, and since the outbreak of the corona pandemic, everything around her seemed to have changed and not only the Netherlands, but the whole world to go from crisis to crisis.

Emma had a job, a reasonable ability, felt healthy and had a roof over her head. None of all the negative developments seemed to affect her own existence, but she knew better than anyone that she could never completely exclude herself from the misery she saw and heard around her.

Presumably caused by the lack of sleep last night, it touched Emma more than usual that day and she quickly drank her coffee, hoping that she would feel better after an invigorating shower.

Emma dragged herself through the day at work, which she felt seemed to have no end. One of her colleagues asked worriedly if she was sick, but Emma reassured her and told her that she had slept badly that night.

'Case of Menopause?' Asked her colleague worriedly, but with a wink.

Emma had never thought about that and had no complaints either, but admitted out of ease that that could very well be true.

'You're not ashamed of it, are you, Emma? Every woman has to deal with it at some point and we can understand it a little more. Otherwise, take an extra fifteen minutes, a little fresh air might help you up,' her colleague suggested understandingly.

Although Emma felt a little guilty, she took her colleague's offer with both hands. A cup of coffee and some fresh air might indeed do her good.

Emma took a seat on a bench in the courtyard of the hospital next to a man who seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she could not place where she had met him before. The man also looked at Emma and told her that he knew he knew her from something, but didn't know what. After telling her where he worked, Emma immediately fell on the penny.

'You are the notary who was friends with Ernst-Jan and handed me the diary he had left me.'

'Yes, now I know again, Emma, if I'm not mistaken.'

'It's all right, and your name is Ant. What a coincidence that I meet you here.'

'Unfortunately, I am a regular customer here. Not for myself, but for my wife.'

She is currently getting her chemotherapy, but they prefer not to stay with me so I wait here patiently until I get a call that I can pick her up again. She has now reached the stage where she can no longer walk independently,' he declared his presence, while both sadness, resignation, and resignation resound in his voice. 'She's been sick for almost five years, but lately she's been deteriorating a lot. Only life-extending cures are possible, we know that she can no longer heal. And I'm afraid that the time will soon come when she will no longer be eligible for this cure.'

'How sad, Ant, I can hardly imagine how hard this must be for you. Do you have children?'  
'Yes, a son: Daan. But he studies and lives in a student residence. It also pulls a heavy change on him. We have a close family and a lot of support for each other, and we also encourage each other to continue to enjoy life as much as possible. Laura doesn't want anything else either and also enjoys everything that is possible, although she is increasingly limited in the things we can still do together. She is a fighter, although we can never say of her that she is fighting cancer. She then invariably says: 'you can't fight cancer, you can only do your best to survive everything possible,' and she's right about that. Because actually we say that if you don't fight, cancer is a winner. And that would be too much honor for this disease.'

'It sounds like your wife is not only a brave, but also a wise woman.'

'She certainly is. And you won't believe it, but she's almost always cheerful. She thinks she doesn't have time to be grumpy. Although she also shows her powerlessness and sadness when we are together. I try to comfort her, but sometimes it's so damn hard and it all feels so unfair.'

'Do you have someone you can talk to when it's all too much for you?'

'Ernst-Jan always was, but he's not there anymore. But my parents are still alive and even though they are old and also very sad about what is happening, they are always there for me. And that gives some comfort and a sense of security.'

Emma tried not to look at her watch, because the fifteen minutes were probably well over, but she couldn't bring herself to just interrupt this conversation.

'I work here in the hospital, if there is ever anything I can help you with, please let me know. Sometimes I can't do anything with it, but there are also things like speeding up appointments for an investigation or result, where I might be able to do something because of my contacts here. Or when you need a listening ear. I'll give you my phone number just in case.'

'I really appreciate that from you, Emma, but I still have your phone number in our file. I will definitely use your offer if necessary. You sometimes feel like a number in this hospital, which is the disadvantage of an Academic Hospital compared to a regional hospital, where it all seems a little more personal. But there they could no longer do anything for her and we are already happy that they could still offer opportunities here to stretch her life for as long as possible.'

'Yes, I recognize that a little. For us as nursing staff, that is not always fun either. Sometimes the atmosphere does indeed feel a bit like in a factory, but I can assure you that everyone, including the doctors, makes every effort to do everything in their power for the patients.'

Ant had no doubts about that, he said, and was very grateful for everything she tried to do to make his wife's life as pleasant as possible.

'But don't let me take up your time any longer. I estimate that your break is now over, and there are patients and colleagues waiting for you.'

Emma confirmed this and said goodbye with the words that she could call at any time if he suspected she could do something for them.

As Emma walked up the stairs, she felt - despite all the sadness that spoke from her conversation with Ant - a bit more cheerful. Because what was the struggle with her feelings about Matt, if you had heard such a story.



## Chapter 30

Emma enjoyed the rousing Techno music playing out of the boxes, and the instructor's voice during her Spinning class. She saw Janneke tiring next to her to keep up with the pace, but went to the limit of her own skills.

Tired but satisfied they walked together to the sauna area of the gym after class, but because it was very busy they decided to just take a shower and then have a drink.

Emma first walked into the courtyard to sweat out and Janneke followed her, still after puffing from the efforts they had just made.

There was a group of young women talking to each other and they apparently had a lot of fun over a weekend they had spent together in the Ardennes that had largely consisted of abseiling, whitewater fern and climbing a mountain wall.

When Emma and Janneke drank their fresh mint tea at a table after showering, Janneke asked Emma if she experienced her life as boring.

'How do you get to ask that now?' Emma asked in surprise.

'I heard those women talking outside about their weekend away, and when I hear that, I often think to myself what we are lazy about. I have experienced a lot of weekends with the girls of our old football team, but we have never made it beyond cycling, walking and the karaoke bar.'

'While you are all sporty and have a good condition. Especially when you were still young, I can imagine myself like this. But to answer your question: I've never thought about whether my life is boring. I think it also depends on the perspective you look at this from. I love structure, in fact: without structure I can't live. Is that boring, yes maybe. Have I made adventure trips? No, I don't think so, although I have experienced my volunteer work in Africa as a great adventure, although this was actually my daily work under different conditions and in a different environment.'

'You must be right, indeed what is boring? But I do feel like we missed opportunities in that regard when we were younger.'

'Life is lived forward, but only understood backwards,' Emma spoke philosophically and Janneke burst out laughing.

'Nicely said, but how do you get there?'

'Have I ever read somewhere, so I won't take the honor myself.'

'Just as well said,' Janneke thought.

'I met Matt yesterday. I was sitting on a terrace and he suddenly appeared next to me out of nowhere and came to sit with me without asking for anything,' Emma couldn't fail to tell.

'You certainly sent him away right away, right?' Janneke remarked in shock.

'I did try, but he didn't care much,' Emma confessed, and told how their conversation had gone, in the hope that Janneke could tell her what to do.

But Janneke didn't seem to know this: 'I can't give you advice on that Emma, I find it very difficult to find anything from that. Maybe it would be different if I knew him, but I have to rely entirely on what you tell me and I can't quite estimate how colorful your story is.'

'I understand that, but the chance you'll get to know him is not that great I think. I really don't know what to do. Do I lose a chance at something beautiful, or do I burn my fingers again? That question is constantly haunting my mind.'

'I get a déjà vu for a while and have to think back to the conversations I had with Bente about Paul. I then advised her to give it a chance and see what would come of it. Well we've seen what came of it, so I don't dare to give any more advice,' Janneke replied, without any kind of humor.

'Janneke, you scare me. Now I don't dare to contact him at all.'

'Maybe you should do a background investigation into him,' Janneke suggested.

'How do you see that for you? I can hardly ask for a statement of conduct.'

'But you might be able to get a little wiser if you look at his profile on social media.'

'He only has a profile on LinkedIn, nothing on Facebook or Instagram, I've already looked for that,' Emma confessed.

Janneke found that somewhat questionable, but admitted that her husband Victor could not be found on social media either. 'Men of our generation make little less use of that than women. But you told him that he is participating with a team in the Roparun. Maybe you can find out a little more through this team. Those teams all have a profile on Facebook and Instagram because that's how they look for sponsors.'

Janneke immediately added word to deed and searched Matt's team on Facebook, which she had easily found within a minute.

'First we see if we happen to know someone from his team, if only by name and from there we look further.' Janneke seemed to find it all very exciting and scrolled through to see what she could find.

'Here, look do you see him? He plays football or has played football at FC Omnes. I only know him by face, but Tooske knows everyone there. Let's start with him.'

'Janneke, I can't suddenly go to FC Omnes, where I don't know anyone, and then talk to him after the game to hear him about Matt. I would never dare to do that and besides, if Matt would find out about this, I don't think it matters at all how he is, because then he won't want anything to do with me anymore.'

Janneke thought she had a point there, but couldn't be caught for one hole. 'Mark, Mirthe's friend is a trainer there and Mirthe sometimes goes with him during a home game. And Tooske can also be found there often. I do ask them when they go again and then we make sure we are there too. With a little luck, we should be able to talk to that man. Although I will first check with Tooske whether he often comes to watch the first team or still plays himself.'

Emma still had her doubts about the effectiveness of this expedition, but let herself be carried away by Janneke's enthusiasm.

'I would have found all this ridiculous five years ago, but after everything that has happened I know that these kinds of things can help to provide clarity,' confessed Janneke, who seemed to enjoy it more and more. 'And it makes life less boring,' she remarked with a wink.

Janneke then sent a message via the WhatsApp group and soon both Mirthe and Tooske replied that they would be present that Sunday, because FC Omnes could become champion.

This message was immediately followed by several responses from the group, who also liked going to their old association again and seeing each other.

'So, that's arranged, we'll see the rest on Sunday,' Janneke said with satisfaction.

'We look like a bunch of teenagers,' Emma was of the opinion, but Janneke thought there was nothing wrong with that. 'You will discover during our cycling weekend what adolescent behavior the girls can exhibit. In the past, that bothered me a lot, but nowadays I happily participate.'

Emma became increasingly curious about Janneke's friends and although she had little confidence in the success of learning more about Matt, it offered her at least the opportunity to get to know these women better.

## Chapter 31

Janneke waited for Emma at the parking and they went to the stands, where the rest were already waiting for them and had left a place for them.

In addition to Tooske and Mirthe, Tedje and Nanda had also come. Tedje was there with her friend Marcel and Nanda told him that Bart would also come later, if he was back in time from his round of golf.

Emma had never had much affinity with football, but soon let herself through Draggled the enthusiasm of the rest along, and cheered as loudly as a goal was scored. Unfortunately, the final score consisted of a draw, so they had to wait until the next game whether or not they could secure the championship.

When the game was over, Emma remembered the purpose of this mission again and looked around the clubhouse curiously to see if she could spot Matt's teammate among the supporters.

The weather was nice and most people walked outside with their drink, so it became even more confusing for Emma. She had already decided to just enjoy this afternoon and get Janneke's whole plan out of her head when Janneke offended her.

'There he stands, by the fence. Just walk there and have a chat.'

Tooske, who had probably been informed about their plan by Janneke, interfered.

'I'll go to him and talk to him. Then you can join in in no time,' and before Emma knew it Tooske was already next to him.

'Tooske is happy that she can interfere with us again, leave it to her, that's the best.'

Emma had already been informed by Mirthe Bente about Tooske's meddling and somewhere she didn't like the thought she was aware of it.

'Don't worry, she doesn't know anything about Matt. She only knows that you are interested in the Roparun team,' Janneke reassured her, as she walked towards Tooske and Emma followed her.

'Look there you have my girlfriends,' heard Emma Tooske say. 'Come on girls, this is Nico. He has stopped playing football and has now devoted himself completely to running just like us. Only not like us, who are happy to be able to handle the ten kilometers, he is participating in the Roparun.'

'How nice, I happened to make a donation to a team participating in the Roparun.' Emma hoped that the nervousness she felt did not resonate in her voice.

'Thank you, on behalf of the entire Roparun team. Which team do you sponsor?' Nico asked with interest.

'Runnersteam 01070,' Emma replied, wondering how he would react to this.

'That's my team, that's a coincidence. But then you must be the Emma who donated such a generous amount.'

Emma concluded from this that Matt must have talked about her and the fear hit her heart, because now Nico would tell Matt without any doubt that he had spoken to Emma.

'Yes that could be. I work in nursing myself and see a lot of suffering passing by. I find it admirable that you do this and I am also happy to make a contribution, even if it is only financially,' Emma replied, while trying to avoid why she had specifically chosen this team.

Janneke, who soon realized that Emma refused to mention Matt's name, took over the conversation from her.

'Are you a close-knit team? I sometimes hear that some teams only get to know each other during the trip.'

'We all know each other. I don't know if you can say that we are a close-knit team, at least not as close as Tooske was with her football girls or maybe still is, but we do know each other pretty well. We have been training a few times a week with each other at an athletics club for years, but we don't deal with each other privately or so. Of course we have learned a few things about each other over the years, and we try to support each other a bit in

difficult times, but that's it. And that support is mainly to drag someone through the training, not that we assist each other with advice and action. So Matt, I think you know him, Emma, at least he was the one who talked about your donation, didn't want to participate in the Roparun this year. He has been divorced since last year and due to all kinds of events that accompanied it, he had trained less. And he had also been to Africa, where he had contracted a virus, so he had lost his good condition a bit. But then we all tried to show him that with some extra training he can get his fitness back on time.'

'I met him in Africa and there he told me about your team' Emma lied. 'I didn't understand that he was running himself, but I thought it would be nice to support this team, because otherwise I didn't know any teams at all. By the way, I only met him there during an excursion, so I had no idea he had become ill.'

'Fortunately, it wasn't too bad. He had been stung by an insect during a boat trip and woke up the next day with a high fever and diarrhea. He spent a few days in bed, but luckily he didn't care about it. Except that he suffered from fatigue for a while and couldn't train.'

'That must have happened during that excursion where I met him. You also have to smear well with Deet, otherwise you are the pineut.'

'Matt is a tough guy, but sometimes stubborn. I can just imagine that he didn't think it was necessary to take precautions. He doesn't suffer from bravado, but sometimes he hangs out the tough man. But he has a small heart, that again. Although you may have understood by the fact that he could not get his heart to make this trip without his ex-wife, because they had booked this trip before their divorce and she had been so looking forward to it.'

It hadn't taken Emma much effort to get Nico to talk and she had been told more than she had dared to hope for.

'Well, I don't really know him well, so I didn't discuss these kinds of details with him during our meeting,' Emma said completely truthfully, although she kept quiet that she had met Matt again a few days ago and he had then informed her of the details about his marriage.

'Anyway, thank you for your contribution to our team and I will say hello to Matt from you.'

This words hit Emma's heart and she saw Janneke smiling from the corner of her eye, when she replied that she did not expect Matt to know who she was.

'Oh, I'm sure he still remembers you.' And after these words he left Emma in confusion, while he walked back to a group of men, who according to Tooske had been his teammates.

'I don't know what this was all about, but I hope you were able to get the information you came for,' Tooske chuckled and with a big smile on her face went back to Tedje, Mirthe and Nanda.

'Maybe you should call him anyway,' Janneke suggested.

'Yes, maybe, but I have to let this settle for a while.'

Then they also walked back to the rest of the group and not much later Bart joined them as well. Emma still had to get used to seeing Bart with another woman, but not only gave him his luck, she liked it all too much that the man - whom she had known for so many years as her friend's husband - seemed to get a place in her life again.

She had always been able to get along well with Bart and spent a lot of time with him when she visited them in Brussels for a few days and Thérèse for work was on her way to one of her important appointments.

Tedje suggested going out to eat somewhere and her proposal was enthusiastically received by almost everyone. Only Tooske was absent because her daughter was going to come to eat with her and Janneke wanted to consult with Victor first.

Emma secretly hoped that Victor did not want to go, because then she was not the only one at the table without a partner. In general, Emma had no problem with that, because she was not used to it otherwise. But between all this fledgling luck, it felt different. Fortunately, Victor had indicated that he had already promised the boys that they would

order pizza and then wanted to watch Max Verstappen, who apparently had a good chance of success in the Formula 1 competition that weekend, but he didn't mind if Janneke went out to eat something with her friends.

Mirthe was now looking for a restaurant and booked a table for eight people at tapas restaurant Guay near FC Omnes where they could still go, provided they found no problem eating six o'clock that afternoon.

Guay was on the Boulevard of the Nesselande city beach and they decided to drive there directly, so they could have a drink on the terrace of the restaurant before they would go to the table.

The terrace looked cozy, and fit perfectly into the environment with the wooden tables and the wicker elements. The terrace was completely surrounded by glass, allowing them to sit sheltered from the wind at a long high table.

Because there was a subway station within walking distance of the restaurant and Emma could safely leave her car here, she ordered a glass of wine.

Mirthe also ordered some pan con allioli, served with olives and salted almonds, so they wouldn't drink on an empty stomach.

Slowly all the tables were overflowing and they were lucky with the fact that they could have obtained another table.

After their drinks were reserved, Mirthe made a toast to Emma and welcomed her to the group. Emma was a little embarrassed by it, but thanked Mirthe for her words and the fact that everyone was so kind to her.

Then Mirthe made a toast to Miranda. 'Her exuberant laugh and her stories are still missed, but in our hearts she is there.'

After these words, an awkward silence fell and Tedje remarked that Miranda would never have wanted them to behave so sadly.

Emma gathered all her courage and took over the word from Tedje.

'I only know Miranda from stories, but I think she could have appreciated it if a tear had been wiped away in due time and especially the fact that you bring back memories together about the time she was still in your midst. Mirthe, Janneke and Bart, so maybe also Nanda, but Bente are also aware that I did know Ernst-Jan very well. I don't want to make a secret of that when I go away with you for a weekend and have no problem with it when you talk openly about it. And if someone finds it annoying that the woman who has had an affair with Miranda's husband is coming along, I will of course withdraw from the group.'

Mark and Marcel didn't quite seem to understand what Emma was referring to and looked at her questioningly, but Tedje reacted as Janneke, Mirthe and Bente had done before and reassured Emma immediately by saying that she only liked that Ernst-Jan would have been less lonely if he had hired her.

'And Emma, you share our sadness and dismay about what happened. Know that you can always talk to us about it freely.'

After these warm words, it was clear to Emma that she had been included in a group of women, which felt like a warm blanket.

## Chapter 32

Janneke had offered to take Emma home after dinner. They lived not far away from each other and it was no problem for Janneke - who only drank a sweet liqueur with fruit juice during special occasions but otherwise did not drink alcohol.

When she drove away, Janneke expressed her appreciation for her openness about her relationship with Ernst-Jan. 'That's better than if they would find out later and wonder why you haven't been honest about this.'

'The most important ingredient for a relationship or friendship is honesty, Janneke, I am convinced of that. That's why I'm so bothered by Matt. If he had been honest right away, I would have looked at him with very different eyes.'

'Now I'm playing the devil's lawyer, Emma, because you heard this afternoon that he told you the truth about his relationship last week. He didn't hide behind the fact that he didn't talk to you the day you left because he was in bed shivering from the fever after that insectbite. Because you wouldn't have believed that of him at that time. And what did you actually expect from him? That he had told you his whole life on the day you met and also the only day you spent with each other? Did you tell him anything about Ernst-Jan? No, you don't tell that to someone you meet during an excursion, no matter how much you feel attracted to someone,' Janneke spoke in an unprecedentedly fierce tone.

Now that Emma knew Matt had spoken the truth, she had to admit that Janneke's words contained a core of truth.

'I know you're right, Janneke, but I find it so hard to trust him. Of course I didn't send him away when he knocked on my door in Africa. And I then fully have a passionate moment surrendered. Whether or not they were separated, it was not correct for her. Why didn't he just ask for my phone number and agree when we were back in the Netherlands.'

'Yes, and then, Emma? Did you agree with him when you assumed he was a married man?'

'No, of course not, especially not after Ernst-Jan.'

'Aren't we talking a bit in circles now? Because if he had told her then that she was actually his ex-wife with whom he made this trip, would you have believed him?'

'No, I don't think so. But I don't know what the reason for his divorce was either. He may still have been a notorious cheater and she was fed up at some point. After all, he knocked on my door very easily and was arrogant enough to assume that I would receive him with open arms.'

'Well, Emma, if I have to be honest, you thought he was married at that moment and nevertheless received him not only with open arms, but also with open legs. I can't really call that correct behavior of you either.'

Emma - not used to the coarse language from Janneke's mouth - looked at her with wide eyes of amazement, after which they both burst out laughing.

'I don't know what to think of it anymore, and certainly not what to do.'

'Let it rest for a while, I think that's the best. You don't have to call him tomorrow.'

'No, you're right about that, I better not make a hasty decision and call him later.'

'But don't wait too long, he's been single for over a year, and not an unattractive party for other women, so before you know it, your chance is over.'

'Thank you, Janneke, for all your advice. You're a good friend to me.'

'Well, if you had said a few years ago that I would be a good advisor in love, not only I, but everyone who knew me would have burst into laughter of disbelief.'

'So you can see, Janneke, how we look at things differently when we experience things ourselves in our lives.'

'Not only yourself, Emma, but also the people who are important to you. What they experience can also be an eye-opener for yourself.'

After these words they had arrived at the apartment where Emma lived and said goodbye to each other.

'Just sleep on it overnight, and we'll see each other soon.'

'Thank you for the elevator and your wise words,' Emma replied, after which she got out and went into her apartment, knowing that it would probably be a long night.

## Chapter 33

Emma could remember that Bente had moved to Nesselande and decided to call her. If she went to pick up her car, she might be able to combine this with the dinner she had talked to Bente about to get to know each other better.

Bente immediately responded enthusiastically to her proposal and invited her to come and dinner with her, an invitation that Emma was happy to act.

After speaking to Bente, she took her shopping bag and walked to the supermarket near her at ease, while making a shopping list in her head.

It was an unusually hot day, while the month of May had yet to begin and the changeable weather of the past week had given way for the sun again. The world was colored green again, a sign that spring had really begun and summer was approaching.

In front of her, a man and woman of age walked hand in hand and Emma hoped that she would one day know the happiness of walking so visibly satisfied with each other. Emma tried to imagine whether this was a couple who had been together for many years and were still happy with each other, or that they had met at a later age after a divorce or the death of their partner. The man leaned forward, apparently to hear what his wife - overwhelmed by the sound of the traffic - wanted to tell him, causing him to lose his balance for a moment just at that moment a boy - wrapped in a black hoodie - tore on his fatbike raking past the couple.

Emma saw the man cling to his wife in a vain attempt to stand up, dragging his wife into his fall in this way. Emma sped up to them, while she took a picture of the boy on his fat bike. The boy looked back for a moment, but didn't care about the couple who tried to get up visibly moved.

Fortunately, the boy had looked back at the time she took the picture, so that she had him reasonably recognizable in the picture, although the search for a pin in the haystack would be, since the boy had the appearance of thirteen in a dozen and the distance was already fairly large between Emma and him.

Emma tried to help the man stand up, but he screamed in pain, after which she took a quick look to detect any injuries, but could not detect any visible injuries.

Emma told him that she was a nurse and asked him to lie down quietly. A rushed resident brought a blanket and a pillow, while Emma called emergency services for an ambulance.

Within fifteen minutes the ambulance arrived, and in brief terms Emma explained the situation to the arrived ambulance worker.

She expressed her suspicion that the man might have broken his hip. To prevent the man and his wife from panicking, Emma made sure they were out of ear when she passed on her findings. Then she turned to the couple again and reassured them as much as possible.

When the police arrived - alerted by the control room - Emma told her story again and showed the photo of the boy. The officer gave her a number with the request to forward the photo there, although he was not very hopeful of being able to grab the perpetrator by the collar.

'Yes, and if that does happen, he will get off with a warning,' grumbled a woman, probably not entirely wrongly.

The friendly local resident who had brought the blanket and pillow asked if Emma wanted to show her the photo as well, and immediately recognized the boy.

'That Snootap terrorizes the whole neighborhood on his bike. Drives up and down the sidewalk and scares people. I've talked to his mother about it once, but either she doesn't care, or she doesn't know what to do with that kid. I know where he lives, although I don't know the house number, but I want to walk with you for a while,' she suggested to the officer who noted everything.

After the ambulance staff had examined the man, it was decided that they had to transport him to the hospital to be examined further there.



The woman had now also been examined and seemed to have nothing wrong, and was advised to contact her GP.

The woman cried softly and asked Emma if she could ride the ambulance, because she had no idea how else to get to the hospital where her husband was taken. Emma reassured her, and told her that someone was always allowed to drive with her in the ambulance with a patient.

Emma and the woman - who introduced herself to her as Jeanette van der Waal - exchanged each other's phone numbers after which the woman called her son to inform him, while the man was placed in the ambulance.

The helpful woman had gone with the officer - who had first written down Emma's phone number in case the police had any questions - to show him the boy's address and Emma felt lost for a while after all the tumult. She only hoped that the man would be fine, but as an OR nurse knew better than anyone how heavy and surgery could be for older people when replacing a hip, especially the anesthesia and the after-up. Unfortunately, she also saw more and more patients like this man, because people lived independently for longer and accidents due to reckless driving behavior of other road users. It could be said that the elderly reacted a little less alertly, Emma had now seen with her own eyes that the boy seemed to drive on the sidewalk on purpose, to scare these people.

Still rid of the event, Emma fell in the supermarket annoyed against a child who recklessly hit her leg with a children's shopping cart.

This almost escalated when the child's father said that it was just a child who could not yet properly estimate that she could not drive the cart so fast through the supermarket.

'That's what parents are for, to make that clear to them,' Emma sneered and before the man could answer, Emma hurried to the self-scan cash register, where she could empty her bag again because of a sample.

It's such a day, Emma sighed to herself, that you had better stay in bed.

Before she walked home she bought a beautiful bouquet of flowers on the Oudedijk, to be able to thank Bente for her hospitality that evening, and got on the tram even though she was only a few stops away from her apartment, but she had no more energy to carry the too heavy shopping bag any longer. When a riot arose in the tram between the inspectors and a group of young people who apparently had not paid for their tram ride, Emma was completely done and wondered what the future would look like, with a generation that seemed to care about nothing but themselves.

Suddenly she felt old, because wasn't this exactly what her parents were wondering twenty-five years ago?

## Chapter 34

Emma was just about to walk to the subway when her phone went over and a friendly detective asked her if she could come to the police station the next day for a possible identification. Emma, who suspected that it was about the incident with the cyclist earlier that day - although she was surprised that she was called by a detective - promised to come by the next day and inquired if the detective was aware of the state of health of the man who had been hit.

'The victim died this afternoon as a result of his injuries. Hence our request to come and officially record your witness statement and come and do an identification. Based on your previous statement, it may be an attempted manslaughter. We are looking for several witnesses, but as part of the investigation I cannot make any further announcements at this time.

Emma was shocked enormously, not only because of the fact that the poor man had been deprived of life by such a stupid accident, but also because of the fact that the future of a boy was at stake because of - according to Emma's suspicion - pure bravado.

Emma said she had only caught a glimpse of the boy's face because it had all gone so fast. 'I don't think I can say for sure whether or not he is the presumed perpetrator, but I will do my best.'

The detective emphasized that Emma was only allowed to proceed with a positive identification if she was sure of her case and Emma confirmed to him that she understood this.

Then Emma took her coat, bag and the flowers she had bought for Bente and walked at ease to the Metro stop. She decided to get off at the Oostplein, because she would have to walk past the scene of the accident at the nearest stop on the Voorschoterlaan. Her thoughts were with the poor woman, who had walked hand in hand with her husband that day and now had to say goodbye to him.

Emma decided to contact her the next day, although she had no idea what to say to this woman, somewhere Emma felt that the woman would want to talk to her because Emma had been the first to her after the accident, which would probably make her feel that Emma would understand better than someone else what she had to go through.

Emma got off at the final stop and after she had picked up her car she drove towards Bente's apartment. Because Janneke had designated her the apartment on the day of Ernst-Jan's funeral, Emma did not have to think about the route she had to take and drove along the beach boulevard to the apartment that was only a few hundred meters from her parked car.

Emma was a real city person and would never want to move to a suburb, but could imagine that people in this neighborhood could feel happy.

Various apartment complexes more than twenty floors high offered views over the Zevenhuizerplas and the city beach. At the end of the Boulevard on the beach was the four-story small-scale apartment complex where Bente had her apartment.

Bente welcomed Emma and Emma followed her to the living room. Emma was immediately struck by Bente's interior, which consisted mainly of shades of white and steel. Brightly colored oil paintings on the walls completed the picture. The view may not have been as spectacular as the view Emma's apartment offered, but the setting sun that colored the puddle orange-red offered a breathtaking spectacle.

Still a little awkward, she took a seat on the chair that Bente offered her, still looking for the right words. How did you start a conversation with an almost unknown woman, who had been your lover's wife's best friend? And who was indirectly also to blame for his death.

For a moment, Emma wondered why she had accepted Bente's invitation, but remembered the phone conversation they had had with each other and she had somehow felt a special bond with this woman.

Apparently the situation also felt uncomfortable for Bente, but as a good hostess she relaxed opened the conversation.

'It's a bit strange, isn't it? We are here together if you consider what our common factor is. I've been thinking all day thinking about what Miranda would have thought of this. I'm afraid she would have seen me as a traitor, but I also know that Ernst-Jan would have liked it very much. Although I don't think this situation would have happened if they had been alive.'

Emma completely agreed with her and asked if Bente also saw himself as a traitor.

'Well no, you're crazy. I would also have told her very clearly that she had no right to speak. It has never been Ernst-Jan's choice that

They both led their own lives. And I only applaud that he also chose a little luck,' Bente assured Emma. 'I was, and still am, very happy that they were finally happy with each other, although I regret afterwards that this was at the expense of your happiness. And since I became aware of your relationship, I have often wondered why he did not choose you when their son had reached adulthood and left home.'

Emma decided to tell the truth and informed her of Ernst-Jan's diary.

'At some point - we were away together for a weekend - he had the decision

Taken to leave Miranda. Unfortunately, I chose just that moment to tell him how happy I was with him and still could lead my own life, because I needed the space to be on my own and would have found it difficult to live together. It was just tough talk of mine, I think I said this to not make him feel like I wanted to put him in front of the block to choose me. I only found out after his death through his diary how great his desire for a domestic situation had always been. A woman who lay next to him when he went to sleep, and was still there when he was awake, with whom he could share the meals and sometimes watch a movie on the couch. Through my words, he concluded that I could ever offer him this - no more than Miranda. And when Miranda found out that she loved him and wanted to give their marriage a second, or perhaps a whole new chance, he was open to this when he discovered that it was not Miranda's whim, but that she was honest and sincere about it. And then he probably decided that Miranda could eventually offer him more of the life he had longed for than I could.'

'Didn't you regret your words terribly afterwards, when you read that he would have wanted to choose you one day?' Bente asked sincerely with compassion.

'When I read it, I did. But you know, Bente, regretting something costs so much negative energy and is an obstacle to going on with your life. I prefer to keep my energy to give a positive turn to my life again.'

'I think that's well said, Emma, and very brave. I hope that one day I can think back in the same way to what has happened in my life since I met Paul.'

Emma replied that one day there would come a time when Bente could also make peace with her past and really go on with her life.

'Maybe we can help each other with that.'

'I'd love to, Emma. But I have one last question and I suggest that we then move on to some lighter topics, because you have not been in for half an hour and you have already exposed your soul to me. But before we do that, I want to know from you if you blame me in any form that Ernst-Jan would still have been alive if I hadn't gone to them, while at that time I already knew that my life might be in danger.'

Emma was not aware of this last detail before and she had to swallow something before she could answer Bente. But Emma was still of the opinion that Bente was also only a victim in the story.

'Tell me the truth sometime, but I want you to believe that I will never come up with reproaches against you. Because I'm sure you never wanted to deliberately endanger the people who were so close to you.'

'Thank you, Emma, and I'll tell you everything you want to know soon. But for now I think it's been enough and I suggest going out for dinner and gossiping about the girls during dinner.'

Emma was only too happy to agree with this, after which they relaxed and enjoyed the pasta dish that Bente had prepared and the tiramisu, which she served as dessert. Emma listened attentively to the stories Bente knew how to tell about Janneke's friends and the fact that Miranda also appeared regularly in this no longer seemed to bother her, as long as she looked at her as a friend of Bente and not as Ernst-Jan's wife.

Then Emma told about what had happened to her that day with the older couple and Bente listened attentively without falling into the reason.

'Don't get too carried away in this story, Emma, that you call that woman once in a while is okay, but you don't know her else and her sadness is not your sadness,' advised Bente.

But Emma assured her not to do this. 'During my work I come into contact with a lot of suffering and sad family members. I can very well distinguish between the grief of people I do not know but whom I am confronted with through my work and sadness of people who are close to my heart.'

'Oh yes of course, you work in nursing,' Bente suddenly remembered and inquired how Emma made this decision.

## Chapter 35

Emma came home after she was at the police headquarters had formally made and signed a witness statement. She had emphasized that she had not been able to determine whether it had been the boy's angry intention to cycle up the sidewalk past the elderly couple, or youthful recklessness. 'It all went way too fast for that,' Emma had said in a decisive tone.

Looking at the photos therefore did not bring the result hoped for by the police, because Emma could not identify a single boy as the one who had caused the accident. As far as she is concerned, they could have been all, or none of them.

The detective had nevertheless thanked her for wanting to take the trouble to come and make a statement, after which Emma had left the police station as soon as possible. She had no need to get involved in the misery of a completely unknown to her.

She made herself a cup of coffee and looked at the mail she had fished out of the mailbox. Most of it was advertising addressed to the residents of this building, which Emma threw unopened into the paper container, an invitation to participate in the breast cancer population survey and an announcement of work on the fiber, which meant that the WiFi network would be unavailable for a few hours later that week.

Emma noted the date and time of both the work and the invitation to the population survey in her diary and continued to drink her coffee.

She had decided to make the decision today whether she would still contact Matt and if so, what would be an appropriate time to let it pass before she called him. Because she didn't want to come across as too eager, but also didn't want to wait too long for it to come across as unbelievable.

But first she would call Jeanette to give her condolences on the loss of her husband and to inform her if she herself had any complaints from the fall.

To her surprise, it was recorded by a male voice and when Emma revealed herself, the voice said that he was Jeroen, Jeanette's son. Jeanette didn't want to take calls herself, but he was glad that Emma was calling, because his mother wanted to thank Emma personally for the help she had given her parents. Emma believed that everyone who had seen this happen had come to the rescue and told him this too, but Jeroen disagreed with her.

Emma became a little shy of the conversation and tried to convince him that a thank you was really not necessary.

Emma inquired how his mother was doing and fortunately, apart from some muscle pain, she had no injuries from the trap herself.

'But the sadness and disbelief that my father is no longer alive is all a bit too much for her.' Emma said she could imagine this very well and wished his mother and him a lot of strength.

She then completed the conversation as quickly as possible in a polite manner and saw that it was almost time to go to work, for her late shift. Her decision to contact Matt just had to wait a day.

Emma was happy that she would soon resume her work as an OR nurse and that she would be able to perform her work again during standard day shifts. She had been lovingly helped in the nursing ward due to a staff shortage, but irregularity was something Emma still couldn't handle well.

It had been a busy afternoon and evening during her service. Many new patients were admitted that day, and it seemed that everyone needed an IV or catheter, or in some cases both.

A woman with Alzheimer's was admitted, who wanted to know where she was during her entire shift and asked Emma to call her mother to ask if she wanted to pick her up. Emma feared the worst for her colleagues on the night shift, if the woman might keep everyone in the room awake. There was no single room available and the only option was to administer

Benzodiazepine or another sleeping pill, but this was against the guidelines in clients with Alzheimer's. Emma had discussed it in the case with the room doctor and it was up to him to do something.

Emma was lucky enough to work that day with a colleague who always drove home via the Maasboulevard, and offered to take Emma home. Emma always found it annoying to be dependent on others, but with the conflict of the previous day in the tram between the inspectors and the boys who refused to pay still in mind, Emma was only too happy to take the offer.

When home, Emma made herself a cup of herbal tea and opened a roll of biscuits. Her head was still too full of all the events, to be able to sleep.

She turned on the TV and watched a few episodes of the series she was following, without really seeing what she was watching because her minds wandered again and again.

She knew she had made her decision whether or not to contact Matt, but something kept her from calling him. Although she could not quite determine herself whether this was fear of what might happen next, or that she simply would not be able to find the right words if she had him on the line.

It will probably be a combination of both, Emma stated to herself. It would be a lot easier to send a WhatsApp message, but Emma thought that was too cowardly and what should she put into that: I changed my mind and want to see you anyway? Or: I think it would be nice to have an appointment together?

No, if she wanted to meet Matt she would have to call him and she would do that next weekend.

To distract her thoughts before she went to bed, Emma grabbed her iPad and looked at her emails. To her surprise, there was a message from Ant, and she suspected that he wanted to know something from her that related to the treatment of his wife in the EMC.

Curious, she read the message, but it only consisted of a request if Emma wanted to contact in the short term. There was nothing else he wanted to talk to her about, but he did give her his private number.

Emma decided to call him immediately the next morning, after which she walked to her bedroom, hoping that she would be able to fall asleep that night.

As expected, Emma had slept badly that night. They had spent the night alternating between dreams and wakings, and the much-needed deep sleep had been latched. Her head seemed to consist of cotton balls, her mouth felt dry and her tongue like sandpaper. She looked at herself in the mirror and her bloody eyes seemed to emphasize the dark circles under her eyes.

She threw some cold water over her face and dripped her eyes, hoping that they would make them look a little less red and take away the burning sensation.

Even the coffee didn't seem to help this morning and Emma considered just going back to bed and lying there for the rest of the day. But knowing that an hour in the gym or a round of running would probably do her more good, and going back to bed was a bad idea, she poured herself another cup of coffee and took two paracetamols with a glass of water.

Then she let the bath fill up and let herself slide into the warm water, which in any case seemed to have a calming effect. From the bath she could see the clouds gliding along and each cloud seemed to drive away the next cloud and then change itself in shape and color. Emma felt her eyes close and decided to get out of the bath quickly, before she would fall into a deep sleep and possibly drown.

Having become sloom from the hot water, Emma decided to set her alarm clock and still go to bed for a few hours, after which she was overcome by a deep and dreamless sleep.

Not caring about the many liters of water she had already consumed that morning when the bath was full, Emma - after getting out of bed for the second time that day - took an invigorating lukewarm shower, poured another cup of coffee, and prepared a light breakfast that also served as lunch for herself.

Then she felt a little better and called a colleague to ask if she wanted to go for a run that day, and they agreed to meet at the end of the afternoon at the edge of the Kralingse Bos.

She then looked up Ant's phone number and called him to ask what he wanted to know from her.

Ant thanked her for the fact that she had responded so quickly to his request and after they had exchanged some politeness Emma had inquired about his wife's health.

'Yes, that's why I actually wanted to talk to you. I think we have a rather special request to you, but we would rather explain this in person. Would it be possible to meet sometime this week, preferably in the evening?'

Emma, who became curious, said that she had no appointments that evening, after which Ant invited her to visit him and his wife that evening.

'Then you'll see me tonight around eight' Emma promised and noted the address in her agenda.

Emma tried to come up with what Ant and his wife would like to talk to her about, but couldn't think of anything meaningful. Although she did suspect that it had something to do with his wife's illness.

She decided to wait for the evening and got ready for a run, knowing that she would feel a lot more cheerful afterwards and pull the fog out of her head.

## Chapter 36

Ant and his wife lived in Hilleegersberg - one of Rotterdam's chicest neighborhoods - and Emma drove past a long line of parked cars parked on the narrow canal, looking for the house number Ant had given her.

Ernst-Jan and Miranda had lived in this neighborhood. Emma had never visited him at home, but had sometimes driven past his house out of curiosity and was surprised by the size of the house. The house of Ant and his wife was less imposing than the house of Ernst-Jan and turned out to be a detached 1930s house - which were currently very popular - and looked well maintained.

Ant opened the door and took on her coat, after which he introduced her to his wife, who was lying in a hospital bed placed along the wall overlooking the garden, her head leaning against a pile of pillows.

Emma was startled when she saw the woman, who only looked like a shadow of what she probably once was. The sunken cheeks seemed to underline her white face and the eyes lying deep in her coffers were dull and there was no more vividness. The greatly emaciated contours of her body were visible under the blanket that had been placed over her and Emma knew that no doctor could do anything for this woman, except make sure that she would suffer as little pain as possible.

Ant offered her a cup of coffee or tea and Emma asked for a cup of tea, for fear that coffee would keep her awake again.

Emma felt a bit uncomfortable and noticed that this also applied to the woman. Fortunately, it didn't take long before Ant came back with the coffee and tea and took a seat in front of Emma.

'I think you're wondering why I invited you here at home and will start right away, I think that's the best.' Ant's voice sounded broken and an octave too high, and was nothing like the powerful warm voice with which he had spoken during their first meeting at the notary's office.

'As you know, and can also see, my wife is seriously ill and in the last phase of her life. The doctors do not make a statement about the time she has still been given, but we have to think of a few months at most, although it can also be weeks. Laura's wish is to spend the time she has left at home,' Ant paused for a moment and Emma nodded understandingly, patiently waiting where this story would lead.

'It is impossible for me to take care of her twenty-four hours a day, and despite the fact that we have a large social network of people who want to help us, we prefer to look at a somewhat more permanent solution. And I was thinking of you. I discussed this with Laura and she is open for me to make you a proposal. Of course you can think about it, but it would be fantastic if you could see her on the days that

I can take care of work. Of course we just pay you a salary for this and I also understand that this may be difficult to arrange with your own work in the hospital, but I just don't see any other solution.'

Emma had to let his words sink in for a while and only nodded her head, as a sign that she had understood him.

'Ant, Laura, I understand your wish, but I think this will be impossible for me. At least in the short term and unfortunately we are not talking about the long term here if I just understood you correctly. I have my own full-time job in the hospital where I can't just take leave indefinitely. Take. We are not family, because for my parents, for example, I could take care leave, but that does not apply in this case. In addition, I already get special leave every year because I work as a volunteer in Africa. So as much as I would like to help you, I really wouldn't know how to arrange that,' Emma replied cautiously, looking at Laura to see how she reacted.

'But if your leave were not a problem, would you be willing to do so?'



'Maybe, but that doesn't matter, because even if I were to resign, I would still be bound by a notice period and I won't be available at short notice,' Emma tried to make it clear to them.

'But if I had the contacts that make it possible for you to help us from next week, would you consider it?'

Emma now felt a little pressured and noticed that she had to make an effort to answer with understanding.

'Of course I would like to help you, but when I'm not there this brings extra workload for my colleagues. And the workload in our department is already very high because we barely have enough staff to get the schedules. So I don't see how I can fulfill your request. I'm really sorry,' and after all the emotion of the past few days and the bad night's sleep, it was hard for Emma to control her voice.

Ant had been listening with his hands folded together, and Emma saw a tear shimmering on Laura's cheek, who could not hide her emotions without making a sound.

Their sadness and despair hung like a heavy curtain in the room and Emma had preferred to admit that she would help them and that her colleagues should just figure it out with each other. But Emma knew that the next morning she would regret it if she now made promises that were impossible to keep.

Ant made another attempt by asking if Emma wanted to think about it and discuss it at work with her colleagues or supervisor. 'If you

Can get along with them, then I can without any problem ensure that you can take care leave for as long as necessary, and then resume your work.'

Emma glanced at Laura again and saw the hope on her face and the almost pleading look she gave Emma.

'Well then, I don't make promises I can't keep, but if it's as you say, then I want to discuss it with me in the department and think about it,' Emma finally admitted, although she had little confidence that she could fulfill her wish.

'Thank you Emma, that's the only thing we can want from you for the moment.'

Because there was nothing more to say, Laura was visibly tired and there was no room for cows and calves after this conversation, Emma said goodbye with the promise to give Ant an answer as soon as possible.

As soon as she was in her car, Emma burst into uncontrollable crying. And for the first time in her life, she hated that she now came home to an empty house, where there would be no one to listen to her and offer a comforting shoulder.

Still snobbing, she picked up her phone, called her mother and told her about the accident with the older couple and her conversation with Ant and Laura. Her mother listened without interrupting and comforted her after she told her story.

'I'm flying to the Netherlands this weekend, honey, you don't have to be alone now,' her mother promised.

Emma didn't sput back in any way and felt the tears well up in her again, as she thanked her mother for wanting to come.

'I need you, mom, I don't remember it all for a while,' Emma said emotionally, realizing that she had never said these words before and she felt like the little girl calling for her mother for a while after she had hurt herself.

'I know, honey, try to calm down now and get some sleep. Tomorrow when the sun shines, the world will look different again. Believe me,' sounded the comforting words of her mother.

Emma didn't know if it was because of the comforting words or the thought that her parents would be there in a few days, but she fell asleep like a block that night and as her mother had predicted, she felt a lot better the next morning and had gathered enough energy to think about what she had to do.

## Chapter 37

Despite the fact that it was her day off, Emma made sure she was at work at ten o'clock the next morning, so that she met her colleagues during

Their coffee break. She had no idea how she could correctly convey the wish that Laura and Ant had made known to her to her colleagues.

Her colleagues greeted her in surprise, pushed the coffee pot towards her, and asked as if in chorus what she came to do on her day off.

'Well that's a rather bizarre story and I have no idea what to do with it,' Emma began somewhat uncertainly and then informed them of the conversation she had had with Ant and Laura the night before. 'The bizarre thing about the story lies mainly in the fact that I don't really know these people at all. Ant once handled something for me as a notary and he is a good friend of a deceased friend of mine. But I had never met his wife before.'

Her colleagues agreed with her that this had indeed been a strange request and everyone had their own view of the story.

'I think they're just desperate and even if they don't really know you, you're probably the only nurse who got their way,' was the many of a colleague and what kept the most.

'Have you made a decision yet?'

'No of course not, but I will probably tell them that it is impossible to combine it with my work here in the hospital.'

Then it was quiet at the coffee table for a moment until her supervisor, who had been sitting silently until that moment, took the floor.

'Emma, there must be a sleeve that can be adjusted. And I want to think along with you, provided everyone agrees with this. Because it may pull a change on the rest of the team.'

'From what date will you return to the OR?' Informed one of her colleagues, while she rubbed her arm thoughtily.

'In July, as soon as those two new colleagues are scheduled. So that will take a while,' Emma replied, wondering where her colleague wanted to go with her question.

'Can't they start sooner?' asked her colleague while she looked at their leadership questioningly.

'They are currently completing their training phase in the obstetrics department, but maybe I could ask if they can be scheduled in our department for a few days a week. I do think a sleeve can be adjusted to that.'

'If they both take over two shifts a week from Emma and Emma also runs another shift every week, then it should work, right?'

Emma looked at her colleague with gratitude. She knew that Annebeth was pragmatic, and could have suspected that she would propose a solution that everyone could agree with.

'I also want to do a weekend shift, then maybe it's still a little easier to plan.'

But Annebeth didn't want to know anything about that. 'You can't work six or seven days a week. But an occasional Saturday or Sunday service would be nice. I'm going to see what I can arrange and then you'll hear that tomorrow, is that early enough? And I will also arrange that you are not yet scheduled for the OR, because now they can give that a different interpretation.'

'I don't know how long it's going to take, weeks or months,' Emma warned her, but as she said it she realized herself that three months would probably be the maximum achievable for Laura and it would rather be a matter of weeks. She could read in Annebeth's eyes that she was of the same opinion.

Her colleagues said they understood that, after which everyone went back to work. Emma sat for a while, and picked up her phone to inform Ant of her decision and the possibilities. Before she could call, her supervisor came running back.

'Emma, are you going to work there as a nurse, or as a caregiver? Because I think you should arrange things like professional liability insurance when you start taking care of her as a self-employed nurse. And fiscally that will also have consequences I estimate.'

Emma had not yet thought about these kinds of details and said that she should delve further into them.

'Fine, as long as you make sure that you can't get into trouble in any way.'

Emma thanked her for thinking along, after which Annebeth wished her success and Emma still called Ant.

She had told Ant about the possibilities she had just discussed, underlining that she had not yet received formal approval, and that Emma would only be available four days a week. Ant was happy with her decision and assured her that they would have been helped in four days.

'I am free on weekends and then take care of her myself, and if necessary, with the help of our social network. And I also want to keep my agenda free one day a week, because you will understand that I want to spend as much of the time we have left with Laura as possible.'

'We will discuss the details with each other when I have the green light, Ant, because at the moment I do not yet have the right information what is needed to work as a private nurse, while I am also employed by the EMC.'

Ant promised that he would instruct his assistant to help Emma figure out these kinds of details, because she had studied tax law and probably knew more about it than she did.

After they had said goodbye, Emma started to doubt her decision again, that she might have taken it too quickly. But what choice did she have? Because time was exactly what Laura didn't have.

## Chapter 38

Emma cycled back home and grabbed her gym bag that she had prepared that morning to go to the fitness center. She quickly took an apple from the fruit bowl and closed the door behind her, which she had carefully closed since she had heard the story of Bente's hostage taking. She didn't know the nice things, but enough to be extra careful.

In the fitness center, she met both Janneke and Bente and Emma took a seat on the free elliptical trainer next to Janneke for a warm-up. Upon entering, she had seen a yoga class being given, and this was exactly what Emma needed at the time, a round of cardio and strength training, ending with an hour of yoga.

She may have felt better than the night before, and already regretted her panicked phone call to her mother, but the adrenaline still prevailed in her body.

Both Janneke and Bente had their iPods in and Emma followed their example, so that she could be uplifted by the beat of the music she always listened to while exercising.

The sweat gushed out of her body after she finished her round and Janneke and Bente suggested drinking some extra water and taking a quiet cooldown on the treadmill to lower their heart rate before they went to yoga class.

'Is it okay with you, Emma? You were so struggling during training that it seemed like you had too much energy and had to get rid of it.' Janneke looked at Emma with a worried look and Emma felt the tears swell in her again. What was wrong with her that she reacted so emotionally to everything? Emma replied that she actually had no idea what was going on with her lately, but Bente and Janneke replied in chorus: 'the Menopause.'

'The Menopause is heavy, Emma, you really have to take yourself seriously if you have complaints,' advised Bente, who admitted that she had denied it for a long time.

'But I have no complaints at all and have no idea what a hot flash is,' Emma responded indignantly.

'Wait a minute, they will come by themselves, although not every woman will have to deal with this to the same extent. But it does explain your emotional moods, and although I don't want to downplay your dilemma about Matt, you can never trigger these kinds of emotions if you think about it soberly, Emma? Nor did the death of a man unknown to you,' Janneke kept her in mind.

Emma then told them about her conversation with Ant and Laura and their request, but Janneke maintained her position that her reaction was disproportionate, because there could not be so much difference for her as a professional between terminal care for someone in a hospital or in a home situation.

'And I let my mother come to the Netherlands because I didn't know it all for a while. Are you now telling me that she is coming back from Spain to assist her daughter in her first menopause symptoms?'

Bente reacted a little more nuanced and thought it was just nice that her mother came back for her, if only for a few days. Whatever the underlying reason for that. 'And maybe your mother will also like to spend a few days with her daughter again.'

Emma could not deny the latter, because it had become clear to her that her mother was only too happy to seize every opportunity to return to the Netherlands for a few days.

'Are you going to call Matt?' Janneke asked who could no longer contain her curiosity.

Emma felt overcome by the directness of Janneke's question, and felt her heartbeat rise, just at the thought that she would tell Matt that she wanted to meet him again.

'Yes, I'm going to call him this weekend to tell him that I want to meet him.'

Janneke and Bente both expressed their approval on this, but with the warning that Emma had to be careful.

'His parents are good acquaintances of my parents,' Emma tried to dispel their anxiety, which she only partially succeeded in.

But there was no time to continue their conversation because the yoga class started and they knew that the door would close inexorably in two minutes and they were only allowed to come back in after class.

Emma couldn't name whether it was because of exercise or her conversation with Janneke and Bente, but after the yoga class Emma felt not only a lot more relaxed, but also more cheerful.

While drinking a cup of coffee, Emma elaborated on her story about Ant and Laura and the reason why she had decided to comply with their request. Both Janneke and Bente expressed their admiration for the fact that she wanted to take care of a woman completely unknown to her in the last stage of her life.

'I'm not used to anything else, am I? I take care of strangers every working day, sometimes in their last stages of life. So this is not exactly something that makes me a kind of 'Florence Nightingale'.'

'And yet I like that you want to do this. Because this is not going to be a patient who takes care of you for a few days in the hospital together with other colleagues. This will be ten times more intense, I'm sure, because you're going to build a bond with someone like that anyway,' Bente said, contrary to Janneke's earlier comment that Emma didn't care much about whether she was offering terminal care in the hospital or at someone's home.

Emma was only too well aware of this, yet she did not let it stop her from taking care of this woman, so that she could quietly say goodbye to her loved ones and life in her own environment.

## Chapter 39

The last few days had been dominated by the many information regarding insurance and tax consequences that Ant's assistant had emailed to Emma. There were snags and eyes to everything, because if she were to provide care as a volunteer or informal caregiver, she was not allowed to perform medical procedures despite her BIG registration. If Ant had formally hired her nurse, she had to take out insurance and had

This is a tax consequence. What made it even more complicated was the fact that she remained on the payroll at the EMC and she had been given care leave.

Emma had no idea what forces had been hidden behind this extremely coulant decision, but it offered her the certainty that she could resume her position unchanged.

After everything was finally arranged, Ant had formally put the appointments on paper and Emma would start her work for Laura the first Monday, and she would continue her work at the EMC on Wednesdays - alternating with a Saturday or Sunday per month. For example, there would be no personnel problems in her ward, Ant would be able to provide informal care on the days that Emma would not be there, and Emma would have enough free time to relax and recover from the undoubtedly intense period ahead of her.

Her last shift that week had been an early shift on Saturday, which fortunately had been quite quiet because there were fewer patients in the ward than was usually the case on weekdays.

Emma had planned to keep Sunday off for a walk and lunch with her mother and the phone call with Matt.

Her mother had arrived Saturday afternoon with her father, she had dinner with them that evening at her favorite restaurant Chung. Chung did not serve standard Chinese dishes and Emma loved the fusion dishes, which often consisted of both Chinese and French influences.

Her parents had been terribly worried and Emma had been a little ashamed of the impression she had given them by calling her mother so upset.

Her mother had looked at Emma inquisitively when she was in the restaurant Arrived, but seemed somewhat reassured when she had looked at Emma.

After the owner had come to greet them personally and served their drinks, Emma had felt obliged to reassure her parents as soon as possible and began her story with an extensive account of the accident they saw happening, in which the man had died and the cyclist had run away at high speed on his fat bike without caring about anything.

After that, an extensive conversation had taken place about the upserting of society and the lace attitude of the government to counteract this. Emma, who did not want to get bogged down in a discussion about current politics and the question of where all this would go anyway, had interrupted the conversation by indicating that she had much more to say, after which she had told her parents about Laura and her mother had sighed that Emma took too much hay her fork, that she had thought about it after Emma had called her, and was of the opinion that it would not be wise if Emma would give in to the request to take care of Laura.

Emma had reacted rather pily to that and her father had finally cleaned things up. Despite the fact that her father was of the same opinion as Bente and her supervisor Annebeth - that caring for an anonymous patient had a different impact than caring for a terminal woman in which she would be personally involved - he supported her in her decision and expressed his admiration for the way Emma had repeatedly proven that she not only spoke about the misery in the world, but also actually contributed to it in the form of volunteer work in Africa and now again to take care of this woman who Her last days she wanted to stay in her own way.

Emma had waved away his praise and told that by doing this she was a hundred times happier than during the period she was focused on her career and making a fortune.

'Well, when I think back to how emotional you reacted when you called me, I dare to doubt this,' her mother had replied, to which Emma said that her friends suspected that she had been in the Menopause.

Her father had reacted immediately by saying that he could still recall her mother's crying and hot flashes, and Emma had looked at him gratefully.

'But, mom, I really needed to see you and a little extra love,' Emma had confessed and had seen that these words hit the target and her parents had looked at each other with a satisfied look.

Then father had suggested that she go to lunch with her mother the next day to: 'talk about women things,' and he with his friends then could go billiards.

The evening had been pleasant for the rest and Emma had said goodbye with a good feeling.

The next morning she had felt a lot calmer and the haunted feeling that had haunted her since her unexpected meeting with Matt on the terrace seemed to have subsided.

After having breakfast, she gathered all her courage and picked up her phone to call Matt. She had no idea how the conversation would go and had decided to just let it happen to her.

After only two times he had answered the conversation and seemed surprised when he heard that it was Emma who called him.

'I honestly expected to have wasted my chances and would never hear from you again,' he honestly admitted.

'Yes, I expected that myself, but I don't think I reacted very realistically.'

'Maybe not no, but I honestly don't know how I myself would have reacted if you hadn't shown yourself after that night and I don't know if I would have believed you.'

'I just wanted to offer you my excuse for what I said and let you know that I suspect you did indeed speak the truth.'

'Did you come to this insight before or after your visit to football club Omnes?' Matt asked and Emma could hear from his voice that he could barely control his laugh.

Emma wanted to react indignantly again, but because she had heard the laugh in his voice in addition to the irony, she decided to react neutrally by noting that the world was small.

"And, Emma, what are we going to do, or did you just want to apologize?"

'I don't know, I haven't thought about that at all,' Emma lied.

'Shell we just bury the battle axe and start over?' Matt suggested.

"Do you think we'll be able to do that?" Emma asked, suddenly not sure that they could indeed do that.

'We can at least try, right? Maybe we can have a bite to eat somewhere together soon?' Matt introduced and Emma tried not to come across as eager, but accepted his invitation all too gladly.

Emma pretended to consult an overcrowded agenda when he suggested that they meet the following Saturday.

'Then I'll participate in the Mercyships run in Bleiswijk, but around eight o'clock should work I think.'

'I hope you won't be too tired to eat out.' 'There's no need to worry about that. I had kept that evening free to rest, but actually that is not necessary at all because after such a sporting event I generally glow with new energy and an hour of rest and an invigorating shower is usually enough to be able to cope with the rest of the day and evening again.'

'That sounds promising. I will reserve a table somewhere and let you know where we are going to eat. At least I have your phone number now.'

Then they said goodbye and Emma breathed a sigh of relief, happy that the conversation had been so pleasant. She sent a message via WhatsApp to Janneke and Bente saying that

she had agreed with Matt to go out to eat somewhere in a week. Bente gave her a heart and Janneke gave her a thumbs up in response.

Not much later, her mother rang the bell and Emma felt like she had been given wings when she walked to the intercom to let her mother in.



## Chapter 40

Her mother was tired of the trip and the previous day's dinner and suggested taking a short walk through the Botanical Gardens and having a simple lunch in the pop-up restaurant the "Maaltuin".

The Trompenburg was only a few hundred meters walk from Emma and these gardens were at their best in the spring. Emma loved to walk through these gardens with an area of eight hectares, which was hidden on the edge of the center of Rotterdam on the border with the Kralingen district.

The gardens were created about two hundred years ago on swampy land at the time. There were several English-style gardens, a food forest and a desert climate to admire.

The country house had passed from private ownership into a foundation to ensure its survival in the 1950s and now served as a museum.

Together they strolled along the paths at ease and Emma was once again amazed at the tranquility that reigned in the gardens, in the midst of the hectic pace of a big city.

'Mom, do you know the Bosch family from Laren, who also often stay in La Carihuela?'

'Yes, honey, why? Do you know them too?'

'No, although I did meet them when I was visiting dad, but that was only short-lived when they saw us sitting on a terrace during a walk they took.'

'Nice people, dad and I sometimes go out to eat with them.'

'Do you know their son too?'

'Their son? Not that I know. Or wait, yes I met him once when he visited his parents with his wife. Although I believe he is now divorced, but I'm not sure because his parents were very hopeful that things would be fine between them if they had made their trip to Africa together. I don't know how that ended, because I haven't spoken to them in a while. Nice man, I can still remember that. His wife I found a little gray mouse. Walked there as if she was carrying all the suffering of the world on her shoulders. But who knows, that was the case. Not from the whole world of course, but maybe her marriage didn't go so well then. Although I also thought she was a bit haughty.'

'I met him in Africa and his wife and he are indeed separated.'

'What a coincidence. I was already thinking at the time, why on earth would you go on vacation with each other when you are separated? That can't go well, and if you miss each other and you want to reconcile with each other, then you don't wait until you go on a journey together.'

'No, but the trip was a dream of his wife, I mean ex-wife and he couldn't get it over his heart in my opinion to cancel the trip. So they traveled to Africa together anyway.'

'I still think it's a weird story. But you're quite aware of what happened in his life,' her mother remarked sharply, while looking suspiciously at Emma.

'Matt and I met again by chance in the Netherlands and agreed to go out for dinner somewhere on Saturday. And, mom, I think I could fall in love with him.'

'Emma, where are you starting again? I don't think the good man is officially divorced yet. Now you can just meet up with an unbound man for once in your life,' her mother sounded desperately.

'Mom, I'm fifty years old and I think the chance I'll meet a man without a backpack is ten percent or less. He has been away from his wife for more than a year and a formal divorce really won't last long, that's arranged these days.'

'Yes, but it's not settled yet, so he's still married. And the official divorce has yet to take place and who knows what a misery that still comes with. Financial issues in particular generally do not go smoothly when they separate. And then you will be dragged into that.'

'Don't be so dramatic. I don't let myself be dragged into anything, that never happened to me with Ernst-Jan either. And we just agreed to eat something together. After that I'll see

it further, maybe on closer inspection he will be very disappointing,' Emma said against better judgment.

'As long as you're careful. I will sometimes pulse with his parents when I am back in Spain. They wanted to meet again soon to have dinner with us.'

'Mom, don't interfere with it,' Emma exclaimed in dismay, who already saw an image of an interrogation about Matt's divorce, and she could imagine that Matt wouldn't appreciate that.

'I really do take it tactfully and will not show that I am aware of your appointment.'

Emma, who knew there was no point in convincing her mother to shut up, then shrugged her shoulders and only replied that her mother was doing what she wanted herself.

'That's not nice of you, Emma, I always take you and your father into account. And I'm very sorry that you don't have confidence that I can just inquire about their son with interest and then see how the conversation goes.'

'Yes, but if his parents know that he agreed with me, they are immediately suspicious.'

'I really know how to give that a twist, trust me now. And tell me all about your appointment next week. So, and now we're going to have lunch, I'm getting tired legs.'

Emma sometimes forgot that her parents were already of age, probably because they were still very fit and active for their age and still looked good. But of course her mother was tired after the trip and dinner, where they didn't leave the table until late.

'I'm glad you're here,' Emma said honestly, as she put her arm in her mother's.

'And I'm glad I came, Emma, and really, I hope you'll find your luck with Matt.'

'I hope so too,' Emma replied with a sigh, and these were the last words they said about it and during lunch Emma asked a hundred what awaited her during the transition and her mother patiently answered all her questions.

At the end of lunch, Emma concluded that menopause was not exactly something she was looking forward to, but that there was nothing she could do about it to counter it.

## Chapter 41

As expected, Emma woke up early the next morning, and still felt more tense than she expected to start her new temporary job. However, a long lukewarm shower, two cups of coffee and a light breakfast later, Emma felt a lot better.

To create some more distance, her supervisor had suggested wearing her uniform, although she did not know if this was against the rules of the hospital. 'But,' she had decided, 'you work there in a personal capacity and not for another organization and that is known to these people, so it seems okay to me. And we don't have to wake up sleeping dogs, so keep this between us. But in uniform, this woman will see you more as a caregiver and not as a friend and that's better for both of you.'

Because Emma couldn't do anything against this and had seen the logic in it, she pulled out after taking a shower and eating her breakfast Nurse's uniform.

She had decided to go by car, so no one would see her, except a flat resident she happened to be in the elevator with, but she wouldn't know better than going to go to the EMC to work. If anyone were already wondering something, because the inhabitants lived quite anonymously next to each other.

But after she saw herself in the mirror, she decided to go in her normal clothes anyway. Because if Laura was confronted with Emma's nurse's uniform, she would probably feel immediately confronted with her illness, and Emma had just set out to prevent that. Laura had to feel like a woman at first as long as possible, and only then a patient.

Ant received Emma warmly, gave her a tour of the house and told her where she could find everything. Finally, he gave her the doctor's phone number and a house key so that Emma could let herself in. He emphasized that Emma was not required to do housework and she only had to be there for Laura. But if she wanted to clean out the dishwasher or turn on the washing machine every now and then, she would help Ant a lot with that. For the rest, they had hired a woman for years to come to clean, and she had promised to come now twice a week, instead of just for the usual weekly cleaning.

Then Ant said goodbye and Emma and Laura sat together a little awkwardly with a cup of coffee. Laura had not been in bed to Emma's relief, but was dressed in easy-fitting clothes in a comfortable-looking armchair in the conservatory. There was a walker next to her chair where an open novel by Donna Leon lay.

The conservatory overlooked the garden, where a Magnolia was in exuberant bloom, but the rest of the garden was neglected and offered a sad sight.

'I hate that I need a babysitter and have someone around me all day that I don't know. I'd rather be honest with you,' Laura opened the conversation. 'But Ant worries too much when I'm alone, and I want him to be able to continue doing his work. I think I'll like you, but you have to give me some space. Do you think that will work?'

Emma was happy with Laura's frankness, which offered her the opportunity to deal with her in the right way and would also offer Emma the space to have a moment to herself during the day.

'I think we can find a way together, Laura, I shouldn't think about spending about eight hours a day with someone in the same room. Can you still do things? Shopping together, for example?'

'Yes, with the wheelchair I am still reasonably mobile. And I would even appreciate it if you would take me somewhere every now and then. Have coffee somewhere, for example. And I would love to go to Diergaarde Blijdorp again. A good friend of mine has promised to go there with me, but it's way too heavy for her to walk behind the wheelchair all day. Although I weigh almost nothing anymore, she has osteoarthritis and that makes it all a bit more difficult. So your help would be welcome.'

'I admire your perseverance, Laura, it's very good not to feel too patient and still do what you can. But know your limits and indicate them too. I promise you that I will not treat you as a patient who is no longer able to do anything, but I will point out the facts when I find that you have reached your limit and can take it easier for a day, even if you continue to insist that it will still work.'

'Yes, I think I'll need that from time to time. Indeed, I suspect that together we will find a way to deal with this,' Laura confirmed with a smile.

On the one hand, Emma was relieved that Laura had clearly indicated what she expected of Emma, but also wondered how she had to spend the days herself. She was used to hustle and bustle at work, and there would now be a lot of silence around her. And as much as Emma loved peace and quiet in her spare time, the hustle and bustle at work provided the right balance in her life.

Emma brought the coffee cups to the kitchen and filled the dishwasher with the plates, glasses and cutlery left on the counter after breakfast. She counted three pieces of each, and Emma concluded that there must be another living child. Emma had not asked about this before and decided that she would discuss this with Laura.

She then made the bed that was placed in the living room for Laura and walked upstairs to make the beds there.

It felt strange to be in Ant's bedroom, as if she entered a private piece where she had nothing to do. However - she told herself - she was not here as a friend, but to help care for Laura and support Ant with some small work, so that he could concentrate on his work.

The bedroom was decorated in warm yellow and golden brown shades. There were no cupboards in it and Emma suspected that there would be a dressing room in the next room. A large window offered a view of the houses across the street, where privacy was protected by a row of trees placed along the yardline. Next to the bed was a walnut bedside table on each side, on the right bedside table was a wedding photo of Ant and Laura. Emma stood for a moment watching the couple looking at each other with a radiant smile, unaware of the pain and sadness they would face just over twenty years later.

On the left cabinet was a baby monitor, probably because Laura was sleeping downstairs because climbing stairs had become too heavy for her, but this way she could call Ant for help at night if necessary.

Then she walked downstairs, where she found Laura sleeping in her chair. Emma gently walked back to the living room, picked up her phone and opened the App of her digital newspaper. It could be very long days.

After less than an hour, Emma heard her name called and walked to the conservatory, where Laura asked her to get her a cup of coffee and bring some cookies.

But before Emma complied to the request, she first fulfilled her role as a nurse and clamped Laura's index finger with the oxygen meter and then recorded her blood pressure. Her blood pressure was fine, but the oxygen level in her blood was a bit on the low side, although not yet disturbing and Emma wrote down the values so she could compare them.

'We'll see if it went up and you don't have to worry yet,' Emma reassured Laura, after which she walked to the kitchen to get the coffee and cookies for Laura.

In the kitchen was the same Jura coffee maker as Emma's using at home, and she was glad she knew how this machine worked. Although, just like at her home, she had trouble making a decent cappuccino. She herself preferred to drink her coffee, but Laura had asked for a cappuccino.

Emma looked at the garden from the kitchen window and thought that maybe she could work a little in the garden in the moments that Laura was resting, a proposal that Laura accepted with both hands a moment later.

'I would like that Emma, I can't do it myself anymore and Ant doesn't have green fingers. And I don't have to ask my son at all. Maybe we can drive to the garden center this afternoon when I feel good to buy some plants?' Suggested Laura, and Emma saw that there was immediately a little more life in her eyes. The garden was apparently very important to Laura and it seemed to make her sad that it was so desolate.

'How old is your son?' Emma asked.

'Daan is twenty and studies veterinary medicine in Utrecht. He tries to get home as much as possible, but I don't want my illness to affect his academic results and I also want him to enjoy his student days. I still look back on that time with pleasure and I grant him that too. He spent last weekend at home, he still sees this as home, and this morning he left early. He went to play golf with Ant yesterday, while a friend was with me. Daan prefers to practice a more active sport such as running, but can play golf well and knows that he is doing Ant a great favor. There is nothing that makes Ant happier than a round of golf on Sunday with his son.'

'It is also important that Ant himself takes his moments for relaxation, because they often think of the patient, but for the immediate environment it is just as hard. And even if they don't hurt themselves, it's not easy to see someone you love hurt.'

'That is also my biggest sadness, when I see how Ant and Daan struggle with their feelings and always try to stay positive and cheerful for me. I find it so terrible that I make them so sad.'

'You don't make them sad about Laura, never forget that. It's your illness that causes that grief, not you.'

'I think I'm glad you're here Emma. I often struggle with feelings and fears that I don't know how to deal with, but with which I don't want to bother my loved ones. I like to talk to you about it and be frank, while I don't saddle you with even more sadness, which would undoubtedly be the case with Ant if he knew this.'

'I'm glad I can take on this role, and it's just as important as the medicines I give you. I don't have all the answers, but you can trust me with your fears, I will never talk to others about it, unless you indicate it yourself.'

'Thank you, Emma, but you have to promise me that you won't get too attached to me. I really can't get anyone else to grieve. I still don't want us to treat each other as friends, but you continue to see me as a patient and I see you as the nurse who takes care of me,' Laura said, probably shocked by her openness during one of the first hours since they met.

Although Emma knew that it would be virtually impossible to meet Laura's request - or was it a demand? - from Laura, Emma replied that she understood this and confirmed that Laura would be a patient for her and her help not a friendly service.

'Okay, then that's also clear. And now I would like to rest in bed for an hour, so that we can go to the garden center after lunch.'

The intimate atmosphere that had hung out there had disappeared, and Emma helped Laura in bed, after which she herself started working with a hoe in the garden and began to remove the weeds between the stones.

## Chapter 42

The work in the garden had had a therapeutic effect on Emma, and after Laura woke up after just over an hour, Emma had helped her out of bed and prepared a simple lunch.

After lunch, Emma had driven her in Laura's car to the garden center, and the basket that Laura had put on her lap sitting in her wheelchair, full of flowers and plants.

Before they drove back, they had drunk coffee together in the restaurant and Emma had noticed how much Laura had enjoyed the trip. Although she looked tired, she seemed to be doing a lot better than the night Emma had first met her and she had been barely approachable in bed.

'I have good days and bad days,' Laura had admitted, stating that one time she could and the other time she could not trace what was behind this. Emma had said that this feeling was generally caused by someone having done too much the day before, but emotions could also make you feel better one day than the next.

'You were recently told that you have been treated, Laura, and that does a lot to a person, don't underestimate that. Feeling physically less well for a day can be the result of that. But as long as you still have good days and you know how to find the right balance between rest and effort, it is only good for you to do as much as possible,' Emma had tried to make it clear to her, hoping that Laura would take this from her as a nurse, which also seemed to be the case when Laura replied that she was happy to finally be able to talk to someone who was medically sad and knew what she was talking about.

'Everyone is worried, sometimes even overprotective, and that stuffs me. And that also prevents me from doing what I can still do. I just don't want to be treated like a greenhouse plant yet,' Laura had said emotionally, after which Emma had promised her that she would try to convince Ant that it was not harmful to Laura's health if she tried to do as much as possible.

Laura had thanked her for wanting to do that and finally noticed that she would rather die a few weeks earlier because she had done too much, than have to spend those few extra weeks as a greenhouse plant.

Emma had replied that she shared that opinion, but that Laura should interpret it as her personal opinion: 'I would like to leave the rest to your doctor.'

When she returned, Laura had immediately fallen into a deep sleep, and Ant found her when he entered the room. Emma had given him a report on how this day had gone and kept her promise by trying to convince Ant that there was no need to treat Laura like a greenhouse plant. 'Let her do what she can, and I'll keep an eye on her that she doesn't cross the red line. But you must give her a little more space and be careful not to suffocate her with your concern.'

After Ant said he understood this, he told Emma that their doctor wanted to meet her and then said goodbye. Emma had driven home, believing that she had made the right decision when she had responded to Ant and Laura's request.

It was already the fourth day that Emma took care of Laura and they had both found their way. In the morning Emma helped Laura shower and get dressed, they drank coffee together and then Laura sat reading in her chair in the conservatory and Emma did some light housework. Then they drank a second cup of coffee together and Emma worked a bit in the garden, which Laura thought was more important than housework.

Emma loved working in the garden, under the watchful eye of Laura who gave Emma the necessary instructions in her chair - which Ant had placed in front of the patio doors.

The weeds had now been removed, Emma had put a bowl of violins on the table, Ant had pruned the hedge and mowed the grass, making the garden look a lot more pleasant. Today Emma would pot the new plants, as a final piece of the garden project.

It was a beautiful day and Laura had asked Emma to put the cushions on the garden furniture so she could enjoy the spring sun.

Laura had enjoyed her trip to the garden center, but as expected she had to take a little more rest the next day.

Yesterday they had walked together to the nearby shopping streets to do some shopping and look at shop windows. Laura didn't want to go into the fashion stores, because she felt it was a waste of money to spend something on new clothes at this stage. Then they had a drink on the terrace of brasserie Facet and Laura was to her pleasure what acquaintances came across.

Hillegersberg had been an independent municipality until 1941 and only merged with the municipality of Rotterdam in the middle of that year, so that the village feeling of "we knows us" still prevailed among the residents who had grown up here, and only in a few cases did they move to another part of the city or another municipality.

Today Laura wanted to take it easier, so that the next day she would have enough energy to do something together with Ant.

Emma had prepared lunch for them together in the garden, and after they had

And Emma had cleared the table, Laura asked if she wanted to sit with her for a while because she had some questions.

Emma poured another cup of tea for them and took a seat on the garden chair opposite Laura so she could look at her during their conversation. Laura's voice had sounded serious and Emma was getting ready for what was to come.

Laura opened the conversation by saying that Monday afternoon the doctor would come by and would like to meet Emma, but because the doctor wanted to take the time for this conversation he would not come by until after his consultation and could not say exactly what time that would be.

"Do you mind waiting for him?" Laura asked and Emma replied that that was no problem at all because she had no appointments.

'Are you married, Emma?'

'No, and I don't have a relationship in any form,' Emma replied slyly.

'Is there anyone in your life? You don't have to answer my question, if you prefer not to tell this.'

'Yes, there has been someone in my life who was important to me and with whom I have been in a relationship for about ten years. But our relationship ran around a few years ago and he passed away about a year and a half ago, so the chance that we will get back together one day is lost, while I expected this.' Emma was shocked by her own words, because although she had indeed always hoped that Ernst-Jan would eventually realize that his true happiness was not with Miranda but with her, she knew better.

'What a same for you. May I know why he died?'

'Due to a fatal accident. A matter of at the wrong time in the wrong place.' Emma kept a little in the middle of what kind of accident this had been, because there was a good chance that she had known Ernst-Jan and had achieved his death there in the national daily newspapers, especially among the residents of this district of "on us knows us" would have been discussed, and she hoped that Laura would not ask further about the way in which the accident had occurred.

Fortunately, Laura didn't either, but asked how Emma had dealt with this loss.

'Grief is raw, Laura, it hurts, it makes you angry, you feel powerless, sad and sometimes even desperate. Your life stands still, life goes on. You hate everyone who tells you that it all needs to take place, that your tears will disappear and these tears will give way to a smile at the memories you have made together in life. It's all so cliché.'

'But is it also true? Have you picked up your life again, dried your tears, given the sadness a place?'

'Yes, I think so. The sharp edges go off almost unnoticed at some point and from the automatic pilot you slowly switch to something that resembles a new life. I enjoy a walk in the sun again, the chirping of birds and the people around me. It was a dark road that I traveled, but with the help of a good friend I took a new road. Actually, that started after I first volunteered in Africa. Not at Doctors Without Borders, but for an organization that does about the same work, Mercyships. There I learned that you yourself are only a small part of something much bigger. I am an Atheist at heart and too scientifically inclined to adhere to a faith. Mercyships offers help to sick people by faith and trains doctors and nurses in their own country, and despite the fact that much was prayed, they have not been able to convince me that such a thing as a God exists or has existed. But still it touched me in a different way and offered a different look at the world and especially my own life. I can't put it into words exactly, but my own grief was subordinated to what I saw around me. What I have seen in Africa does not only consist of suffering and suffering. I met grateful people because we had helped them make life a little more bearable. I saw brave people who knew that despite all the misery that had happened to them and the daily struggle for survival that they had to wage, there is always something beautiful to discover. Children in orphanages who met us with a cheerful smile when we visited them. I think I have seen and learned that sadness is part of life and that life can always offer you something beautiful, as long as you want to see it.'

After these words of Emma, only the sound of the birds and a lawnmower could be heard and the latter sounded as if the sound of this wanted to underline Emma's words that life, whatever happens, just goes on.

'I hope that Ant and Daan will pick up their lives again at some point. Their happiness is the most important thing to me. Of course I don't have to think about waking up another woman next to Ant in a year, but I realize that he is still young, too young to be alone for the rest of his life and I hope that one day a nice woman will cross his path with whom he can be happy again. And don't forget that I've been sick for five years. That he has been obstructed in his actions all these years. Especially the last two years that have been dominated by surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. And then I'm not even talking about all the MRI scans and the tension over the results. His life has been at a standstill for two years.'

'If he's ready for that himself, that will probably happen, Laura. There is no time for entering into a new relationship. There are people who throw themselves into the first best arms, simply because they cannot be alone. And others are only ready for a new love in their lives after years. A heart is big enough to love multiple people, Laura, I am convinced of that, but you will love each person in your life in a different way. You are the mother of his son, the first woman he loved enough to marry. That will never change and if he meets the right woman, she will understand this. I myself have an appointment with a man for the first time tomorrow, since my broken relationship. Of course there is no love yet and maybe it won't come, but it is something that makes me realize that there is a possibility that I can love someone again.'

'Well, if Ant can open his heart to a new love in a few years, I hope he meets a woman like you, Emma. I could stand that thought.'

Emma thought back to their first conversation, just a few days ago, in which Laura had indicated that she wanted to enter into a patient-nurse relationship and did not want to build a friendship in any way. Emma realized that they had crossed that line after this conversation and there would be no way back. Laura seemed to realize this too and without words the look they gave each other confirmed that this was okay.



## Chapter 43

Emma had thought for a long time about the conversation she had had with Laura and knew that, except with Ernst-Jan, she had never been so frank with anyone before. She felt that she had only got to know herself since her first trip to Africa, and understood less and less of her earlier way of life, her reluctance towards other people, her need to be alone and the way she had often and quickly felt overstimulated.

Of course, she would always remain an introverted personality, but no longer introverted. And just as Janneke had proven this, Emma also began to believe more and more that you can change yourself, as long as you stay close to yourself and want to see that there is another way of life than what you have always been used to. Even her parents seemed to have seen this after fifty years of marriage and this would probably have saved their marriage.

As expected, she had enjoyed the Mercyships Run and although she was tired, she was blazing with energy. Together with her colleagues, they had raised a nice amount for charity, and although they had ended up somewhere low in the sports ranking, they were in second place when it came to the team that had brought in the most money, especially because of the donations made by the EMC staff.

They had celebrated this success together afterwards, and Emma had come home with a satisfied feeling.

That her first appointment with Matt was on this day could not have been better, because Emma was not only full of energy, because of the activities of that day she had not had time to think much about this evening.

Matt had sent her a message via Whatsapp that he had reserved a table at eight o'clock in restaurant Celest on the Zalmhaven. Emma had wanted to eat here before, because this restaurant was located at 190 meters altitude and offered a 360° view of Rotterdam. Emma suspected that Matt had used his connections to reserve a table in such a short time.

He had offered to pick her up, but Emma had reported that she would come on her own, noting that the restaurant was within walking distance of her apartment. Matt had replied that they would meet around eight o'clock in the rooftop lounge.

Emma had changed her clothes four times before she finally dropped her choice on a simple black tight-fitting dress. She hadn't worn this dress since her breakup with Ernst-Jan and she had long doubted whether this dress would come across a little too sexy.

But then she told herself that there was no reason why she shouldn't look sexy tonight. At the last minute, she had swapped her stiletto heel pumps for black suede loafers.

Not only because she found the stiletto heels in combination with the tight-fitting dress a bit too challenging, but also from a practical point of view because she would walk to the restaurant.

She looked at the final result in the mirror and was satisfied with what she saw. She had casually clamped up her blonde medium-length hair and made her eyes light, making them look bluer than they really were. Her cheeks still had a pink glow due to the effort and the sun that day, making her look not only sexy but also healthy.

She realized that Matt had only seen her in casual clothes so far and hoped that he would be impressed with the result.

She would have preferred to pour in a glass of wine to drink herself a little courage, but probably she would drink a few wines during dinner and she didn't want to get drunk.

Instead, she called Janneke in the hope that she could talk her into some courage. Janneke wanted to do that, but had little experience with dating, and noted with a laugh that she had little added value in that regard. Despite this, her conversation with Janneke had given

Emma some more self-confidence and she walked expectantly to the restaurant, where Matt was already waiting for her in the rooftop lounge.

His approving look did not escape her and this was confirmed by his remark that he had already noticed that Emma was a beautiful woman, but she had surpassed herself tonight in that regard. Fortunately, it sounded like a well-meaning compliment, which may have embarrassed Emma, but did not feel abandoned.

Matt asked what she wanted to drink and Emma chose a glass of Aperol Spritz. Matt called the waiter and ordered an Aperol Spritz for her and a whiskey with ice cream for herself.

After the waiter had put down the drinks for them, Matt raised his glass and toasted to a pleasant evening. 'I hope you can appreciate my choice for the restaurant and didn't find it too pretentious,' he asked, and Emma replied that a few weeks ago she had planned to eat at this restaurant soon, and she couldn't have asked for better company to put that intention into act.

She noted to herself that she could appreciate that he had wondered this and had not taken for granted that Emma would appreciate this.

'I should have asked earlier, but I thought this was such a fantastic location that I didn't think about it before.'

After these few simple words, Emma felt a little more comfortable and felt the tension flow away from her body.

The waiter appeared to invite them to go to the table, put their drinks on the tray and went in front of them to the table that was set in front of them. To Emma's delight, they were assigned a table by the window and were lucky that it was a clear day.

Despite the fact that Emma herself could enjoy the view of the Rotterdam skyline from her apartment every day, she found this view phenomenal and could not suppress a cry of admiration.

They could just catch a glimpse of the setting sun, and the glare of the orange-red sunlight that reflected in the windows of the towering buildings around the Salmon Tower gave the city an almost fairytale look.

She saw her own apartment building, which seemed tiny from this height, and pointed to Matt where she lived.

'You can praise yourself lucky that you can live there. And I don't mean that you can afford to buy this apartment financially, but, Emma, you really have the most beautiful view in all of Rotterdam.'

Emma completely agreed with him, and asked him where he lived.

'Probably in one of those beautiful residential towers that you designed yourself?'

'Well, modesty makes me confess that I am only a link in the whole, and our agency was even involved in the construction of one of these towers. And unfortunately I don't live in one of the residential towers. Since Elza and I separated, I have been living temporarily in a rental apartment. I can only buy something when the house we lived together - and own together - has been sold. But I want to give Elza and Mike enough time to find a suitable living space. Only when they are ready do we offer the house for sale.'

'Is Mike your son, or Elza's new partner?' Emma asked curious about his life.

'That is indeed our son. He still lives at home, although he might prefer to live on his own, but that is difficult these days and I think he finds it easy to still live at home. He also visits me regularly and then stays for a few days. That is a happy side effect in a divorce and your children are already adults, they decide for themselves whether they want to be with their father or mother. Mike has chosen to stay with his mother where he has the space, and sees me as a haven where he can dock if he feels like it, which fortunately is quite regular.'

'Do you have more children?'

'No, it stayed with Mike.'

Something in Matt's voice made Emma decide not to ask about this. She had told Matt earlier in Africa that she had no children, when he asked her if she could combine her work

for MercyShips with her work at the EMC and private life, so he didn't ask her any questions about that now.

Their conversation was interrupted again by the waiter who came to explain the Chef's menu to them and asked if there might have been a food allergy. Emma and Matt said this was not the case, although Emma confessed that she was not a lover of oysters. Then he asked if she wanted to use the accompanying wine arrangement, to which Matt replied in the negative and asked for the wine list.

'As you wish, I will ask the sommelier to bring the wine list,' the waiter replied politely, after which he walked away from their table to ask the sommelier to come to them with the wine list.

"Do you want white or red wine?" Matt asked Emma, after the sommelier had handed him the wine list. Emma replied that this did not matter to her and the sommelier recommended them a Pinot Noir, which fit perfectly with the menu that consisted of both fish and meat.

After the amuses were served, they continued their conversation.

'I want to know everything about you, Emma, where you grew up, what your hobbies are, what you love and what you're horrified. What has your life been like so far? I mean, are you divorced, widow? Or am I going too fast?'

'Maybe a little, but to answer your last question, I am neither divorced nor a widow. There has been a man in my life, but that is a long story and I may tell you someday, but this does not seem to me to be a subject for a first appointment.'

'Sorry, you're right. Talking about relationships that are over during the first date is not such an appropriate topic, and actually that's none of my one's one of my ss. I also don't intend to bother you with the reason for my divorce. If there is a real reason for that.'

'There's always a reason, Matt, otherwise you wouldn't split up.'

'Yes, I think you have a point there,' Matt admitted.

'But I do want to answer all your previous questions. I grew up in a loving family. My childhood has been quite complicated, but that has nothing to do with my parents or circumstances. I was always very self-conscious and therefore found it difficult to connect with classmates. As a result, I was bullied at school and because I felt excluded and different from the other children, I crawled even more into my shell and it got from bad to worse. Nowadays there is a lot of attention for bullying at school, but then the teachers were just told that you should not appoint yourself and that you should also do your best to be liked.'

'I'm sorry to hear that, Emma, your childhood should be carefree and a Time when you get your own friends and girlfriends. What did your parents think of it, did you have support from them?'

"I never told them. My father is also an introverted man, while my mother is very exuberant. I think my parents always assumed that I looked a lot like my father and that everything would be fine with me. My mother often asked why I took so few friends home, or went to play with them, but then my father always said that not everyone needed other people around them, and that my mother should leave me alone.'

'Don't you felt very lonely? No girlfriends, being bullied at school, teachers who ignored this and parents who didn't see it and had no idea what was going on? I think I would have been miserable.'

Matt's entire body language exuded compassion, as if it was something that was still taking place in Emma's life. Which was perhaps partly true, because Emma had previously realized that all this had probably underlying her need to be alone.

'Well, when I was bullied at school. But in high school that became much less. I was very shy and introverted - by the way, I still am the latter - but at that age other things also play a role that make people like you, or interesting. I was very good at sports and everyone

wanted me on their team. That did help, because during exercise you counted your performance and no one cared about whether you were talking a lot or not. But I have never had an extended circle of friends and was always very insecure and on myself. That only recently came a little change when I started working as a volunteer for MercyShips in Africa. There you are dependent on each other twenty-four hours a day and there are only rare moments when you can be on your own. And to my own surprise, I didn't mind this at all, in fact: I enjoyed it to the fullest. And since that moment I was finally able to open up a little more to others. Through a chance encounter with a woman I vaguely knew from the fitness center, I got to know a bunch of nice women and I also have some more personal contact with my colleagues because we started training with each other for the MercyShips run, which we participated in today.'

Matt had watched her closely throughout her story and had not once come to reason with her. Emma thought she could sense something of pity in his steel blue eyes - which still reminded her of Bart - and that bothered her. She was not pathetic, had never found herself pathetic and did not want to be found pathetic.

But Matt's answer showed that the opposite was true and he was merely interested. 'Well I'm glad to hear you're satisfied

With the person you are, without worrying about what others think of you. I have always admired people who are like that, because they are actually the purest people. When they befriend you, they always sincerely mean it. But I also like to see that you have finally crawled out of your shell a bit and are now opening yourself up to new friendships and experiences in your life. Of course I don't know you well at all, but what I've seen from you now is not a shy introverted woman. I admire your self-confidence and your belief in what you stand for.'

Emma looked at him in surprise, because no one had ever said this to her. And she had certainly never looked at herself that way.

'I think I'm a bit of a complicated person, if I may be honest. I still don't like to talk about myself and I still need more space for myself than an average person I think. I do agree with you, if I make a friendship with someone then I also sincerely like that person. I will never become everyone's friend and I have no need at all to make friends with everyone through social media, for example. That I told you all this tonight surprises me more than that you will be surprised to hear this from me.'

The appetizer that the waiter had previously set up for them was still untouched on the table for them and Emma suggested that she do honor to the Chef's arts. They tasted good and Matt poured another glass of wine for them from the bottle that the sommelier had left on the table for his request.

'My childhood looked a bit less complicated if I'm honest. I had enough boyfriends, was always on my way to something or someone and I liked everything. I wanted to play football, but my parents allowed me to go to a hockey club but not to a football club. Later I started playing football, until I got injured and thought it was nice. I now play golf when I can find the time for that and I am a member of a rowing club, and I feel nowhere as happy as on the water. The physical effort combined with the calmness that emanates from the water are the ultimate way for me to forget everything for a while and just enjoy what is happening in my life at that moment. My social life has changed a bit after Elza and I separated. The joint dinners with friends have given way to an evening in the pub or to a football match with friends. I still have contact with some mutual friends of Elza and me, but those are generally only the people I already knew before I met Elza. I don't think there are people who have taken sides for Elza or me, but a dinner with four people is a different experience than when there are three of you. That's just how it goes, and I'm at peace with that. I also got other people back in my life. They always say that life is like a train: people get on the way and at some point leave the train in which you are traveling. Only a few get off with you at the starting station and only leave the train at the end point.'

Emma then talked about her friendship with Thérèse and how she had recently realized through her friendship with Janneke that this had been a surrogate friendship, one-way traffic without any depth. But that Thérèse still had a place in her heart.

She talked about John - the only one in her life who had really considered a friend since she knew him - but who had now found his happiness on another continent and she did not expect him to ever return to the Netherlands.

The evening flew by and before they knew it, dessert was served. Emma couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed someone's company, and she had been so herself.

Even during her time with Ernst-Jan, she had never completely torn down the wall she had built around her. She had always been careful not to give him the impression that she wanted to put him in front of the block.

Emma sincerely hoped that this feeling was mutual and that she would see Matt again soon. She breathed a sigh of relief when he invited her to go with him the next day for a cruise.

'I rented a sloop and not a rowboat, so rest assured: you can just relax and enjoy. During the MercyShips run you participated in today, I think you made enough effort for the rest of the weekend. And tomorrow I think you'll have muscle pain,' he had remarked with a grin.

It didn't even occur to Emma to grab her schedule so as not to come across as too eager and make it seem like she had other appointments. And even if she had had it, the chance to spend the next day with Matt had not let herself be deprived of anything or anyone and had resisted any other appointment.

Matt had dropped Emma off at home by taxi after their dinner and made no insods to go upstairs with her and Emma hadn't invited him for a ride either.

Emma had planned to actually see that evening as their first date and forget the night in Africa, or at least pretend that this had nothing to do with their dinner tonight.

## Chapter 44

When she returned home, she had been full of adrenaline and without turning on the lights in the living room, she had been in her chair by the window for a long time to enjoy the wonderful evening.

She knew it wouldn't take much more for her to fall in love with Matt. She enjoyed that feeling and did not allow herself to think about other things, such as that it might not lead anywhere, except new sadness for Emma. She invariably intended to enjoy every moment and let everything come over her.

The warnings of Janneke, Bente and her mother hit her in the wind and she would only rely on her own feelings. If this was her chance for new luck, she had to seize it with both hands and not let others fool her.

Emma was convinced that she had enough human knowledge to know if Matt was reliable. And she only had to look him in the eyes to know that this was definitely the case.

And hadn't Bente had doubts about his correct intentions from her first appointment with Paul? Matt had absolutely not evoked that feeling in her and the only thing Emma wondered was whether their possible relationship would be able to withstand the pressure that would undoubtedly arise from his formal divorce.

Whether this infatuation could eventually lead to love, no one could predict, but if Emma would not allow herself to fall in love, then there would never be such a thing as love and connection as a logical follow-up.

Despite the fact that Emma had already spent a passionate night with Matt in Africa, she wondered what it would be like to feel his arms around her, his naked body close to hers. And although she could not wait until that moment was there, she had solemnly promised herself not to be overwhelmed too quickly by her desires for him.

Emma woke up the next morning with an energy that only people who are in love can dispose of. She sent a message to Bente and Janneke to let them know that they had had a fantastic evening and that she would go sailing with him that day.

They had both replied that they were happy to hear that and wished her a lot of fun, supplemented by the request to tell them everything on Tuesday evening after exercise, to which Emma answered with a thumbs up.

Unfortunately, that day the unusually high temperature for the time of year of over twenty-five degrees of that week before was not matched, but it was dry and the sun even showed itself the moment Emma got ready for her boat trip with Matt.

She had white pants that fell up to her ankles with a black/white horizontal striped shirt on it. Finally, she had put on a black sweater over it, because the feeling temperature on the water would probably be lower.

The moment she took one last look in the mirror, Matt rang the belly.

She invited him to come upstairs and opened her front door to greet him, feeling her pounding in her throat. He wore the same sand-colored pants he had worn during the excursion in Africa with a dark blue skipper's sweater, which underlined his brown-burned face and seemed to make his steel-blue eyes even more penetrating.

He greeted her with a kiss on her forehead and told them that they still had time to drink a cup of coffee, but if Emma liked this, they could also drink coffee in the clubhouse of the Marina.

'No dude, I have a Jura vending machine, so a cup of coffee is made in no time.'

Like all of Emma's other visitors, Matt immediately walked on to the window, while Emma made a cup of coffee for both of them.

Matt had taken a seat in the chair where Emma usually sat, and Emma pushed another armchair from the living room to the window.

She appreciated that Matt did not stand up to help her, but assumed that Emma would be very well able to do so herself.

'I'm in your place?' Matt asked, without making the way to get up.

'Yes, I often sit there with a book or just staring out the window. There is always something to see and every day it seems like I discover something new.'

'If you look a little to the right, you'll see the building there that came from my drawing board. It cost me blood, sweat and tears, and above all a lot of overtime, but it also earned me brand recognition in the world of project developers and architects. I'm the one who gave me this

Have offered opportunity, owe something forever.'

'I don't agree with you. You owe it to your own qualities and you can be grateful that someone believed in you, it was ultimately you who achieved this. You can be proud of yourself anyway. But you are too, don't you, Matt, you don't seem like the type of false modesty to me.'

Matt looked at her in shock and asked if she thought he was arrogant.

'No, Matt, certainly not. But you yourself are aware that you have achieved an exceptional achievement with this project. That has nothing to do with arrogance, but with faith in yourself and I personally think that's a good trait of someone. If you don't believe in yourself, how can you expect others to do this?'

'I think we've shown enough admiration for each other since last night, soon we'll be walking next to our shoes. I suggest that we now leave for the marina and enjoy the day,' Matt dodged an answer to Emma's last comment.

'But that's exactly the fun thing about first dates, Matt. You can then just

Feel very special and enjoy it without shame. And I'm going to tell you just as long as I find so special about you, that you're not only going to walk next to your shoes, but also with your nose in the wind,' Emma replied.

'I think I can live with that. Then tell me later what you think of my sailing skills.'

Then Emma grabbed her bag and walked with him to the front door, and while they were waiting for the elevator Emma felt him gently put his arm around her shoulder. And somehow, that felt more than familiar.

## Chapter 45

In the marina, Matt turned out to be a good acquaintance and the sloop was already waiting for them. Matt had ordered a picnic basket and after helping Emma on board, he handed her the basket that she pushed under the couch.

Matt jumped on board and started the motorcycle, while he asked Emma to untie the ropes. Slowly he sent out of the marina, while Emma took a seat on the forefront so she could look at Matt.

'On the rear end you are a lot more comfortable,' Matt advised her, but Emma replied that she preferred to look at his blue eyes rather than his back.

Emma felt the wind flutter her hair around her face and put on her sunglasses when the sun began to shine brighter and brighter against expectations. Matt asked if she wanted to take his sunglasses out of his backpack as well and as Emma got up to comply with his request, she lost her balance for a moment and grabbed Matt, who grabbed her with a firm grip.

Emma would have preferred to stand for hours, close to him, his strong arm put around her.

After sailing for an hour - partly silent and enjoying everything they saw around them in the nature that had come to life - Matt sent towards a small cove, where they anchored.

Matt picked up the picnic basket, put it on the table by the bench on the rear and invited Emma to sit next to him.

A large number of geese swam down on the boat and Emma looked at the chicks who came swimming behind the geese. Matt grumbled that there were far too many geese and the population had become uncontrollable, but Emma only had an eye for the chicks and barely heard what he was saying.

In the basket they found fresh sandwiches, various types of French cheese, fresh meats, strawberries and a half-liter bottle of champagne, including two champagne glasses.

There were hardly any sounds to be heard from this place and the silence was only disturbed by the quacking of the ducks and in the distance she heard children jumping into the water. If Emma had to draw luck, she would have drawn this picture.

After they had enjoyed the extensive lunch and Matt had spiled another glass of champagne for them, Emma leaned against him and felt his hand slide down her back under her shirt. So they sat for a while without saying anything, enjoying the peace that the water offered and of each other.

The magic of that moment was brutally disrupted when Emma heard her phone ring. Emma, who rarely got a call, was startled by the sound and watched who was calling her. When she saw that it was the EMC, she decided that this call could wait and that they should speak in her voicemail.

But the enchantment was broken and as Matt looked at his watch, he realized it was time to sail back.

They put the leftovers of lunch back in the basket, Matt took a seat behind the steering wheel again and Emma on the bench on the fore-end, after Matt had first thrown her a tube of sunscreen with the advice to smear her face well, because she would burn faster on the water.

Emma smeared her face well, put some sunscreen in her hand and smeared it on Matt's face. And this small gesture seemed to confirm the intimacy that had already arisen between them.

Emma would have preferred this day to last indefinitely, but when they enjoyed a cup of coffee on the terrace, Emma's phone rang again and this time it was Ant who called her, causing Emma to feel compelled to answer the conversation.



'Emma, I am currently in the EMC, Laura became unwell this morning and they took her to the hospital by ambulance. I just don't hear what's going on, and I was wondering if you could get this done.'

As sorry as Emma thought it was to have to end her day out with Matt early, she promised Ant that she would come straight to the EMC.

'She was admitted to the oncology department and, Emma, I don't know how to thank you.' 'You don't have to do that either, Ant, I'll be with you within an hour.'

She explained the situation to Matt and he offered to take her to the EMC. 'I'll wait for you there for a while, then we can have a little bite to eat along the Meuse in the Ball Tent.'

Emma protested weakly and when Matt continued that he assumed that Emma did not have to stay in the hospital for hours, she gladly accepted his offer, happy that this day did not seem to be over.

Emma found Ant next to Laura's bed, who was lying pale with her head in the pillows, her hand tightly clamped around Ant's and Emma could read the fear in her eyes.

After considering the situation, she walked in the hallway to the head nurse and asked if she could tell her a little more about the seriousness of the situation, but she said she didn't know much more than that the doctors had done some tests.

Emma knew that at the weekend everything was going a bit slower in a hospital and decided to walk to the laboratory to see if she could get a little wiser there, although she suspected that she would not be told much more there than from the nurse. On the way to the elevator, Emma ran into the room doctor and she rushed to him to ask if he had already received a result from the laboratory. He didn't, but because he Emma

Had met during the running training they had done from the EMC, he offered to her relief to make an extra phone call.

After just ten minutes he came back and was able to reassure Emma.

'As it looks now, she has contracted a harmless intestinal virus and due to the stress she has probably started hyperventilate. We keep her for a night for observation, but based on these results she can in principle go home tomorrow.'

Emma breathed a sigh of relief and quickly walked back to tell Laura and Ant the good news. After promising to pick up Laura the next morning, they said goodbye to each other Emma rushed back to the coffee corner, where she had left Matt.

She once again offered her excuse that their trip was so cruelly disturbed, but Matt didn't want to know anything about it and thought it was commendable that Emma was so involved with her patient.

'I think she has now meant more to me than just a patient,' Emma confessed and although Matt found her adorning this, he warned her as her supervisor had done this not too much on Laura to attach.

Then Emma offered to prepare some food at her home, because they both didn't feel like going to eat somewhere for the second night in a row, nor did they need other people around them.

## Chapter 46

Emma parked her car at Ant and Laura's door, walked inside to pick up the car key from Laura's car and then drove on to the EMC, hoping to take Laura home.

Emma was still feeling like the last weekend she had spent with Matt. The night before, Emma had prepared a meal salad for them at home and served it with some fresh bread from the oven. They had been talking to each other until late in the evening about anything and everything and time had flown by.

At eleven o'clock Matt had looked at his watch and said it was time to get up because they both had to get back to work early the next day. He had given Emma a gentle kiss and asked her if she would like to accompany him on his weekly walk next Friday night.

'I walk the dog for my neighbour every Friday night, and I would like it more if I could walk my weekly tour along the Kralingsplas and through the woods with you.'

Emma had previously decided for herself that she would not just pretend she already had an appointment, and accept every invitation from Matt.

They had agreed to meet there at six o'clock in the evening and Matt had suggested ordering a pizza afterwards and eating at his house.

'My cooking skills are absolutely not worth a demonstration,' he had noted with a smile and Emma had replied that a pizza was fine.

It was busy on the way to the EMC and the ride had taken longer than Emma had hoped. She praised herself lucky when she had arrived at the EMC that Laura had a parking permit for the disabled, so that she did not also have to look for a free parking space, because there was hardly a free space in the parking garage.

Before Emma went to the oncology department, she walked quickly to her own department to greet her colleagues. They reassured her by telling her that the new forces were doing their job excellently and that no problems had yet arisen in the grid.

Then Emma walked to the oncology department, where she was told that the fever had subsided and all blood values were good enough to discharge Laura from the hospital and she was allowed to go home as soon as the attending physician had signed the necessary forms for discharge.

Laura was already dressed next to the bed waiting for her and Emma helped her in the wheelchair so they could leave as soon as possible.

Fortunately, it didn't take too long for the nurse to come to them and tell them that they were allowed to go.

Laura sat silently staring in front of her on her way home, lost in her own thoughts that - as Emma suspected - were mainly focussed on her last phase of life. Emma had often seen it happen that people - after they had been told that the doctors could no longer do anything for them - denied this for themselves, but once they were hospitalised - often due to a complication caused by their poor health - suddenly seemed to face the truth and a kind of retissation occurred.

Emma's suspicions were confirmed after she helped Laura in her chair in her beloved conservatory and they had a cup of coffee together.

"Are you good with computers, Emma?"

'Well, that's not how I would describe it, but I'm certainly not a digibit and reasonably know how to deal with it.'

'My end is approaching, Emma, I feel like I don't have long to live and I realised last night that a flu can already cause such complications, that I won't survive it. And I would like to put something on paper, as a comfort to Ant and Daan when I am no longer there to comfort them myself.'

'I think that's a nice thought, Laura, of course I'd like to help you with that. What did you have in mind?'

'I want to put on paper memories we made together in our lives. What all those things we experienced together have meant to me. How much I love them and that they have been the most important thing in my life. But also how I experienced my last phase myself, how their care and love gave me the strength to continue as long as possible. And I also want them to know that I have finally made peace with it that my life is finite. That I can let it go when the time comes and that I want them to pick up their lives again. That they should not linger in their grief and that I still grant Ant happiness with another woman.'

Emma had to swallow her tears after Laura's words, because they reminded her of the diary that Ernst-Jan had left her.

Emma felt an unprecedented admiration for this woman whom she had only known for so recently, but who had already made an unforgettable impression on her.

'I'm not a writer, but I promise you I'll do my best. I will try to write everything down as literally as you tell it.'

Laura smiled and replied that Emma could safely take it on, because she could not expect Emma to have the right speed in terms of typing skills, to keep up with Laura's pace of storytelling.

Emma did agree with her and it also gave her the opportunity to rest when Laura was lying, to do something useful with her time now that she had completed the garden project.

'Do you also want to have it printed for me in book form and only hand it over to Ant after I die? I know I like a lot of you

Longing, but I can't afford to give it to him during my life.'

'I promise you, and I suggest you pick out a photo for the cover of the book, that makes it even more personal,' Emma suggested.

"Yes, that's a good idea. I will pick out a photo of a beautiful memory, a moment that was dear to all three of us.'

'And now I think you'd better go get some rest. Then we can start your story after lunch.'

But these words had already escaped Laura, and was already in a deep sleep.

## Chapter 47

After a few days, Laura seemed to have strengthened again and had enough energy to go outside again and had asked Emma if she wanted to take a walk with her in the nearby Lage Bergsebos and have lunch with her at Lake Seven.

It was another beautiful day and Emma wanted nothing more than to go outside. She took a fleece blanket and put it on the wheelchair so that Laura couldn't get cold and reserved a table for them at the Brasserie.

She parked her car as close as possible to the Brasserie so that they could drive home as quickly as possible after lunch, and started the walk from that point. On the way they met some of Laura's old friends sitting on a bench resting from their walk, and she asked Emma to drive her to them so she could have a chat with them.

Emma granted Laura her privacy and indicated that she would sit on the next bench, until Laura called her to continue their walk.

Emma picked up her phone and looked to see if she had any messages and to her surprise she saw that she had received a message from Matt. He had sent her a picture of a huge pizza with the caption that he couldn't wait until the moment he could eat it.

The double message of this did not escape Emma and her heart jumped with joy. Because Matt could have seen that she had read his message, she immediately replied that it had been a long time since she had seen such a delicious pizza and had an unprecedented craving all week.

Tuesday evening she had extensively reported on her weekend with Matt to Bente and Janneke. Bente had only asked if it felt good and when Emma had responded with full conviction with the words: 'more than good,' Bente had replied that she had to enjoy it and nothing more than that.

Janneke had been a little more conservative with her reaction and told Emma that she should enjoy it, but not sit on a pink cloud.

Laura had also asked about her appointment with Matt and said she hoped to meet him one day before her death. Emma had given her a doubtful look, but Laura had reacted lightly and told Emma to get picked up once after work.

'Then you just come to me by tram once. I am extremely curious who has managed to conquer the heart of such a conservative person like you in such a short time. Grant me some romance, Emma.'

Emma then gave in to Laura's request with a wide smile and promised her that if the opportunity arose she would make sure that Matt would pick her up at Laura's house.

Despite both of their intention to keep the relationship businesslike, a close bond had developed between them, which was reinforced by the frank and often intimate stories that Laura entrusted to Emma.

In the morning Laura told her story and in the afternoon Emma recorded this story word for word on her iPad. Laura had picked out a photo for each memory, which Emma then added to the story. Emma could not imagine a more beautiful and dearer memory for relatives.

Emma was startled from her reflections by a shadow that popped up before her. It was one of Laura's friends who came to tell them that they were going on with their walk and Laura wanted to have lunch.

Emma walked up to Laura and pushed the wheelchair out in front of her, which was sometimes complicated by the false flat of the paths.

Emma could see that Laura had blossomed from her conversation with the women and visibly enjoyed lunch, although they had to skip the coffee because Laura had largely used up her energy for that day and she also wanted to keep some of her energy for Ant.

The regularity of working during the day was good for Emma and she slept much better as a result. She was therefore happy that she would return to the OR in the foreseeable future, after which she was freed from the irregular shifts in the nursing ward.

Emma told herself every day that Laura's death could present itself at any moment and unexpectedly, and that she was not allowed to allow herself grief. Not now that she had met Matt and she felt happier than she had felt in a long time.

Yesterday afternoon she had a FaceTime call with John and told him about Matt. After she had convinced him that he really was no longer with his wife, John had said that he hoped she would be happy with him.

'You deserve it, honey, but don't run too fast huh?'

'No, we're taking it easy,' Emma promised, after which John had noticed that three dates within a week did not fall into the "quietly" category.

'But we haven't had sex yet, not even kissed,' Emma had proclaimed, which had raised the question of the John under which category her night with Matt in Africa fell exactly.

'That doesn't count. We act as if that never happened and we met in Spain through our parents.'

John thought that was an unbelievable story, but if Emma thought this was okay, who was he to be a different person.

In the end, he informed her of the true reason for his conversation and told her delighted that Michael had proposed to him and he had said yes.

Emma had congratulated him and was genuinely happy for him, but the realisation that the chance that John would move back to the Netherlands had been missed made her sad.

'You're coming to our wedding, right?' John had asked and Emma had replied reassuringly that nothing could stop her from doing so.

After that, they exchanged some gossips and said goodbye to each other.

After they had finished the conversation, Emma had been sitting and looking outside for a while. She missed John very much, but she had also regained new friendships for it. She hoped that the friendship with Bente and Janneke would turn out to be as close as her friendship with John had always been.

## Chapter 48

Ant had come home early on the Friday that Emma had rearranged with Matt, so that Emma had had enough time to change herself at home for her walk with Matt. She had taken a quick shower and washed her hair. She had no idea how the evening would go, given the allusions in their WhatsApp messages.

Thérèse had once said that the best contraceptive was white Sloggi underwear, because then the sex would go away by itself. Despite the fact that Emma did not yet agree with herself whether or not she thought it was too early to spend the night together, she had opted for a black lace lingerie set just to be sure. Over that she had put on comfortable trousers and a comfortable sweater and ditto sneakers. Her lingerie may be sexy, but her outfit certainly wasn't.

She quickly grabbed her toiletry bag in case, and decided that she would tell Matt - if it came to the point that she took it out of her car - that she always had it with her in case she had to spend the night with Laura if her condition worsened. And Emma thought it would indeed be a good idea to leave the toiletry bag in her car.

Bente had warned her that she should not think beforehand whether or not she wanted to spend the night with Matt. 'Then in your head you're only working on that all evening and that doesn't make sense. Just wait and see how it goes, then you'll find out on your own.'

Emma had decided to take this advice to heart, because this would indeed probably benefit the evening.

When Emma arrived at the parking lot where they had agreed to meet, Matt was already waiting for her with a Golden Retriever on his leash in his hand.

Both Matt and the dog greeted Emma enthusiastically and Matt grabbed Emma's hand with his free hand during the walk, while Max happily wagging his tail with them.

They kept the pass well and encountered many dog owners along the way who said goodbye to Matt kindly and looked at Emma curiously.

Matt said that he walked the same round every Friday night and also usually the same people walked their dogs around this time, tired after a week of work and energy for the free weekend that was ahead of them.

'Sometimes I make a chat, but the conversation is generally limited to topics such as the weather, the traffic jams and the dogs.'

'I occasionally go for a run here with a colleague, and often meet the same people, but runners. And that they don't always get with stray dogs and visa.'

'Yes, I think people give each other too little space, on all those crowded walking and cycling paths. My mother fell a few years ago because a cyclist apparently thought his riding time was more important than his fellow road users. My mother had no chance of preventing her from falling, but it was soon said that her ability to react because of her age would have decreased and that she might not be better off getting on the bike anymore.'

Emma, who would rather not be reminded of the accident she had recently witnessed and the victim had died this evening, tried to change the subject and pointed out to Matt a bunch of children who were given sailing.

After they finished their walk and arrived at their cars in the parking lot, Matt passed his address to Emma, who ran it into her navigation system.

She saw that Matt lived not far from here, and immediately understood why he wanted to move as soon as possible. Emma had always found this neighbourhood - which consisted largely of blocks of concrete as they were often built in the 1960s - a bit desolate.

She was therefore pleasantly surprised when she drove into the parking lot and saw that the apartment complex consisted of a semicircular building, which overlooked a large pond that connected the Lage Land and Prinsenland districts.

The apartment was bright and clearly visible furnished by a man. In the living room annex kitchen, there was a black leather sofa and ditto armchair, a dining table with four bucket chairs and opposite the sofa hung a huge TV, which took up almost the entire wall. There was a bouquet of fresh flowers on the wooden dining table and Emma suspected that Matt had brought them into the house especially for her. On the counter was a coffee machine that would not be out of place in an average restaurant, but otherwise there was not a single kitchen appliance in the kitchen.

On the dining bar, which separated the kitchen from the living room, there was a large bowl of fresh fruit and an open laptop and on a low cupboard along the wall were some photos, probably Matt's son. For the rest, there was no form of decoration to be found.

'Not the cosiest living room you've ever seen, is it? But I didn't put much time or money into it to make it a little fun. This is only temporary and I didn't take anything with me when Elza and I separated. Only when I have found a place where I want to live for a longer period of time will I invest a little in it. These are all second chances, so they are sustainable. A friend of mine was going to redecate his entire house and he couldn't have chosen a better time for that. I only bought the TV new.'

'I already had that suspicion,' Emma laughed. 'First priority for a man, right, a big TV? You probably didn't get that chance with your ex-wife I suspect.'

'That's right,' Matt had to admit. 'Weld you object if I tok my TV with me when we were to move in together?'

'You're running a bit fast, Matt, but I'd rather not have such a thing hanging on the wall in my living room.'

'Then I just have to look for a big house so I can set up my own mancave. Includes billiards and a dartboard. And his own refrigerator with beer and whiskey,' Matt said with a steel face, but Emma saw that he could only suppress his laughter with difficulty.

"Where would you like to live?" Emma asked, because she felt that this often meant a lot about someone.

'Oh, I wouldn't like to ever want to live anywhere else than in Rotterdam. I've come to love this city very much. But I don't know if I would really like to live right in the centre. Your apartment is in an ideal place, just outside the centre, but within walking distance of it.'

'Yes, I can count myself lucky, but an apartment like mine doesn't offer room for a 'mancave'.'

'I don't think so either, I would also prefer a bigger apartment, but it's a choice you have to make, space or location. I would actually like to have a garden again, and that makes the choice even more difficult because there is a price tag and I just have to cough it up now. Don't feel sorry, because I'm definitely not poor, but a house like Elza and I once bought together is out of my reach.'

'Where did you live with Elza?'

'On the Plaswijcklaan in Hilleegersberg. We bought this in 2008 and then the housing market looked very different. As soon as Elza has found another home and we have been able to sell this house, I do have a nice budget with the shared surplus value, but I no longer want to live in Hilleegersberg. Don't ask me why, but I've never felt at home there. Moreover, I never want an old house again, so the choice is not huge, because you will not encounter much new construction with an area of at least 150 m<sup>2</sup> within walking distance of the centre.'

'Yes, your wish list is very difficult. I think you will have to make a choice between an apartment around the centre with a terrace, or a house with a garden in one of the suburbs.'

'I know, I know,' Matt sighed. 'But for the time being, Elza hasn't found a new home yet and her list is just as difficult, because she now has 280 m<sup>2</sup> of living space and doesn't want to give up much on that. In addition, she wants to continue living in Hillegersberg and the house must be completely and sustainably renovated. And actually she wants to continue living where she lives now,' Matt could hardly have disguised his anger when he said this.

'Well, then you'll have to buy you out, then she can stay where she is, although I wonder what she still has to do in such a big house, especially if Mike has soon found his own home.'

'I think Mike is precisely the reason why she doesn't want to move, because as long as she lives there, Mike won't make any minds to live on her own. He has half the upper floor at his disposal with all the privacy he could wish for. He has his own bathroom and a mother who washes, irons for him, makes his bed and cooks for him. Mike really doesn't sit in a twenty-square-metre student room with a shared bathroom and kitchen.'

'So then it will be buying out,' Emma stated soberly. 'Because your life goes on too. And if she can't afford it financially, Mike and Elza will also need water with the wine, Matt, your life goes on too.'

'You have a point, Emma, but I'm just a bit easy-going at this kind of thing. And maybe I feel guilty somewhere that I abandoned them and that they should not be the result of my decision to break up.'

'Was that just your decision? Wasn't Elza behind this? I can hardly imagine that you want to stay married to each other when the cake is over, or there is no longer love for each other.'

Emma's thoughts went back to the marriage of Ernst-Jan and Miranda, which had also been a loveless marriage for years, while they had remained together and he had been in a relationship with Emma for more than ten years in the same period.

'Elza has, for a short time, had a relationship with someone else. She regretted it very much afterwards, but I never knew for sure if her regret arose from the fact that I had found out, or sincere repentance of her act. I tried to forgive her, but then I started thinking about the deeper reason for her relationship with another man. And I then came to realise more and more that we were only together out of habit. We led a good and comfortable life together, had few arguments and gave each other the space to be able to undertake things separately from each other in addition to our joint social life. And then I realised that we had stayed together not only out of habit, but also because of Mike, the social life we had built together and perhaps even out of shame on the outside world, who had always considered us the perfect couple. Not that I didn't care about her anymore, but I didn't want to get old with her anymore. This would never have happened if Elza didn't cheat, I guess. Then I would have just continued on the same footing and in a way been very satisfied with our lives. But in the end I told her I wanted a divorce. She strongly resisted it and just didn't beg to give our marriage a second chance. She managed to convince me that it would be better to separate only temporarily for the time being and we would still make the trip to Africa together because we had already booked it. After this trip we would see if we didn't want to continue together, although I must honestly confess that my decision was actually already fixed at the time and I only agreed out of a kind of cowardly. I don't have to explain to you that our holiday in Africa was a drama. And then I met you and realised that I wanted to get on with my life and I no longer wanted to keep Elza on the line. After our first meeting on your terrace there in Africa, I told Elza that my decision was irreversible. Of course the moment was not well chosen and I later regretted it, but at that moment it seemed to me the only right thing I could do. Last week the papers were officially signed and I am now a free man. I have resumed my life in recent months and found my way, knowing that our divorce would be final. All this time, Elza has been hoping that everything in Africa would



be fine again, and she is therefore still in the process of processing the divorce and the acceptance that we are permanently separated. And that's one of the reasons I don't want to pressure her to sell the house or buy me out. Everything is arranged on paper, but not yet in practice.'

'That adorns you, Matt. Okay, you may have approached it a bit awkwardly, but with the best intentions and it could also have happened that you had come to the realisation that you still loved her and wanted to continue together.

And Elza will now also build a new life for herself. She has no other choice, I guess. But in a few months you have to start a conversation about this, Matt, because you don't want to stay here and create a real place for yourself. The most important thing is that Mike can still be the only bond between you and not a house or other material things.'

'That's not how I imagined this evening, to be honest. Talking about Elza and me. I'd rather talk about you and me,' Matt confessed.

'Well, first order a quick pizza for you and me, because I got a huge craving. And then we will only talk about you and me for the rest of the evening.'

Matt ordered the pizzas for them, which were delivered within half an hour. He had set the table and opened a bottle of wine and even lit a candle, although the intended atmosphere of it was a bit lost because the sun had not yet set.

They let themselves taste the pizza and wine well, while they told each other what their favourite dishes were and what they absolutely did not like.

They discussed their favourite Netflix series and discovered that they were both fans of the series 'the traitors' that could be seen on Videoland. They agreed that the Australian version was their favourite, but enjoyed the American series where the participants were more American than any American they had ever seen before and the Belgian participants were much more for each other.

After dinner, Matt conjured up another cup of ice cream from the freezer and while Emma put the dirty plates in the dishwasher, Matt scooped some ice cream in the dishes for both of them, after which they sat next to each other on the couch.

Emma kicked off her sneakers and folded her legs under her on the couch, while she crawled close to Matt and he put his arm around her.

"She shall we?" Matt asked and before Emma could ask what they were going to do, he took the remote control and switched to Videoland, where a new series of the traitors had started, which they had both not yet seen.

Despite the fact that not everyone would agree with her, this was the most romantic evening she had ever had for Emma. Together with a bowl of ice cream, leaning against each other, watching their favourite program.

They watched two episodes and agreed that they would also watch the next episode together, or at least at the same time, although it was each for their own TV.

Then Matt turned off the TV, poured another glass of wine for them and some time later Emma was happy that she was not wearing a white Sloggi, but had chosen her black lace lingerie set.

## Chapter 49

When Emma woke up the next morning, she didn't know it was every day and when she realised it was Saturday and both Matt and they didn't have to work, she turned lazily on her side for a while so she could look at Matt, who seemed to be still in a deep sleep.

She thought back to his hands that had slowly, piece by piece, discovered her body until they had come to her most intimate place.

His touches had been soft and tender, yet full of passion and in no way reminded her of the wild sex they had experienced together in Africa. Emma, who had not gained much experience in her life with other men, concluded that there was probably a difference between sex just to do it, or sex that arose as self-evident from the feelings between two people. That Emma had had these two different experiences with one and the same man was perhaps not unique, but that's how it felt for Emma. And if she had to be honest, she would have enjoyed both experiences equally.

She saw Matt slowly but surely wake up and stretched his muscular body, after which he rolled smoothly over her, while his hands

Made a new journey of discovery about her body and his lips sought hers and Emma once again completely surrendered to him.

'That's how I would like to start my day every day,' Emma whispered, after she was still enjoying herself in Matt's arms and he let his hands roll through her hair. Matt muttered something that seemed like he didn't think it was a bad idea, and stretched again.

"How about a delicious breakfast?" Matt introduced, after which he jumped out of bed and opened the curtains, so that the sunlight flowed in and Emma could watch the spectacle of the clouds gliding across the bright blue sky, as if they were there especially for Emma.

'Breakfast in bed or rather at the table?' Matt asked, as he pulled on sweatpants from a la viste.

'Prefer at the table, I don't like staying in bed when I'm awake,' Emma confessed.

"I just didn't notice much of that," Matt remarked, walking back to the bed and handed her a long T-shirt. 'I think you'll fulfil this for a while, unfortunately I don't have a dressing gown for you.'

Emma went looking for her underwear and then put the t-shirt over it, after which she followed Matt to the kitchen for breakfast.

Unless Matt spoiled himself with a very extensive breakfast on the weekend, it seemed that he had had the same thought as Emma regarding taking her toiletry bag, because breakfast had not been out of place in a good hotel.

Emma was only too happy to be pampered and enjoyed the sweet-smelling strawberries, fresh sandwiches and croissants from the oven, freshly squeezed orange juice and yoghurt with muesli.

Matt asked if Emma wanted to drink coffee or tea with it and Emma replied that she would like a cup of black coffee, after which Matt went to his professional

Coffee maker walked to make her a cup of coffee. Emma snorted the smell of freshly ground coffee beans and thought to herself that life couldn't get better than it was at that moment.

She spread a thick layer of butter on her croissant, put some of the sweet strawberries on it, and after taking the first bite of her croissant, she realised that these were the tastiest strawberries she had ever tasted and probably not from a supermarket. She was moved that Matt had apparently spared time or effort to take care of this breakfast.

'What are you going to do this weekend?' Matt asked, apparently assuming that Emma had an empty schedule and they would spend this weekend together.

Emma thought of the mountain of laundry waiting for her at home, the empty fridge that needed to be replenished and the layer of dust on her furniture that she had ignored for a few days.

'I honestly didn't think about that,' Emma confessed. 'I didn't assume we would spend the whole weekend together.'

Matt shined his eyes, as if he could better estimate whether Emma was telling the truth and rubbed his nose as if the answer was hidden there.

'Okay, luckily I thought about it and kept an eye on the weather and that lends itself perfectly to a beach walk, followed by lunch in one of the beach tents, where we can sit sheltered from the wind behind glass. Then we drive to the supermarket where we load the cart with tasty things, which we eat at your place or at my place, while we bingwatch in front of the TV. Finally, I will show you that last night was just a foretaste and take you to even higher spheres.'

Emma, pleasantly surprised that he had apparently already thought about this weekend in advance, was always happy to agree to his proposal.

'I do have a toiletry bag in my car, but that's all. Your proposal sounds great to me, but I'll have to go home to get some clothes and so on.'

'So you were a little prepared to spend the weekend together, at least last night,' Matt remarked, looking at her with a wide smile.

'I've had some much-needed toiletries in my car since I worked for Laura, in case I have to spend the night there unexpectedly,' Emma said with a face that she hoped couldn't tell the truth. 'Because it can just happen that she suddenly regresses quickly and I can't leave her alone with Ant.'

Although the latter was true and Emma had already decided to leave it on the toiletry bag in her car, she still felt uncomfortable with the fact that she had used Laura as an excuse.

But Matt apparently found her statement credible and praised her for her involvement, which gave Emma a double feeling of guilt.

'I can also pack some stuff and then we'll stay with you for the weekend. In any case, your apartment is a lot more atmospheric than mine and I also want to try out your bed.'

Emma thought it was a great idea, as long as she could spend the whole weekend with him, she didn't care where that would be.

In addition, the clothes she had worn the night before for their walk with the dog were also excellent for a beach walk, so she didn't have to go home first before they would go to the beach.

After breakfast they cleared the table and took a shower together. The small shower cubicle installed in the bathroom by the landlord actually offered no place for the two of them to shower at the same time and it came in handy that Emma had a flexible body and Matt's muscular body was powerful enough to carry her body, while the warm water jets flowed over their bodies.

## Chapter 50

Emma still felt glowing, as she watched Matt who prepared another cup of coffee for them before they left for the beach.

Emma suggested going with her car, because she had a place in the parking garage below her apartment and it would be impossible for Matt to park his car near her, if only for the parking fee of three euros per hour.

'If you don't mind ditting me home early Monday morning, I think that's a great idea.'

Once again, Emma was surprised by the self-evidentness that Matt assumed they would spend this entire weekend together. And although she herself wanted nothing more than that, somewhere something was gnawing deep inside Emma. Because did this self-evidentness come from the fact that Matt was also falling in love with Emma, or had he been so used to a stable relationship that this was just a matter of course for him?

Something that had never been the case for Emma, because Ernst-Jan had rarely been able to spend a whole weekend or longer with Emma due to his marriage to Miranda.

While Matt was grabbing his weekend bag to spend the weekend with Emma, she filled the dishwasher, after which they drove towards the beach.

Fortunately, it was not busy on the road and there was still plenty of parking space.

Hand in hand, they walked along the tide line over the beach, where only a few were walking.

Despite the fact that it was not really beach weather in terms of temperature, there were still a few families sitting on the sand. A father helped his daughter fly a kite, while the mother watched with a baby on her lap.

Somehow, through this scene, Emma seemed to come to the painful realisation that she should never have experienced the joy of motherhood. This had never actually done much to her, and Emma wondered to herself why those feelings came to her right now.

As if he had felt this, Matt asked at that very moment if she experienced it as a lack in her life that she had no children. As much as Emma had looked forward to this moment, this was the moment to tell him about her relationship with Ernst-Jan.

'Sometimes I do, although I never think about it for very long. I've been in a relationship with a man who was married for a little over ten years. It sounds like a cheap excuse, but it's really the truth when I tell you that his wife and he both led their own lives, and that's why I never felt guilty towards her. But it was out of the question that I would have a child with him, and I had chosen him. I had always told myself that I was not suitable for a really committed relationship and certainly not for living with someone. And I would be completely unfit for motherhood. Only after the death of Ernst-Jan did I come to the realisation that I have made wrong decisions in my life and I do not feel much need to be alone at all. It was only then that I really got to know myself, or at least gave me the space to investigate what I really long for and not what I have always told myself. I told you before that I'm a complicated person, Matt'

'I think you're much less complicated than you think. That this is also something you have always told yourself. Did your relationship end because he died? That must have been very intense, because I can imagine that you felt you had lost your partner, but that you did not pontifically sit next to his wife and children at his funeral, or perhaps were not welcome at all.'

When that happened, we weren't together anymore. And his wife died at the same time as him. I did go to their funeral, but more or less anonymously. I always thought we would get back together and only after his death did the realisation come that it was really over. I was very sad about it, and I also understand very well how your ex-wife should feel. My work for MercyShips and the other crew members have proven to be my lifebuoy. Even the prayers helped me to look deep inside myself. Regret is lost energy that doesn't bring you

anything, so I don't regret my relationship with Ernst-Jan. But if you ask me if I would ever want to talk about it again, my answer is resounding no.'

'Of course I don't know you well yet, although what I've seen and heard from you is more than enough to get a little insight into how you're in life, and I think, Emma, that you should just let the things that come your way come over you a little more often and think less about who you actually are, what exactly you stand for and what you want to do with your further life. It comes as it comes, you are a beautiful person and also incredibly attractive to see.'

Matt's face had been serious when he said this and Emma felt very well what he tried to make her clear.

'I'm too busy with myself, right? I don't mean to say that I'm selfish and never think about someone else, but I'm always dissecting my own feelings too much.'

'You say that just right, Emma, I hope you don't get mad at me, but it's not a trait that others generally appreciate in someone. And most people don't give a ball about what the cause of why you do this is. Don't take life too seriously, what do you care if you sometimes do things that weren't so useful in retrospect. Do you think you can, Emma? You just spontaneously plunge into the adventure with me and see what happens?'

Emma let out a deep sigh, and wanted nothing more than to answer affirmatively, but the words faltered somewhere in the back of her throat, which did not go unnoticed by Matt.

'It doesn't matter, Emma, I sometimes trot a bit and after spending one weekend together I can't want you to bother you in my arms without thinking about anything. Figuratively speaking then, because of course you have already done this. So feel free to slow me down if I go too fast for you. But if it's up to me, I'm going to see you as much as possible in the near future. And whether the infatuation I feel for you now will go into love, I don't know any more than you do. But the only way to discover that is to both be open to it and not to lose sight of the spontaneity.'

What was this man the opposite of Ernst-Jan, who, like Emma, had always made deliberate decisions, even when it came to his feelings for Emma and whether or not he wanted to give in to these feelings. Spontaneity was the last thing she thought of when she thought back to Ernst-Jan.

'I think I'm going to succeed, Matt, because I'm now at a stage where I can't deny that I'm in love with you, and I want nothing more than to get to know you better. And you know, I think I could be a much nicer person together with you.'

'Even more fun?' Matt grinned. "I don't know if I can handle that. But for now you make me a happy man and you can make me even happier by going to lunch with me now, because my stomach is rattling after all those conversations we had.'

Emma was happy that the conversation became a bit lighter again and relieved that she had told Matt the truth about her relationship with Ernst-Jan.

He didn't have to know the nice thing about it and Emma closed the Ernst-Jan chapter for good at that moment. Matt was now the new chapter in her life.

That love also partly goes through the stomach quickly became clear when Emma saw that Matt could easily devour a large steak with mushrooms and fries, and then had enough space left for a large ice cream cream with strawberries, avocado and whipped cream.

Emma had kept it with a meal salad with salmon, shrimp and avocado and ended the meal with a cup of coffee.

'Did you know that avocados leave a huge footprint on the environment? I think something like 1000 litres of water is needed to grow those things and then they are also shipped all over the world before they end up in the supermarket. What should be a delicacy has become a fashion grill,' Matt said.

'I never thought about that, but apparently you did.'

'Well, that's not entirely true. I happened to have a conversation about this from a couple of female coffee latte macchiato from oat milk drinking colleagues at the coffee machine. They discussed a column by Daphne Deckers if I remember correctly, and they were very disappointed that their favourite spread turned out not to be as good as they had thought,' admitted Matt.

'Yes, that must have been a scare for them,' Emma laughed and promised that from now on she would look at an avocado with more respect.

Because they had already had a hearty lunch that afternoon, on the way back home they only got some tasty snacks at a delicatessen and some sandwiches, toppings and pressed oranges at the supermarket for breakfast for the next few days and some daily groceries that Emma said could not wait until Monday.

Emma still had a few good bottles of wine lying around and while she had placed the snacks on dishes and prepared plates on the coffee table, Matt opened the wine, after which they looked up a series on Netflix that they both could appreciate and had not yet seen.

Matt said he had always longed for evenings like this, but Elza always wanted to leave. 'Eating out, going to the theatre, to friends or family, as long as we gave substance to a busy social life. And weeknights we were either exercising or working out.'

'Well, that won't bother you with me,' Emma remarked soberly,

'Because I regularly spend the weekends like this. Couples generally don't invite a single woman to dinner on the weekend so quickly.'

Which Matt immediately agreed, although he had a circle of friends built up that consisted mainly of singles. 'But it all seemed a bit of a surrogate. And believe me when I say that it is absolutely not for me to spend every evening at home on the couch with Netflix, but a person absolutely needs a weekend like that in a world where we are often sucked into everything.'

'I suspect, given that we would really become a couple, that together we will then build up a new circle of acquaintances. Our friends then become mutual friends, with the necessary invitations back and forth. But for now I'd rather have some more time for us together, before we plunge into a new social life,' Emma replied, wondering at the ease on which she said this.

'I want to toast to that,' and while Matt said this and got up to refill their glasses, Emma heard that she received a Whatsapp from her mother, which she had given her own tone.

Her mother notified if she could call Emma, because she had spoken to Matt's parents, which immediately set off all kinds of alarm bells for Emma.

She replied that Matt was with her at the time and so it didn't work out very well. The emojis she got back in the form of a face with hearts all around and a thumbs up, were enough for Emma to know that her mother would not come up with annoying news and she quickly knew the message, so Matt would not be able to read it.

Matt had meanwhile walked to the couch with the glasses. 'What are you sitting there with a big smile on your face?'

'Nothing special, I'm just happy and thought to myself that if we drank our glasses, we should go to bed early and I felt like letting my muscles relax in the bath first, maybe followed by a small massage.'

"You know what a man needs," Matt replied, after which he probably took a small taste of what Emma had promised for later that evening.

## Chapter 51

Despite the early time they had gone to bed, they had not gone to bed until late and the next morning Emma woke up with a sound she did not recognise. She looked at her phone and saw that it was already nine o'clock. The seat next to her was empty, and it occurred to Emma that the sounds she had heard came from her own kitchen.

She put on her bathrobe, glanced quickly in the mirror and walked to the kitchen where Matt had set the table for breakfast.

'Good morning, beautiful sleeper, did you sleep well?' Matt asked as he walked over to receive a kiss.

'Delicious, Matt, if you continue like this with all that food I'll be around in no time.'

'Last night you burned more than enough calories, so take it away.'

As if it were a daily ritual, Matt poured coffee for her and himself, and at his leisurely spread a sandwich that he topped with a thick slice of old cheese.

'What would you have done today if I hadn't confiscated you?' Matt asked, looking at Emma with a penetrating look, as if he wanted to force the truth from her.

'Probably I would have had a cup of coffee in my chair by the window and taken a bowl of yoghurt with fruit an hour and a half ago, while I had read the latest news on my iPad. Around this moment I would have put the laundry in the washing machine and then put on my running shoes to go for a walk. Then I would have had another cup of coffee and then take a shower, I had put the laundry in the dryer and put the next one in the machine. Finally, I would have gone through my house with a duster and a vacuum cleaner, because I haven't had time for that in the past week. After lunch I would start thinking about what I would do with the afternoon, and probably sit down to read or walk to the centre because I promised Laura to pick up a book for her from the Donner bookstore that she had ordered for Ant.'

'Okay, that's what we're going to do today, although I don't have sportswear with me, and I definitely don't have your size, so we have to replace the active part with some exercises at home. And I do have a few nice exercises in mind for that, which I think you are flexible enough for.'

'As long as I don't have to hang on to ropes, I'm open to trying some new exercises,' Emma replied smacisely, as she unleashed her imagination on what Matt had in mind for her. 'But the housework will have to wait until tomorrow night.'

However, Matt was not to be embarrassed and insisted that she would do so today. 'I'm happy to leave the laundry to you, while I empty the breakfast table and fill the dishwasher. And after lunch we walk together to the city to pick up that book and go for a drink somewhere.'

Matt immediately added action to word and urged Emma to hurry up with filling the washing machine, because he was eager to start the physical activity together.

Singing to herself, Emma walked the room where her washing machine was. Was this really just the first weekend they had spent together? It already felt so familiar that Emma could hardly imagine that she would wake up alone in two mornings.

## Chapter 52

'Well, you've had a nice weekend,' Laura greeted Emma when Emma came into her house the next morning and handed her the book that Matt and she had picked up for Laura the day before.

Emma felt that she was going to blush and not only because Laura had apparently been able to see from her that she had spent the night with Matt, but also because of the memory of what he had done to her, leaving her completely out of pleasure.

Emma had not gained much sexual experience in her life except with Ernst-Jan, and the sex with Ernst-Jan may have been good, but lazy. The feelings that Matt had managed to unleash in her, she had never experienced before in her life.

'I'll make a cup of coffee for us, and then I'll tell you everything,' Emma promised. 'At least, most of it,' Emma added with a meaningful grin.

Laura visibly had a good day and enjoyed every minute Emma told how her weekend had gone.

'I am very happy for you, and I sincerely hope that you will remain so happy with each other. When will you see him again? At least I assume it won't stop at this one weekend, if I've heard your story like that.'

'We won't see each other again until Sunday. He promised his son to go to a festival with him on Saturday and they already had tickets for that. Fortunately, his son is already a fairly mature man of twenty, but Matt does regularly spend time with him on weekends and it is of course still too early to get to know him. But I also think it's more fun to keep it a bit exciting at the beginning and not see each other too much. I thought doing housework together yesterday might be romantic, but if that were already happening weekly, I think the romance would disappear quickly.'

Laura agreed with Emma, and then told her about her first dates with Ant.

'That was of course in a different time than now, and we were both still very young and inexperienced. I even lived with my parents, so sex was always something which had to be planned in advance. That was a shame, but it didn't deter the infatuation we felt for each other,' Laura said, as she went back in her mind to the time of their fledgling love.

Emma hoped that in twenty years she would still be able to look back on a life with Matt with such a feeling of happiness.

Without Laura noticing, she turned on the microphone of her iPhone so that she could soften Laura's story about the early period of her relationship with Ant in the booklet they were making as a legacy for Ant and Daan.

This afternoon two of Laura's friends were going to visit her and after she had finalised her story about her first dates with Ant, Laura told that Emma could take a few hours to herself.

'I'm in good hands, and you can leave with peace of mind if you want. And that also offers me a little more privacy,' with which Laura once again indicated that their relationship might have become a little more than patient-caring, Emma and they were not friends.

Emma did send a message to Ant - without telling Laura - to ask if he also agreed. Finally, she had been hired by him for a certain reason and Emma was aware that she might get into trouble if something happened to Laura, while she had not done her job properly by leaving.

Ant soon replied that he did not want Laura to be alone, but that Emma could safely leave if someone else was with her and it was indeed important for Laura to feel that she still had a life of her own.



Immediately after lunch, Laura's friends arrived and Emma didn't know what she was going to do with this unexpected free time. She wanted to stay around in case something unexpectedly went wrong, and besides she would have to be back in an hour or two. Emma didn't know anyone who lived in this area and she decided to just take a walk around the neighbourhood and maybe have a cup of coffee on a terrace.

Emma kept up the pace well - she could use some extra calorie burning after this excessive weekend with Matt - and walked through the streets of Hillegersberg with no purpose or knowing exactly where she was.

She admired the large stately houses she walked past and thought she could remember that Bart had to live here somewhere too.

She walked on for a while, orienting herself how she had walked so that she would easily find her way back.

Suddenly she stood paralysed when she read on a sign that she was walking on Plaswijcklaan, the avenue of which she now knew that Matt had lived here with his wife.

If Matt saw her walk here, although that chance was small, he would never believe that she had ended up here by accident.

She was about to make a u-turn when she saw the outside door of a house opened a little further away and a young man walked out, who she immediately knew must be Matt's son. Behind him, a woman walked out, whom she recognised as the woman she had seen in Africa sitting at the table with Matt at breakfast.

Emma did not want to run the risk of the woman recognising her too and took a few steps aside towards a high hedge so that they could not get her eye.

As if mesmerised, Emma remained staring at the woman, while she did not dare to move. Fortunately, she was on a dead end for motorised traffic, so the chance that they would drive past her was almost nil.

She saw the woman get into a Porsche SUV - a car that must have cost a small fortune - and she thought of Matt who had driven a Toyota Yaris.

After Elza and Mike had lost sight of, Emma dared to move again and walked back to Matt and Laura's house. She no longer needed to sit on a terrace for a cup of coffee, and decided that until it was time to go back on a bench in the sun along Bergseplas and call her mother, curious about what she had to say.

Of course, her mother first wanted to know everything about her appointment with Matt, and although Emma only told about their dinner in the restaurant and that they had agreed to go to the beach the next day, her mother understood all too well that they had also spent the night together. But because a conversation about sex between mother and daughter did not feel very comfortable, they both pretended that had not happened.

'But, mom, what did Matt's parents have to tell you?' Emma wanted to know.

Her mother first began to talk clumsily about when and where her parents had agreed with Matt's and what they had eaten. Then she proudly told how she had managed to bring the conversation to Matt and his divorce. 'They really didn't realise that I had on this subject Controlled, by the way, not your father either.'

Emma interrupted her mother, knowing that otherwise it could take a long time before her mother finally got to the point.

'Sorry, dear, of course you're curious. Anyway, Matt is indeed

A fairly well-known and successful architect. According to his parents, he has a Good income, but that is in stark contrast to his wife's wealth. She owns an Offshore company or something like that she inherited from her parents. I don't know anything about that industry so it may well be that I didn't remember it well. Anyway, she has a huge ability. During the divorce, however, she got a little upset and she feels that Matt is not entitled to anything. According to her, the fact that he had always taken care of his family

himself for years - especially in the period before she had inherited her assets - does not matter. So Matt is just entitled to some of their possessions, at least according to his mother huh. Anyway, on paper everything seems to be fairly well arranged, but it does say that Matt will only receive his part of the house - for which he has always paid and that is independent of his ex-wife's assets - when the house has been sold. And now that woman refuses to sell the house. Of course she can pay for it all herself, and according to Matt's mother she can also easily buy him out to stay there, but she refuses. Kind of revenge according to his mother. And Matt in turn refuses to pressure her again, because he doesn't want to do that to his son. So get your chest wet sweetheart, if things get serious between Matt and you, you're still waiting with that woman. The worst of all, his mother thought was the fact that they separated because that woman had someone else. Matt's mother almost exploded when she told him. I suspect she actually enjoyed doing her story,' her mother ended the story.

Matt had of course briefly outlined Emma what had happened, but apparently that had not been the whole story and Emma had to process what her mother had just told her.

'That's for him, doesn't it, mom? By that I mean that he is not being tough.'

'Yes, I agree with you. But of course he should not let himself be walked over.'

'I don't think he's the type for that, and I suspect that at some point he will really get on his stripes. But it doesn't want to hit the point so soon after the divorce, especially because of his son whom he seems to love very much.'

'Whatever, Emma, as long as you make sure you don't get sucked into this story. And by the way, Matt has such a bond with his parents that he will probably tell them about you soon. And then his mother will understand that I told you the whole story I just told you. See for yourself what you want to share with Matt.'

'I'm not happy about that, mom, but well I'll see how that develops. Now I'm going to say goodbye to you, because I have to go back to Laura.'

'Tan take good care of yourself, girl. A few more weeks and then Dad and I will be back for a few months.'

'I'm looking forward to it. And when I work in the OR again, I can also come to you for a weekend a little more often.'

'That would be nice. And Matt's parents will like that too,' her mother laughed.

'Now I'm really going to hang up. Daddy, greetings and see you soon.'

After Emma ended the conversation with her mother, she thought back to her words for a while. She didn't know yet whether she would confess to Matt the conversation of their mutual parents or not. Although that might be the best, because if his parents talked to him about it, it might embarrass her. On the other hand, if Matt's parents didn't talk to him about it, they might embarrass his parents. She decided to think about it again and would not make her decision until Matt and she saw each other again.

## Chapter 53

Tuesday evening had become her unnoticed her regular sports evening with Janneke and Bente and like a teenager in love Emma told her story about her weekend with Matt, releasing a little more details than she had done with Laura and her mother. She also told the story her mother had told her, and they both advised not to tell Matt too much about it. 'You just tell him that your parents have seen each other and then you wait for his response,' Janneke advised.

'And then you also say that you suspect they gossiped about you, because parents always talk to each other about their children,' Bente added.

'Be glad you can trust Matt completely. Because that's how it sounds,' was Janneke's opinion.

Emma could only agree with them and she realised that she could look forward to her next meeting with Matt without any feeling of distrust, insofar as she had ever had a sense of distrust towards him.

Emma invited Bente and Janneke to come and have dinner with her that Saturday before saying goodbye. Janneke already had an appointment, but Bente said she was happy to take the invitation and they agreed that Bente would be with Emma around five o'clock in the afternoon.

Laura had to pay a toll today for the hustle and bustle of visiting her friends the day before and after sharing her memoirs with Emma in the morning, she had slept almost all afternoon and Emma could have quietly taken over the story on her iPad and inserted the photos. Laura wanted to hurry up with her story, and had told Emma that morning that she was getting less and less well.

Emma had looked at her worriedly and when she saw a moment later that the oxygen metre had indicated a very low value, she had contacted Laura's GP when Laura was sleeping. He shared Emma's concerns and promised that he would visit her the next day after consultation.

Emma had told that she would not be there, but that Ant was at work at home that day and the doctor had replied that it might also be nice to find them both. He had promised Emma that he would inform her of his findings.

Emma had gone to bed early, as she had an early shift at the EMC the next day, and was still reading when she heard that she had received a message. She had set up her iPhone so that only the people she had classified as favourites could reach her after ten o'clock in the evening. Until last week, this had only been her parents, John and the EMC, but she had added Matt to this.

She grabbed her iPhone and read the message Matt had sent her: five more nights alone in my cold bed. Good night princess.

He hadn't added an emoji of hearts or anything like that, which was appreciated by Emma. Emma replied that he had better turn off the air conditioning, because she could only warm him up again on Sunday and also wished him a good night.

Emma came home with a bag full of groceries that she had brought home for the weekend. She wasn't really a kitchen princess, but had decided to do her best for both Bente and Matt and had been working out a good recipe for a few nights.

She had bought a slow cooker last year, which she had only used once so far, but had discovered that you couldn't really ruin anything with a slow cooker, as long as you followed the recipe exactly.

She had finally chosen to prepare coq au vin for two days and serve it with baguette, so she didn't have to spend too much time in the kitchen on Sunday.

For dessert she had ice cream with fresh figs, chocolate chips and blood orange. She planned to drive the ice cream especially for Boskoop, because they sold the tastiest pistachio ice cream there.

Laura had a bad week, but luckily had no pain. Her doctor had told her that she had to prepare for a period that would ring in the last few weeks for Laura and advised her to take it easier and say goodbye to people she still wanted to see.

Laura - who had always remained positive and had assumed that she might still have months to live - was extremely shocked by this message, although the general practitioner had told her more or less reassuringly that he did not suspect that she would only have one or two weeks to say goodbye.

Laura had wanted to go to the Diergaarde in Blijdorp, and Emma had promised that if the weather allowed it, they would do it next week,

After which Laura had called her friend who had immediately promised to go with her.

Ant had come home earlier today and because Laura was still sleeping, he had a long conversation with Emma, with Emma trying to prepare him for what was to come. Ant had cried and

Emma struck in a powerless attempt to comfort him, her arms around him.

Emma had therefore been happy with the distraction to go to the stores with her shopping list to stock up on all the ingredients for the coq au vin she planned to make.

She unpacked the groceries, realised that she had forgotten the Pinot Noir and took a look in her wine cupboard to see if she had a few bottles left, which was not the case. I'll have to go to the liquor store tomorrow, Emma sighed to herself.

Laura had spoken her last message for Ant and Daan that morning, words of farewell, but also words that were meant to comfort them and especially to make it clear to them that she loved them more than anything in the world and she hoped that they would carry their love for her forever in their hearts.

Her last words for the memoir booklet had been that their love for her should not be an obstacle to going on with their lives if she was no longer there: 'Your happiness has always been the most important thing during my life. And that will remain the case when I am no longer there.'

Emma had been able to hold back her tears with difficulty when Laura spoke these words, and had decided to process these last words of Laura today and have the memory booklet printed immediately afterwards, so that Laura could still see the end result herself.

It was almost midnight when Emma had processed the last words on her iPad and had done a final spell check. The next morning she would read it again and then this task was over for her.

## Chapter 54

Emma had spent much of the day in her kitchen, and now had to wait for the end result until the moment she would serve it. However, the disadvantage of not knowing whether it had worked out well did not outweigh the advantage that she would no longer have to go into the kitchen when Bente was there. She had tasted occasionally and the flavours were at least okay.

She had already set the table and was satisfied with the result. Emma was not really used to receiving guests and except for John, Ernst-Jan and her parents, many people had never eaten at her. Thérèse always wanted to go out to dinner and otherwise Emma hadn't had many good friends until recently. However, she knew that Bente was a perfect hostess and Emma hoped she could match her in this.

Bente arrived exactly at the agreed time and handed Emma a large box of chocolates from a well-known chocolate shop.

Emma thanked her and took on her coat in the meantime. During the day it was wonderful outside, but the May evenings were still cool and a coat was indispensable.

Unlike most of her guests, Bente did not immediately walk to the window but took a seat on the couch. Emma poured something to drink for them and also sat down.

'It smells great here Emma,' Bente complimented her.

'I made coq au vin in the slow cooker. I hope it worked, but I think the flavours were good and they say that if you just make sure there is enough moisture, it can't fail. There's a whole bottle of Pinot Noir in it, so more than enough liquid I think.'

They discussed some more recipes and favourite restaurants and Emma again got the feeling of knowing Bente for years.

Emma told her about the sudden deterioration in Laura's health and the memoirs she had incorporated into a booklet for her.

'That will be a beautiful and precious gift for her husband and son and hopefully they can draw some comfort from it,' Bente said in a sentence.

As a matter of course, the conversation about Ernst-Jan's death came and Bente asked if Emma could have given this a place in her heart.

'Yes, I think so. I no longer feel sadness when I think back to him and honestly I prefer to think back to the time with him as little as possible. Not because I couldn't stand it, but we had been separated for quite some time when it happened. He was already out of my life and even before his death I felt the need to leave that period behind. But how is it for you? I can hardly imagine what a terrible period that must have been for you. Fleeing for a year for fear of reprisals from the underworld, while the only thing you had done was falling in love with a man who turned out to be in narcotics.'

'It's a bit more nuanced than that, Emma. He had hidden drugs with me and not given them to his client, or whatever they call someone like that in that circuit. They apparently followed him and when they couldn't find the drugs with him, they went looking for them in my apartment, and sent the or other cocaine-sniffing idiot to get the job done, who of course couldn't find anything in my apartment. That madman took me hostage when I got home and I can assure you that this has been a very traumatic experience for me, which I still have nightmares about.'

Emma did not interrupt Bente, who visibly moved back to the moment when all this had taken place in her life.

'That idiot came rushing at me while waving a knife. I couldn't go any way, because he had tied me to a chair. Completely out of the world because of the drugs and alcohol, he tripped over my rug, in his fall, his head hit the steel edge of my coffee table and went out of the

west. There I was, with an unconscious man - who I thought was dead - tied to a chair, my phone out of reach and no one who would miss me for the next few days. I was eventually able to free myself and warn the police who were there soon. My furniture was destroyed and I didn't dare to stay home alone. Paul held the boat a bit - for reasons that I understand now but not then - that I would temporarily move in with him. I then lived with Ernst-Jan and Miranda for months, where luckily I had enough privacy in that huge house of theirs. I soon discovered that Paul had hidden the drugs in my car and he was arrested and eventually convicted. As if the nightmare was not complete, I was also considered a suspect myself for a short time, but fortunately it soon became clear that I had been neither part of it. Paul tried to use something of mitigating circumstances during the trial and his lawyer claimed that he had felt forced to do these deeds, because I would have expected him to meet my standard of living. Whatever that standard of living should be, but the judges did not fall for that. After all, because of my testimony, leaders of a criminal organisation have been arrested in Spain and Belgium. And the latter has led to a vengeance on me, with the sad death as a result of the people I have loved most in my life - besides my husband.'

'Oh, Bente, what a terrible story. Of course I knew something about it, but that it was so intense for you, I had no idea of that. How can you ever process something like that?' Emma remarked shocked by this story.

'I'll never really be able to handle this, Emma, although I'm turning a hundred years old. I knew a lot of sadness when my husband died in a car accident after years of happy marriage, but eventually the sharp edges came off, but this experience was too traumatic to ever be able to leave completely. Fortunately, I no longer live in constant fear and also know that I no longer have to be afraid that I will still be watched. They wanted revenge and got their satisfaction by the fact that they hit me with the death of my friends. This was a warning that I was no longer allowed to testify. I think they would have preferred that I had found death myself, but they had frightened me enough with this and they knew that all too well. Especially because of my flight out of the country and wandering around the world, I have been forgotten by them. I'm no longer a threat, so they'll leave me alone. If they don't, they only run the risk of getting their eyes focussed on themselves, without it even bringing them anything. But do you know what's the most wrying about this whole story? That I soon discovered that Paul had meant nothing more to me than a temporary adolescent infatuation without any depth or meaning. Through my work in Brussels, I had met a man there, Jacques. And without being aware of it, I had slowly but surely come to love that man. And that feeling turned out to be mutual. I knew I had found a man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, no matter where. I felt a love for this man, which I had never felt since the death of my late husband and I was convinced that my late husband would have fully supported my choice, something that I have hidden somewhere deep in my heart always knew that this would not have been the case with Paul. But Jacques couldn't deal with the recent events in my life, I knew that. He was responsible for a large company with hundreds of employees and could not afford a scandal or a connection to a criminal circuit, no matter how vague and indirect that connection was. And I loved him too much to let him make that decision. That's partly why I wandered the world for a year. I sailed with a cruise ship from continent to continent, so I was difficult to track down not only for Paul and that criminal gang, but also for Jacques.'

Emma had listened breathlessly to Bente's story, and both had completely forgotten the time.

'Why don't you contact Jacques now? This story has also been lost in the media and there is no longer any risk that you will be linked to what happened. If he really loved you, or maybe still does, then there must be a way to deal with this together, right?'

'I could never have the courage for that, Emma, really not.'

I've lost so much in my life. My husband whom I loved so much, my dearest friends, a new chance for happiness. I really couldn't bear to be rejected by Jacques. And that chance is very high. And how do you see that in front of you? That I call him, wait for him in front of his house? Write a letter asking him if he still loves me, can forgive me and if he would please give us another chance?'

'Well, the latter doesn't even seem like a crazy idea to me. What do you have to lose? That you never get an answer from him? Looking in your mailbox in vain for a few weeks and finally being sure he won't answer you? Or that you receive a short but dismissive letter from him? Is that really that bad, Bente? Is that worse than depriving yourself and him of a chance of happiness? Who knows how many times in that year he looked forward to a sign of your life? How worried he might have been about you?'

'No, Emma, really believe me, it was clear that he couldn't live with this, even though it made him as sad as it made me.'

'That was then, Bente, maybe he looks at it very differently now. Maybe he regrets letting you disappear from his life. You were also a chance for new happiness for him.'

'You really mean this, don't you?' Bente asked with a shaking voice, while she could barely control her tears.

'Yes, Bente, I really mean it. It may be your last chance at happiness. Don't let fear deprive you of that opportunity. See overcoming the fear of being rejected by him, also as a victory over everything that has happened. You'd better regret trying afterwards, but without success, than regretting that you may have missed your last chance of luck.'

'The way you say it, it all sounds so simple. But I don't want to turn his life upside down again. He also thought he had been given a second chance at some luck, and I ended up only making him more sad.'

"What would Miranda have said?"

'Miranda? She had threatened me that she would otherwise contact him herself and made sure that I would write him a letter or call him, as you also suggested. But Miranda had also threatened to do this when I had my doubts about Paul, even before we got something with each other. And look what that has brought me. I might have been with Jacques for months and wouldn't have had to go with all that misery if I had thrown her threat to the wind.'

'So don't waste any more time now. Call him, write to him, go to Brussels and make it seem like a chance encounter, but do something before it's really too late.'

Bente still seemed unsure, but Emma could see from her face that she seemed to slowly become convinced that she still had unfinished business, and she would only find peace when she had faced that last piece. Even if Jacques rejected her, this would be better for her, Emma was convinced of that. Because otherwise it would continue to gnaw at her for the rest of her life.

'Shall I scoop the food on the plates now? The intention is that the dish should cook slowly, but I think we have given that rooster time for a very long time and he is now in the pan.'

But luckily that turned out to be not too bad, and despite their intense conversation, they both let the food taste good.

'If you also serve this to Matt tomorrow, I think you'll make him a happy man and he'll immediately propose to you, I really liked it,' Bente complimented her. 'I'm really not a sweet tooth and often skip a dessert but, Emma, this ice cream is divine.'

After Emma had cleared the table and had a cup of coffee with her, Emma asked if Bente wanted to tell her anything more about Miranda.

'I'm afraid Ernst-Jan gave me a little coloured image of her. But when I hear how lovingly you all talk about her, I realise that a story always has two sides. Cause and effect, isn't that always the case?'

'That's what I want to do, so maybe you can understand it all better. When Miranda and Ernst-Jan got to know each other, Ernst-Jan was at the beginning of his career and had started his business not long before. Miranda had never had it wide from home, but loved luxury. As a young girl, she always dreamed of living in a castle, with a butler and her own maid. Miranda was a beautiful girl and grew up to be a very beautiful woman. Everything just worked for her, and with her spontaneity she transported many a man. Ernst-Jan was madly in love with her from the first look he threw at her and kissed the ground on which she walked. In addition, he flooded her with gifts and expensive dinners. In addition to her penchant for luxury, Miranda had another trait and that was that she preferred nothing more than to be in the spotlight. Miranda confused the pleasure she experienced through his attention and gifts with infatuation, and when he proposed to her, she did not think for a moment about her true feelings. Soon it went wrong. Ernst-Jan's company grew and grew and he was increasingly absorbed by it. Miranda no longer received the attention she was used to from and he continued to flood her with gifts and expensive trips to compensate for the lack of attention. As a result, they began to live more and more of their own lives and eventually grew apart to such an extent that there was hardly any marriage. Miranda sought the attention she no longer received from Ernst-Jan from other men. Although they were always innocent flirts. They didn't hate each other and I know that Ernst-Jan still loved her very much, but also that he didn't see that his behaviour had also contributed to the removal that had arisen between them. Their son was ultimately the reason why they stayed together, albeit with separate lives and at some point even with separate bedrooms. Miranda could continue to live her luxurious life and Ernst-Jan had the perfect hostess in her and could show off with her at business dinners. I couldn't live like that right now, but for them it turned out to work somehow and I think there was only one victim, and that was their son. Miranda just had no idea what a child needed and thought that loving him a lot was the same as raising him. She took good care of him, and, for example, never left the door before he fell asleep, but she did not understand that a child who wakes up after a nightmare needs his mother and not the sixteen-year-old babysitter. When he was a little older, Miranda had a relationship with another man. Both Ernst-Jan and their son have learned that. Ernst-Jan didn't seem to care much, and I understand better now that I've gotten to know you what the reason was, but their son could not forgive her and saw it as betrayal. Fortunately, that eventually turned out well and they were able to strengthen the bond with each other again. I never knew what was behind it, but after Miranda was away for a weekend with friends, she had changed. She was still the extravert Miranda who liked to demand all the attention, but she seemed more empathetic and it seemed as if she had suddenly started to look at Ernst-Jan with different eyes. Typical Miranda, when she had discovered that she still loved him and wanted to revive their marriage, she assumed that he would hug her and cry how happy he felt. That he had always hoped that this moment would come. But of course it wasn't like that, much to Miranda's surprise. But if Miranda had something on her mind, she had it nowhere else and she remained very persistent in her charm offensive. Ernst-Jan once told me that he had only one wish: and that was a normal family life. When his son told him that he was becoming a grandfather, a button was moved by Ernst-Jan. I suspect he wanted to end his relationship with you first, because I don't think he wanted to eat from two wallets. But in the end they seemed very happy with each other. As painful as this must have been for you. Miranda was always there for me: after the death of my husband, during that state with Paul and during all the other moments in my life that I was not doing well. Like you, I am very introverted, but Miranda has taught me to live and not always take life too seriously. I miss her cheerful character, her infectious smile and her tireless optimism. I could name a dozen flaws, but knowing Miranda was loving her.'



Emma had been listening in a handcuff and Bente had not once interrupted. She was always of the opinion that it was logical that Ernst-Jan had sought comfort in the arms of another woman. That he had stayed with Miranda because of their son, and Miranda with him because of his credit card. And partly that was the case and in his diary Emma could have read that he believed this himself. But the way Bente had spoken about them had made it clear that there had always been an invisible bond between them. A band that was just waiting at the right time to become visible. And a band that Emma and Ernst-Jan had never known. They had been each other's refuge, until the moment when Ernst-Jan no longer had to hide with her.

"Has my story hurt you? You asked me to tell how Miranda was and I could tell nothing but the truth.'

"No, it's okay. I just came to understand better why he eventually chose Miranda. It didn't matter what I had told him, or what I had done. The moment the bond between them became visible again, I had lost him.'

'Oh, Emma, that must have been a difficult time for you too.'

'Yes, that was it without ado, but you know, Bente, as strange as it sounds, it made me happier in the end. Not because of his death of course, but because after we were separated I discovered that I was never completely myself with him. That I had lost myself a bit, for fear that he would otherwise leave me. But that doesn't make sense, does it, Bente? If you can't be yourself in a relationship, then that relationship will one day run out.'

'Yes, I think you're right about that. The relationship with Paul had therefore never sustained, not even outside of the fact of what was wrong with him. With Jacques I had that feeling, I dared to be completely myself with him. Not to pretend to be better or less than who I really am. What about you with Matt?'

'I think, if I'm very honest, I'm completely myself for the first time in my life. Or rather: dare to be.'

Emma had felt liberated after her conversation with Bente. As if the last piece that had connected her with Ernst-Jan - and had still had a suffocating effect on her - had been cut through. Abrupt and painless.

## Chapter 55

Matt called her early the next time asking if she wanted to accompany him to a barbeque to which he had been invited.

'I met an old friend at the festival yesterday and we thought it would be fun to restore that old band a bit. He had invited some friends for today and he asked if we wanted to come too.'

"We or you?"

'We of course, I talked to him about you at length.'

'Where was your son?' Emma asked in horror.

'Yes, why not? Mike is mature enough to understand that his parents don't get together anymore and really not so naive to think that I will be alone for the rest of my life.'

'Matt, the ink of the divorce is not even dry yet,' Emma remarked.

'But his mother and I have been separated for over a year. I did ask him if he didn't want to tell Elza anything yet, because it might still be a bit sensitive for her.'

'Well, that's still a bit tactful of yours. Especially since this is our third date. Although the second date lasted a few days. But to come back to your question, I find it a bit exciting to be introduced to your friends already, but it seems very cosy to me.'

'I'm running too fast for you again, I'm Emma? You can feel free to whistle back at me from time to time when I trot through in my enthusiasm.'

'Matt, one of your charms is your enthusiasm, I wouldn't like you to lose it to me. I promise you if you ask me something I'm not ready to do yet I'll tell you.'

'So you probably don't want to meet my parents yet.'

Emma could hear the smile in his voice and reacted concisely by noting that she had already met them in Spain.

'I'll tell you a story about that later. What time do we actually meet?'

'I think I already know what that story is about. But I'll be with you in an hour. I come on the bike, that's easier.'

'But I'm not even dressed yet and I'm still sitting with my first cup of coffee.'

'Nice, that saves time. I can't wait to get there. See you so much,' and without waiting for her further reaction, he had disconnected.

Emma quickly drank the last sip of her coffee, cleaned up the dishwasher with the dishes she had left on the counter last night after her dinner with Bente, and put the rest of the coq au vin, which she had done her best and would have wanted to surprise Matt with, in the freezer.

She quickly took a shower, put on another sexy lingerie set that she had specially purchased that week, pulled a black cotton dress over her head and made the bed. She was just able to take one last look in the mirror, when Matt already rang the bell. Emma hadn't had time to put on makeup around her eyes yet, but Matt had seen her pure nature before so she thought it didn't matter.

As soon as she heard the ping from the elevator, she opened her front door without waiting for him to ring the bell and wrapped her arms around him.

'This is now what they call a warm welcome,' Matt remarked as he answered her kiss. 'You got dressed. Wasn't that a waste of your time?'

'No, we are neatly following the protocol. We're having coffee first and then you can rip my clothes off.'

'I've always dreamed of that, but I think I think that's a waste of this beautiful dress. So I'll gently pull it over your head after slowly sliding the zipper down.'

'You just have to think about that zipper, because it's missing in this dress. But if you try to control for a while, then pour coffee for us now.'

The sexual arousal had already taken hold of Emma during their pun and she had to do her best not to walk straight to her bedroom.

As she pulled the coffee cups out of the cupboard, Matt stood behind her and she felt him press his body against her, while sliding his hands under her dress. Emma left the cups for what they were, and enjoyed his hands and fingers that she slowly felt going over her body. Just as suddenly, when he had put his hands under her dress, he pulled it out of there again, lifted her up and brought her to the bedroom where he gently laid her down on the bed.

The coffee had to wait a while.

'Emma, you're a shameless woman,' Matt told her sternly.

'Yes, you have a very bad influence on me,' Emma returned the ball, while

She still rested on her elbow so she could look at him.

"I'd like that cup of coffee now. Shall I get it for us?"

'Oh no, lazy. You now get out of bed to drink coffee with me in the living room.'

Emma stroked his chest teasingly with her fingers. 'Are you sure?'

'Surely,' Matt replied, as he gave her a sly tap on her buttocks and added word by getting out of bed and pulling her out with his arms.

'So, and what do you have to say about those Spaniards?' He asked, when they had seated with the coffee on the chairs by the window.

'Well, the four of them went out to dinner and I think we did get into it.'

"Have you told your parents about us yet?" Matt asked in surprise.

'Only my mother, but only after they had gone out to dinner with your parents. I then felt like I had better tell it right away.'

'Oh, well then I'll be surprised if my parents didn't already know.'

'I don't think so, my mother hasn't even told my father so far.'

'But what exactly did you want to tell me? Because I know that our parents know each other quite well.'

'Well, as I said, they were talking about us. As an individual, not about us together.'

'Emma, all parents talk to each other about their children. That's quite normal, isn't it?'

'Hm, but your mother has been quite specific about Elza,' Emma confessed. "And that's what my mother told me again. She didn't know we got to know each other a little better and it was just such a mother daughter story. And that's why I told her, I mean from you and me. Because I wanted to prevent her from wanting to go out of school too much,' Emma concluded her story, not quite according to the truth. But in this case that was a lie for the sake of good. Especially for the good of his mother, because Emma didn't know how Matt would react to the news that his mother would respond to superficial acquaintances his dirty laundry outside.

"What exactly did she tell you, Emma? I do think I should know what you've heard about my marriage,' Matt spoke in a tired voice and in a way she hadn't heard him talk before.

'Well, that your wife is a rich heir and can easily buy you out, but that she doesn't do it out of revenge. And that she uses Mike as an excuse. That was actually pretty much it. Maybe your mother told me more, but my mother didn't share that with me.'

Emma preferred to keep a secret that his mother had also spoken at length about Elza's relationship with another man. And because Matt had already told her this himself, she could leave out that detail. The last thing she wanted was for the relationship between Matt and his mother to be disrupted.

"My mother is a chatter. A sweet chatter, that is, but she doesn't know how to stop when it comes to Elza. I've told her before that she shouldn't interfere in that, but in vain,' Matt said clearly annoyed.

'Matt, your parents love you and think Elza hurt you and blame her for that. How would you react if it happened to Mike?'

'Enrour, but I wouldn't share his story with Jan and everyone. And my mother does. Not just to your parents.'

'Maybe you should explain that to your mother in a tactful way. Just point out to her that she can't assume she's telling your story to people who know neither Elza nor you. Because that's it, Matt, your mother wants to tell her story and she'd rather tell that to more or more strangers, than to family or friends of the family who know Elza and you. You better tell her about us now, because otherwise she might clap even more out of school at my mother and I would find that embarrassing for you, but also for my mother.'

'We've only known each other for a short time, and now our parents are already aware of it. Don't you think that's a bit bizarre?'

'Maybe, but you also always say that you're running too fast. Because it's also bizarre that we went to dinner together for the first time two weeks ago, we moved in half together, you've already told your son and you're going to introduce me to friends this afternoon. So as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't make much difference that our parents know. In any case, we never have to introduce them to each other. And the worst thing that can happen is that nothing happens between us and our parents therefore no longer want to interact with each other when they stay in Spain.'

Matt still seemed to mout about his mother's behaviour, but eventually admitted that it did not matter much that they would know about Emma and him, but that he was going to bring her to her senses that he really didn't want her to talk bad about Elza anymore.

'Is what she said true, Matt? That Elza keeps you on the line out of revenge with regard to the financial handling and you can't continue as a result?'

'That's something between Elza and me, no one has anything to do with that.'

For the first time she had met him, there was something of anger from Matt's words and she offered her apology.

'Sorry, Matt, you're right, that's none of my business.'

'I'm not mad at you, really. And I'm also really aware of the game Elza plays. And that is precisely why I am not taking any action. In a not too long time she will give up this game. But that's not going to happen for the time being if I go against it now. Believe me, Emma, I know her all too well and paying no attention to her is the fastest solution. And for now I'm still pretty good in my rental apartment and I earn enough to not have to worry about that at all.'

This seemed like the last thing Matt wanted to say about it, and he walked to the kitchen to put the dirty cups on the counter.

'So, and what are the plans for today, until it's time to go to the barbeque?' He asked in the light tone that Emma was now used to from him, although she could read from his face that he had not yet let go of their previous conversation.

## Chapter 56

Matt's friends where they were invited for the barbeque lived in Nesselande and they had decided to go there by bike, first have a drink at restaurant Guay on the terrace and then take a walk until it was time to report for the barbeque.

As they walked up the terrace, Emma spotted Mirthe out of the corner of her eye with her friend Mark, along with Tedje and Marcel and another couple that Emma did not know. Mirthe also noticed her and beckoned that they should come and sit with them. So later that day Emma not only received her baptism of fire from Matt's friends, he was now also allowed to meet her friends.

Emma introduced Matt to them and felt glowing with pride when she noticed Mirthe's admiring gazes at Matt.

The couple Emma didn't know introduced themselves as Joost and Marlijn. Marlijn turned out to be a sister of Marcel and Emma realised that this Joost had to be Nanda's ex-boyfriend - Bart's wife.

'If they ever release a film about our lives, they don't have to cast too many people,' Janneke had once laughed to Emma when she heard that Emma was friends with Thérèse, Bart's ex-wife and Emma herself had had an affair with Miranda's husband, one of Janneke's friends. And Joost and Marlijn were also an example of this.

Matt seemed to feel completely at ease and chatted with Mark about Max Verstappen, who didn't present as well this year as in previous years and probably could write a new world title on his stomach. Emma was not interested in Formula I and turned to Mirthe to ask if everything was arranged for their cycling weekend in Friesland.

Mirthe enthusiastically talked about the Eleven Cities Route she had mapped out for them. 'This week I'll email all the details and send everyone a tak. I will create a new WhatsApp group, so we can communicate with each other about our weekend and no other messages get in the way trough.'

Emma was really looking forward to the cycling weekend and had agreed with Bente yesterday that it might be good if they both shared a room.

'Oh, we always see that on the spot who shares a room with whom. But if Bente and you like that, that's fine as far as we're concerned,' Mirthe had replied when Emma told her this.

The afternoon flew by and to Emma's surprise no one had ordered an alcoholic beverage. When she noticed this, Marcel explained the reason: 'Tedje is not allowed to drink alcohol because of her health and except at parties we always show solidarity with her. And we've noticed that we've all felt a lot fitter since then and no longer let ourselves be thrown down on the couch after a lunch.'

Emma found this very commendable and it once again showed how involved they all felt with each other.

Unlike that afternoon, the alcohol flowed abundantly during the barbeque and Emma - who never drank much alcohol herself - felt less and less comfortable as the evening progressed. These friends of Matt were so different from the people Emma usually surrounded herself with and she wondered if these people were a model for the life that Matt led.

Everyone became more and more noisy and Emma suffered from vicarious shame towards the neighbours.

Fortunately, she had noticed that Matt had limited the intake of alcohol to two beers and also behaved significantly less noisily than the rest of those present. The men had all been around the barbeque, while the women sat in a circle on the garden chairs and garden

bench. The women talked about their children, gossiped about other women they knew and about the latest fashion.

Emma had nothing to say about the first two topics and the latter didn't really interest her. What a difference with Janneke's friends this was. With them Emma felt at ease, but with these women, as she had always been the case in large companies before, she preferred to run away and she felt that she was retreating back into her shell. Matt, on the other hand, seemed to be having a lot of fun and not noticing that Emma was feeling uncomfortable.

Fortunately, Matt came to walk there after not too long.

'How about cycling home? Or are you still having so much fun that you don't mind cycling back in the dark?'

Emma didn't let herself be told this twice and immediately got up. 'No, I'm going with you, we do have to cycle for another 45 minutes and we can't make it for the dark, but then at least we can still drive the first part of that poorly lit road in the twilight.'

They said goodbye to their host and hostess and walked through the front door

To their bicycles. Fortunately, they had remembered to bring warm coats, because now that the sun was going down, the wind felt cold.

'So, that was once but never again,' Matt sighed as soon as they were out of ear on their bikes. 'What a bunch of bladder jaws together.'

"Were they always like that?" Emma asked curiously about his answer.

'I only knew Michiel and his wife, who invited us. In themselves those are very nice people, but I certainly didn't find their friends pleasant company.'

'No, I didn't like those women I was with either. Were mainly gossiping about mothers in the schoolyard and friends who weren't there tonight. I was glad you came to me to say we'd better go home.'

"I had already seen that on your face. You're not good at that, are you, Emma? To pretend to be having fun when you actually prefer to leave the party screaming. I bet you didn't notice anything about me and thought I was having fun.'

Embazed, Emma had to admit that indeed she did not have that ability to "pretend".

'Oh, that doesn't matter, it actually adorns you. What you see is what you get, isn't that how it is with you?'

'Maybe, but it's mainly that I don't know how to give myself an attitude when I'm in the company of people I don't feel comfortable with.'

'Or when they address topics that don't arouse your interests,' Matt added, who apparently flawlessly saw through her in a short time.

Emma laughed and admitted that the latter was certainly the case, but it was mainly about the people themselves.

'This afternoon I actually saw a different Emma than tonight. But your friends were a lot more fun than mine, I honestly admit.'

'I won't form an opinion on that until I've met your real friends. Because I don't think they were.'

'No, certainly not and they won't be in the future,' Matt confirmed.

'There is also a world of difference between friends and acquaintances. John is a real friend to me, almost family of mine, and even the huge distance between us since he emigrated to Australia does not detract from that. A close friendship could develop with Janneke and Bente. But for example Mirthe and Tedje, those are nice women that I like, but they will always remain only good acquaintances for me.'

'And Thérèse?'

'Thérèse is part of my life, and will always play a role in my life,

As long as we live. I think I'm her only real friend, and we definitely have a bond with each other. But there is no close bond. That is

Impossible because Thérèse simply doesn't have the empathic ability to do that. But despite that, I still love her very much, even now.'

The darkness had fallen unnoticed and Matt suggested driving around a short distance. The easiest way to Emma's apartment was over the IJssel-dijk, but then they would have to cover a large stretch without bike paths. In addition, a fresh wind was coming and at the dike the wind would have over the free play.

'Have you built a real friendship with someone in your life, someone who feels like family?' Emma continued their conversation after they continued on their way.

'Yes, two in fact. I've known Stefan since elementary school and he's married to his childhood sweetheart whom he met in high school. His wife Annelies is for me the sister I never had. She always assists me with advice and action, and without Stefan and Annelies I would not have come so unscathed through the whole process of the divorce. Especially after I discovered that Elza was having an affair with another man, their support was invaluable.'

'If you have one friend in your life, you can already count yourself happy. But if something happens to that, it will leave you with a huge void. My mother lost her best friend to cancer ten years ago, and although she still has so many friends around her, she still misses her every day.'

They were so deeply ensed in their conversation that they did not notice that a car was driving at high speed behind them, their sound is barely audible because of the electric motor.

'That's why I wanted to continue driving on the bike paths, because if this had happened on the dike, it would probably have ended differently. What an idiot,' Matt stirred as the car passed them.

It was the first time Emma met an angry Matt, and as strange as that was, she liked to see that side of him too.

'Do you get angry easily?'

'No, not really. But these kinds of traffic hums sometimes give me a haze in front of my eyes. And yes, I know it's pointless to say anything about it, because these kinds of people never care about anything. Elza was always afraid when I got so angry and spoke to people about their behaviour, because she feared that I would ever meet the wrong person who would stick a knife between my ribs. But that never stopped me from pointing out people for their behaviour.'

'Well, I don't think that fear was entirely unfounded, because you hear the weirdest things these days with youth walking down the street armed with knives as if it were the most normal thing in the world.'

'Yes, but that's also the dilemma. Because if we let fear rule us and don't talk to anyone about anything, then those kids feel elevated above all and it goes from bad to worse. And if you do address them about it, you might put your own life in danger. Sometimes I really don't know what's best. And it makes no sense to say that you should look at this per situation, because my reaction is often instinctive.'

In the meantime, they had arrived at Emma's apartment and put their bikes in the well-closed storage room, and nevertheless Emma advised to lock the bikes. Matt grumbled a little further about the deterioration of society, but once he came up his mood immediately changed and he showed himself from his most romantic side that Emma had experienced up to that moment.

## Chapter 57

With mixed feelings, Emma handed over the memory booklet for Ant and Daan to Laura that Emma had printed. On the hard cover was a photo of Laura, sitting on the beach with Ant and Daan, a ray of blue sky and a white sandy beach as a background. A picture of a happy family, enjoying a carefree holiday on a tropical island.

Laura had looked at the booklet and it was exactly what she had in mind. She asked if Emma wanted to have another copy printed, so that if Daan went to live on his own, he would have his own copy. Then she asked if Emma wanted to get a pen for her and wrote in her own graceful handwriting the last words she would ever put on paper:

*There is life after death, never forget that. Your heart will beat, even after mine has stopped. Keep me in your heart, but let your heart be open to all the beautiful things that life will still offer you.*

Laura then sat motionless in her chair for a while, the booklet pressed against her heart, as if she could lock her heart in the book forever in this way.

Emma quietly left the room and let her tears run free. She knew it wouldn't be long before she handed over the booklet to Ant and Daan on behalf of Laura.

It seemed as if Laura had regressed even faster in the past, and her hands looked like parchment. She was just sitting in her chair in the conservatory looking out and spoke little, as if every word cost her too much energy.

She usually spent the afternoons sleeping in bed, and her appetite seemed to have disappeared. Emma was very worried and had consulted with Ant that morning whether it would not be better if Emma would also spend the nights with them.

But Ant had told that Laura had indicated that they should not do anything for her when the time came and let her sleep peacefully. She could still tolerate the pain, although the GP had prescribed a higher dose of Oxycodone and would come by daily from now on.

Emma had advised Ant to let Daan come home. 'Ant, it may have happened suddenly in a few days, and it is important for all three of you to be together when the moment is here. Maybe you should also instruct your secretary to reschedule your appointments and work from home as much as possible. I am afraid that she will also need more intensive nursing at this stage, and I have already discussed with the doctor that on the days that I am not there, someone will come to take care of her. That will probably be in the morning and in the evening, so not for the whole day. The general practitioner and the Neighbourhood nurses will indicate when the moment is there that she will need even more intensive care, I have no influence on that. But don't worry, the doctor knows she doesn't want to be hospitalised anymore.'

Ant had looked at her with a look full of despair and sadness, after which he had only given an affirming nod, too emotional to speak.

Ant walked to Laura for his short conversation with Emma and Emma heard them talking softly to each other a little later. Emma walked out of the room unnoticed, to give Ant and Laura the privacy they would more than need at the moment.

Half an hour later, Ant came to sit next to Emma in the garden. The conversation he had had with Laura had clearly exhausted him.

'She is sleeping peacefully. I'm about to call my secretary to ask if she wants to empty my agenda and transfer urgent matters to my colleague. Laura and I just called Daan together and he's coming home tomorrow during the day.'

'Laura will like that and that's better for you too. It's going to be hard days, Ant, but luckily she's not in too much pain. I'm just afraid that she will fall asleep more and more often,



also because of the Oxycodone. You can't postpone anything if you still want to tell her something. Although it is often enough to just sit still with her, hold her hand or hold your hand on her body, so that she feels that she is not alone. They are only small things you can do for her, but these little things are very important. And she can no longer be alone at night, Ant, you will have to stay with her in turn, and again, I want to spend the nights here with much love to help you.'

'Maybe I think that's a safe feeling. Oh, Emma, I'm so scared I'll have a panic attack and I don't know what to do.'

'That's understandable, Ant. I promise you that from today I will stay with you.'

Ant took a visibly relieved breath, and thanked Emma for everything she had done for Laura and him.

'I don't know what we should have started without you, Emma. And thanks to you, Laura was able to do the things she wanted in her last few weeks, and she was much less apathetic than before your arrival. I can't put my thanks into words, but someday I hope to be able to do something in return.'

'Ant, I'm just very pleased that I was able to do this for you. I learned so much from Laura that I would like to thank her for allowing me to do this.'

'Thank you, Emma, that means a lot to me.'

'Try to get some rest yourself now, Ant. You will need that to get through the coming days.' Fortunately, Ant saw that too, and took a seat with a book in the chair opposite Laura. He probably wouldn't lose sight of her for a moment from now on.

## Chapter 58

Emma took her toiletry bag out of the car, and called Matt to tell her that Laura was doing a lot worse and that she would also spend the nights with her for the time being.

'Can I do something for you? Pick up something at your home and bring it to you or something?'

'Lovely of you, Matt, but tomorrow when their son Daan is there, I can go home to pick up the necessary things. And if I'm being honest, I think I'm here

Will stay overnight for a week at most. It suddenly goes very fast.'

'So we probably won't see each other next weekend,' Matt said disappointedly.

'No, I'm afraid you'll have to amuse yourself. But all the better it is to see each other again afterwards.'

Then she said goodbye to Matt and walked inside, where she found Laura crying. Emma sat down next to her and took Laura's hand in an attempt to bring her to tranquillity.

'Emma, I know I really want you right now, but if I'm not there anymore, you'd want to visit Ant once in a while. Or go eat something with him somewhere or something. He has actually not had a sounding board since Ernst-Jan's death, and because of your bond with Ernst-Jan and your good care for me in recent weeks, you are still the most important thing for him at the moment. It would be a huge reassurance for me to know that there is someone looking at him.'

'If Ant wants this himself, I promise I'll keep an eye on it until I realise he's saviour himself again.'

'Thank you, Emma, that means a lot to me.'

They were startled by the sound of the bell, and a few minutes later Ant came running into the living room, along with their GP.

After the GP had examined Laura, he took Emma separately. 'I'm afraid it won't be long. I heard that from now on you will also spend the nights with her. I'm going to urgently arrange extra home care, because you can't handle this alone 24/7. Have you noticed if she's in a lot of pain?'

'Sometimes, but she is brave and wants to stay clear for as long as possible. She also does not want to increase the dosage of Oxycodone further.'

'I know, but I just discussed with her and also Ant that I want to make her as comfortable as possible and go on to Palliative Sedation. It took some persuasion, but she finally agreed.'

'So it's really a matter of days?'

'I'm afraid so, Emma, I'm afraid so,' confirmed the general practitioner, also moved himself.

'Yes, I already had that suspicion myself. Unbelievable how fast it can go all of a sudden, right? Two weeks ago I went to Diergaarde Blijdorp with her, although that was a bit against better judgement. But she wanted so much to go there one day, and against her argument that she would rather die a week earlier than wait in her chair for her death, I couldn't add anything meaningful.'

'And there was nothing against that, because Laura was completely right about that, and we can be happy that she has been able to do the things that were important to her in recent weeks. And I say that not only as her GP, but also as a person.'

'I admire her greatly for that. Even after her death, she still wants to offer Ant and Daan comfort, to give them what is important in life,' and Emma told about the memories booklet and the last words Laura had written in it.

'You worked in Africa, didn't you, Emma, as a nurse? You must have seen a lot of suffering there, but also brave people who, despite all the misery and the hard life there, were often more grateful and more cheerful than many others here in the rich west, where we consider everything normal and prefer to see everything blowing.'

Emma was surprised that the doctor was aware of this, but said that this had indeed been her experience.

'People who are terminally ill also look at life differently and know how to estimate this at the right values. I have learned more in my life about what matters from my patients who were sick than I could have ever learned in any other way.'

'Since I've been to Africa, I've also started to see more about what's important in life. And that's definitely not an expensive car or a closet of a house. But I also started to realise that we need to appreciate what we have more. That you can praise yourself for what you have, and that that is not for everyone.'

'Health, enough to eat, clean water and a roof over your head are the essence of existence. But that doesn't mean you can't enjoy all the extra luxury you have at your disposal. Because, Emma, if you don't realise that and don't enjoy it to the fullest, only then should you be ashamed.'

'You should have studied philosophy, doctor,' Emma smiled.

"And who says I didn't do that?"

After these words, he said goodbye with the promise of returning the next day.

Laura had a quiet night behind her and both Emma and Ant had enjoyed enough sleep despite their vigils to feel reasonably fit the next day. Ant had big circles under his eyes, and Emma had to force him to eat something, but felt good enough to do his work as much as possible in the conservatory on his laptop.

Daan arrived around coffee time, and after he had settled himself in his old room, he had had coffee with Ant at Laura's bed, while Emma was reading her digital newspaper in the kitchen.

After lunch Laura had fallen asleep and Emma had gone to her Apartment to pick up some clothes and other necessary things for her stay with Laura. She quickly looked for urgent emails and had called her supervisor to inform her of the situation.

On the way, she quickly got some necessary groceries to be able to prepare a simple meal for that evening, and then drove back to Laura and Ant's house as quickly as possible.

To her great annoyance, traffic from the highway was completely stalled, and Emma regretted not having chosen another route, but realised that she should have braved the crowds on Molenlaan anyway, because the only alternative would have been right through the centre of Rotterdam.

To make matters worse, the bridge over De Rotte also opened just in front of her nose, and Emma walked in more than an hour later than she expected.

The first thing she noticed was the lack of sound, but she suspected that Daan and Ant had sat in the garden because Laura was sleeping. She got a little worried about that, because she had clearly said that one of them had to stay in Laura's field of vision as long as Emma was away.

When Emma walked into the living room she immediately knew why there was no sound to be heard. Ant and Daan sat together at Laura's bed, who lay motionless in bed.

The end had come faster than expected.

## Chapter 59

The funeral was well attended and it was clear that Laura had been a beloved person during her lifetime. Bente had also been present, and for the first time Emma had realised that Bente had of course known Laura and Ant, since she must have met them regularly at Ernst-Jan and Miranda without a doubt, given the fact that Ernst-Jan had been Ant's best friend and Bente of Miranda.

Both Ant and Daan had given a speech, and Emma had struggled to hold her tears. Her life would return to its normal form from the next day, although Emma would undoubtedly often remember her days with Laura with mixed feelings. The life of Ant and Daan would never be the same again and in the coming period would be mainly characterised by a huge loss.

Emma had asked herself whether she should give them the memory booklet before or after the cremation ceremony, but because Laura had asked her to visit Ant, she had decided that it was better to hand it over after, and she would have an excuse to visit him. Moreover, Ant and Daan lived the period between death and farewell, and it was more in line with Laura's intentions to give it when they were in some calmer waters and could take the time to read it as soon as they were ready for it themselves. Ant had responded pleasantly surprised when Emma had called him to make an appointment and asked if she would like to visit him on Thursday evening.

After they had drunk coffee, Ant handed her a package and when she opened it, she looked with amazement at the contents, which turned out not to be the box of chocolates Emma had expected, but a gold necklace with a pendant on which the most beautiful Topaz had ever seen.

"Ant, I can't accept this. This is really an too precious gift,' Emma protested, hoping she wouldn't hurt him with it.

'Laura picked it out for you herself. She didn't have a daughter to leave him to and Daan had said that he really wouldn't give such an old-fashioned thing to his future wife - who is not even in the picture yet, by the way. This necklace has always been very important to Laura and she didn't want it to be left in a box, or Daan to sell it. Laura said that this stone was a perfect fit for you, because it stands for inner growth and a higher awareness of yourself, and also offers protection against negative feelings.'

'Then she got to know me well in a short time, am I really that easy to read?'

'I think the truth is a little more nuanced. Laura already knew you from the Stories that Ernst-Jan told about you. We have been aware of your relationship, but have both found that you are no longer the woman Ernst-Jan talked about, but after his death you have become a woman who knows what she wants with her life. And also strives to achieve this, but sometimes is still a bit anxious to make this come true. And Laura was convinced that this stone could therefore only belong to you.'

'I'm silent about it, Ant, this really is the most beautiful gift I've ever received and I'll wear the necklace with pride.'

'Laura would have liked that. And Laura has asked me if I want to keep an eye on it every now and then or if you continue to walk the right path. In honour of my friendship with Ernst-Jan, she had said, knowing that he had liked this.'

Emma, who had received a similar request from Laura, understood that she would have wanted to make it a little easier for Emma to fulfil her promise, because Emma had not yet figured out how she could maintain contact with Ant for as long as it turned out to be necessary.

"I'd love to, Ant. But you have to promise me that our conversations will not be about Ernst-Jan, because that period is really behind me and that book is closed.'

'How did you manage Emma, to handle that grief? I still can't imagine a life without Laura.'

'I don't think I can explain that in a few words. It was a long way and if I have to be honest, I've been lost for a long time. But in the end, something takes place in your life that allows you to move on with your life. For me, that was volunteering for MercyShips. And I am convinced that such a moment will come for you too. But you are only at the beginning of that road, and the signposting is still missing.'

"Laura could have said that too. I think you could have been very good friends of each other.'

'I think so too, Ant, and I think we've become that, even though her first words to me were that she didn't want that. But only a good friend entrusts you with what she has entrusted to me.'

After she had said this, she took the memory booklets for him and Daan from her bag and gave them to him.

'This was her last gift to you. She asked me to give it to you after her death. And I think, Ant, that you will find the first signpost in this.'

Ant looked at her in disbelief and said he didn't really know what to say on this.

'I think you should just read it when you're ready for it. Some

Things will be quite confronting, but you will also be able to find comfort in them.'

'Have you been able to find comfort in Ernst-Jan's diary?'

'No, and I couldn't really find the truth in it either, it just confused me even more about our relationship. But it did help me to see the truth about myself. And in the end I understood what brought us together and maintained our relationship. But that I do not compare in any way with what Laura has left you.'

Ant slid his fingers across the cover with a loving gesture, while wandering his thoughts to the moment the photo was taken.

'We were in Hawaii. Laura had always wanted to go on a cruise and when we were married for twelve and a half years we made this trip. It's the most beautiful trip we've ever made with each other. We had agreed that if we were married for twenty-five years, we would make this trip again. But that will never happen.'

Then Ant burst into an uncontrollable burst of crying, and it cut through Emma's soul to see this sadness. She wanted to comfort him, but had no idea how and knew that at that moment she could not offer him any comfort in any way.

The tears he had held back all those months - from the moment they had been told that Laura could no longer heal - in order to be strong for her, were now coming loose and this was despite everything, the best thing that could have happened now.

## Chapter 60

Laura's death had gripped her more than she had hoped for and Emma struggled to find her way during her work at the EMC. Her supervisor had also noticed this and suggested that Emma take a week's vacation so that she could resume her daily work at the OR with renewed energy, where she was expected to return in two weeks. Emma had protested that she could not leave work now anyway, but Annebeth had assured her that this would not be a problem in the schedule and it would be in the interest of both her colleagues and the patients if Emma could fully concentrate on her work again.

'In addition, you do not have to take vacation days in the high season and we are only happy if you go now.'

Emma had pulled that last argument over the line and she had called her parents to tell them that she would come to them for a few days. When she told Matt about her intention to go to Spain, he spontaneously decided to go along - if he could reconcile this with his work - but as far as he knew there were no urgent deadlines and he could also do some work from his parents.

'That's going to be very strange, isn't it? You with your parents and I with mine,' he had rightly noted, because their togetherness had now become very familiar and self-evident for both of them.

'I don't think my parents would have any problems with it if you stayed with them too. But I don't know what your parents would think of it.'

'Well they wouldn't mind either, but I think we shouldn't drive a wedge between them and the best solution is that we spend the night together in a hotel and divide our time proportionally.'

Emma could relate to that and Matt had promised to book a room and a ticket for himself on the same flight as Emma.

Last night, Bente had called her and told her that she had written an extensive letter to Jacques, in which she had offered her excuse that she had fled without any sign of life - in any form - and had left him with countless questions and uncertainties.

That she regretted that things had gone this way and their relationship had really begun before this, had ended so cruelly and abruptly. She had not said a word about her true feelings for him, nor about the fact that she really wanted to talk to him, nor about her hope that they could make a fresh start.

She had concluded the letter by saying that she was so sad to him and she was convinced that under different circumstances they would have had a future together.

Bente had read the letter to Emma before she had sent it, and Bente's words - which had come straight from her heart - had touched her.

'Maybe it's better this way, Bente. Perhaps too much has happened to think that you can pretend that all this never happened. But aren't you afraid that you'll wait or he'll respond? And are you prepared for the unrest that that will bring?' Emma had asked cautiously.

'No, Emma, because if Jacques wants to respond, he will be in front of me this weekend. And if that doesn't happen, I'll never hear from him again. I'm very sure of that.'

'Well, stay home until Monday as much as possible,' Emma's sober reaction had been.

'I didn't plan otherwise,' Bente had replied and Emma was convinced that she would actually do that.

Matt had booked a room in the only 5-star hotel that was rich in the area, although it was a bit further away from their parents' apartments, because it was located on the boulevard of Benalmádena, but that was no problem for Emma.

It was good for Emma to stay in a different environment for a few days, away from everything that had happened. The care for Laura had somehow enriched her life.

Despite the fact that Emma had been confronted daily at work for years with patients who knew that the doctors could no longer do anything for them, the care for Laura had been many times more personal than Emma had intended, and whatever she was warned about not to allow this.

Still, Emma did not regret that she had thrown this advice into the wind, because Laura's positive attitude had removed the last remnant of uncertainty from Emma about her future.

She had learned to be happy in the moment, not to let the beautiful moments be overshadowed by fears and that something could just be over. Laura's memory booklet was not only a gift for Ant and Daan, but also made Emma realise even more that losing someone you love should not mean the end of your own life but that it - after processing the first grief - was the beginning of another phase in your life. And that that phase can also be quite beautiful, and more importantly: may be.

Whether this loss was caused by a relationship breakup, death, or your best friend emigrating to Australia.

Emma's mother had immediately noticed that death, or perhaps better said: Laura's life, had caused something essential in Emma and said she was proud of how Emma had managed to turn all this into something positive.

Matt and Emma had agreed to spend the first day apart from each other with their parents and go out to dinner together with mutual parents the next day. The fact that their parents already knew each other fairly well made it all feel a little less uncomfortable and formal.

Emma's father had gone for his daily walk, and Emma was sitting on the terrace by her parents' apartment drinking coffee with her mother and her mother wanted to find out everything.

How Emma had experienced the last few hours with Laura, how Ant and Daan were among them, and especially how things went between Matt and Emma.

'Of course it's all very early, only a few months ago I was here too and I completely ignored him. And now we are at least two, sometimes even three days a week together. I don't have a crystal ball, mom, but I do have faith in a future for us together. And more importantly, I trust Matt. I know he is who he is, and I never wondered why he wants to be with me. Because the only saving that he wants to be me is that he wants to be with me. Do you know what I mean, Mom?'

'Yes, dear, but all too good. Although I won't deny that Ernst-Jan cared a lot about you, because he undoubtedly did, you turned out to be a surrogate relationship for him. Without a real future ahead of you together, and you have hidden that knowledge deep within yourself, but you knew it. With Matt you don't know what the future will bring you, you never know, but you flawlessly feel that a future is possible for you together. Do I put it so well, Emma?'

'Why do mothers always know their daughters better than daughters know themselves, mama?'

'Because that's just a mother's job,' Emma's mother replied, hugging her daughter. 'And mothers feel flawlessly what is good for their daughter and this mother feels that Matt makes her very happy. And it makes me very happy that you were able to say goodbye to the ghosts of your past, through your work in Africa and through Matt. And I'm glad you now have a few real friends, and not just that ice cream queen Thérèse. Do you ever hear that again?'

And because of this last question, they were back to light subjects and the benign gossip, which is common between mother and daughter.

Emma was happy when Maarten - her mother's temporary whim - turned out to be largely the subject of the juicy gossip her mother told. The neighbour turned out to be less fun than Emma's mother had thought.

'Do you know that you bring out the best of me in me?' Emma asked, as they enjoyed the view and the moon shining like silvery wrinkles on the gently undulating sea on the balcony of their hotel room in the evening before going to bed.

Despite the fact that it was a rhetorical question, Matt answered her question anyway. 'No, I don't know, because I only know this side of you. And I like that side. I only know the Emma who is sweet and caring. She has learned to take life as it comes, who dares to stand up for herself, but never thinks that she should only have the best for herself, but also thinks of others,' replied Matt. 'And who is a beast in bed,' he added with a smile.

'That's what I mean, that's the best in me, and that's partly thanks to you.'

'Partly I think so, and that was also my intention. But partly because of everything you've been through and through which you got to know yourself better, and especially because it has penetrated you that Emma is quite a nice woman and not nearly as complicated as she made herself believe.'

'You sound just like my mother now.'

'I don't think it can be considered a compliment if you tell the man of your dreams that he looks like your mother.'

"Are you the man of my dreams, Matt?" Emma asked while looking at him if she saw him for the first time.

"At least I hope so, Emma. In any case, it feels to me as if you are the woman of my dreams and I really hope that we will spend our rest of our lives together.'

'I hope so too, Matt, with all my heart.'

'Then I'm going to celebrate this now, using my last mentioned good quality of the woman of my dreams,' was Matt's answer, as he took her hand and pulled her out of her chair.

His touches were softer that night, longer-lasting, different than usual. And it felt to Emma as if he not only wanted to make love that night, but also wanted to show his love for her.



## Chapter 61

Jacques hadn't come to Bente, but he had called her. He appreciated the letter that Bente had sent him and he had never forgiven her, simply because there was nothing to forgive, and he had never blamed her for anything that had happened to her.

He had a difficult time after Bente had fled and not contacted him, but eventually resumed his life.

He was eternally grateful to Bente, because through her after the death of his wife, he had been able to open his heart again for a new love in his life. And he had found it by now.

Bente had been extremely disappointed, but when Emma realised that she could now let go of her guilt towards Jacques, and she too could really move on with her life, she had agreed with Emma in this.

Bente had decided that she would accompany Emma when she would travel to Africa again in a few months to work as a volunteer for MercyShips for a few weeks, and was able to work simultaneously with Emma in the planning department, to compile the schedules on board the ship.

Bente had been offered a new job via LinkedIn, and although it was a temporary six-month project, she was happy to be able to do something useful again.

'Now another nice man, and then I'm completely satisfied,' Bente had sighed and then said that Emma could count herself lucky with a man like Matt.

Something Emma had completely agreed with, but she had also added that there could still be plenty of opportunities for Bente.

Emma had promised that as soon as she returned from Spain, she would visit Bente, after which they had said goodbye and Emma had completely surrendered to the wonderful days she spent with Matt in Spain, together with their parents.

'Mike wants to meet you,' Matt had fallen with the door after they had returned from Spain. 'He thinks that if his grandparents have met you, he as a son has the right to also know with whom his father has a new relationship.'

Emma had felt a little taken over by his communication, but could understand that his son was curious about her and agreed without objection to a meeting.

Matt was visibly relieved that Emma had no objections and had told him that he wanted to meet on a terrace somewhere in Rotterdam.

'I don't want to make it a formal state of it, and having a drink with each other seems like a good plan,' Matt had added.

Emma had agreed with him and he had called Mike afterwards and agreed to meet next Friday on the terrace of "De Vier Windstreken" in the Kralingsebos.

Emma was curious about his son and especially to see with her own eyes how they got along with each other. This would tell her a little more about a side of Matt that she didn't know yet. In Spain they had gotten to know each other better and better, and their parents' stories about them had certainly contributed to that.

Matt had first come to Emma to put his weekend bag with her, after which they had walked together to the woods, where they arrived earlier than Mike.

Emma was now suffering a bit from healthy tension, which she also noticed in Matt.

Not much later Mike came up to the terrace, with the casual attitude that was characteristic of a student. He hugged Emma spontaneously, and because of the confident way he did this, it seemed as if they had known each other for years.

'Well done, old man,' he greeted Matt with a smile and gave him a high five.

Emma was surprised at how easy it was for Mike to deal with the fact that his father had a new girlfriend, despite the fact that his parents had not been officially divorced for long

and his mother had not even fully accepted this fact. But maybe Mike just looked a lot like his father, because Matt was also generally uninhibited in life.

'Mom knows too, I mean you have a new girlfriend. I know you didn't ask me to tell her yet, but I thought she had the right to know this before she heard it from someone else. As you know, Hillegersberg is like a village, and you can't keep anything a secret there.'

Matt was in colour and asked how Elza had reacted.

'Pretty cool actually. She said she didn't expect anything else and hoped you would be happy. Really, I couldn't believe it myself at first, but she really meant it.'

Emma could read from the face that Matt didn't quite trust it, but Mike seemed to be convinced that Elza was okay with it.

That this was probably really the case was revealed when Mike continued the story. "She also has someone else. For a long time by the way, but you don't know that about me.'

'How do you know your mother is in a relationship too?'

'Yes, what am I just saying, Hillegersberg is like a village and you can't keep a secret of anything there. I heard it at the hockey club. But mom doesn't know I know, so shut up. I calmly wait until the moment she tells me herself. At least if that doesn't last too long. Because now she knows that I

It knows about you and Emma, and I don't make it difficult, she doesn't have to keep it a secret anymore for fear that my dear soul can't handle it, or something like that. By the way, I'm quite hungry, can you get something to eat here too?'

Emma didn't know if it was youthful uninhibition, or an attempt to avoid further questions from Matt by asking if he could get something to eat, but Emma enjoyed the ease with which this boy seemed to deal with the situation.

Matt ordered a bitter garnish and promised - to Mike's great satisfaction - that they would eat a pizza together somewhere later in the evening.

'You're definitely together every weekend?' Mike asked, beeking the waiter to get him another beer.

'Take it easy with that beer, Mr. Student, a snack is not a meal yet,' Matt warned his son, completely back in his role as a father. 'And to answer your question, yes we are, except on the weekends you're with me.'

"But you're not going to live together yet?"

'No, not yet, that would go very quickly, don't you think? But may I know where this in-depth interview can lead?'

'Well, I would have thought so,' Mike began, while looking at his father with a wide smile, a look that Emma recognised because Matt also always looked like he had come up with something that seemed to him a good plan. 'If your apartment is empty, I can stay there for the weekends. Can mom also get along with that new friend of hers when I'm not there.'

'Mike, a little respect for your mother please, I don't think that's a comment you can make, you just keep it for your study friends,' Matt pointed out to him, after which Mike apologised and Emma suspected that he just wanted to come across as a bit tough and disinterested, but the opposite was probably true.

'But is it allowed? I promise I'll clean up everything, not plunder your fridge and don't throw parties or take girls home,' Mike tried to convince his father.

'Yes, Mike, and the Pope is not Roman Catholic,' was Matt's sarcastic answer.

"I don't know what you're talking about now, but is it allowed or not?" Mike asked, visibly getting impatient.

'I'll have to discuss that with your mother first, Mike.'

'Dad, I'm an adult yes. So I'll tell her myself, you don't have to do that.'

'Okay then, as far as I'm concerned it's okay. And I'll make sure the fridge is filled and there are a few beers in front of you. But you clean up your junk yourself before you leave, otherwise the fun is quickly over. And no parties with loud music or more than six men.'

And you stay away from my bedroom, you just use your own bed, that's big enough. But I think we first

Have to ask Emma if she doesn't mind that from now on I have half of

The week at her bivouac,' Matt concluded his list of demands on Mike, after which both Matt and Mike looked at her expectantly.

Emma felt caught off guard for a moment and furrowed her eyebrows, while looking at them with a stern look, two bad boys who suddenly seemed to swear to get something done.

'What if I'm away with my friends for a whole weekend?' Emma asked to buy time.

'I think I'll stay in my own apartment and like to spend that weekend with my son again.'

'And when will you see Mike outside that weekend? You want to spend time with him regularly, don't you?' Emma noted soberly.

'That will be fine by itself. I can just do something with Mike on the weekend, only I'll come back to you in the evening.'

Emma could no longer resist such an overwhelmingly charming offensive of both men, and eventually surrendered.

Although she herself knew only too well that the idea that Matt and she would spend more time together sounded too tempting to her ears.

## Chapter 62

Emma had picked up Janneke and Nanda early the weekend they left for Friesland, after which they drove to Bente to pick her up in Nesselande and then continue their way towards Friesland.

The weather gods seemed to them well-disposed and no rain was predicted for that weekend. Tedje would drive to the destination together with Mirthe, Ana and Tooske, and Diana and Liberra would arrive later that day, because they could not have freed themselves from their work until the afternoon.

Emma was free until July 1, as she had finished her work in the nursing ward and was not back in the OR until that date.

Emma and Bente had no idea what they could expect from the weekend with this close-knit friends club, but that this would be mostly noisy, Janneke had already warned them about that. Although Nanda told that it would probably be a little quieter without Miranda.

Emma still found it difficult to have a conversation about Miranda, but she wouldn't be able to avoid that next weekend.

'Actually, none of us were really close to Miranda, right? Not like Tooske with Ana and Diana with Liberra. And certainly not like the two-unit Mirthe and Tedje,' Nanda didn't ask anyone in particular when they were on their way to Friesland, braving traffic jams due to roadworks.

'Yes, that's absolutely true, but we're not either, Nanda? Let's be honest, who were we close to? Yes, we usually travelled together on the weekends when we were away with each other. The wallflowers, together in the back of the karaoke bar. And you were very close to Liberra when Denise went looking for her father. But since you've been with Bart, there's no question of that anymore, right? And that goes for me and Tooske. Tooske was there for me when Victor and I were in a marriage crisis, but after that that bond was diluted again,' Janneke truthfully noted.

Emma felt a bit left out by this conversation about their friendship, as if she was allowed to join, but wasn't really part of the group.

Mirthe had rented a bungalow that could accommodate ten people, so they would all stay in the same bungalow.

The bungalow was on the property of a farmer, who had converted an old barn for this after he had stopped farming and now maintained a mini-campsite on it.

The bungalow was fully equipped, including a dishwasher, a washing machine and tumble dryer, which provoked Tooske's comment that Miranda had always dreamed of this.

'From a washing machine and dryer?' Bente asked in surprise.

'No, from a dishwasher, Miranda didn't like having to do the dishes herself,' Tooske replied, with a slightly sarcastic undertone.

'Which she never did, or has anyone ever seen her with a dishwashing brush or tea towel in her hands?' Diana asked, looking at the rest of the group. But indeed, no one could have ever caten Miranda on that. Or on any other housework.

'But she always poured the drinks for us, and made delicious cocktails,' Tedje defended their late girlfriend.

'Yes, and I miss her weird antics too. Especially now that we have all become so lazy in recent years, actually since our weekend in Groesbeek,' Mirthe continued, with sadness in her voice.

'Oh well, do you remember how she dragged those big suitcases, and we wondered what the hell she had taken with her for those two days?' Nada recalled. 'And that she had brought an outfit for all of us from her pop-up clothing store?'

'Yes, you still felt a bit piked at the time, because Miranda had said that, now that you were with Bart, you could use a chic dress,' Ana remembered.

'And then Miranda got angry because Tooske said something about old money, what was that again? Oh yes, she said: "Bart is even more chic than you, Miranda, because he comes from a family with old money," Nanda added.

Bente had heard it all with a smile.

'That was Miranda to the feet. She had a broad heart in that regard, and loved sharing her wealth with others,' confirmed Bente, who had known Miranda like no other.

'Have you ever worn that dress, Tooske? Because you didn't really look like you felt comfortable in your new outfit with those sneakers under that dress,' Diana asked, smiling at the memory of Tooske who had looked like a marathon runner wrapped in a dress.

'Yes, as she had ordered us: on her wedding day. What did she call that day that their son Ernst-Jan and her took off the marriage promise again?'

No one seemed to answer this question and Bente looked diagonally at Emma, who had left-handedly followed the whole conversation.

Emma gave Bente an unnoticed smile, sign that it was okay for her if she brought back memories of Miranda.

'Okay, girls, Miranda is not there to arrange the catering and pull Ernst-Jan's credit card for this, nor to conjure up a box of wine from her car, so we will first have to see what groceries we have to get and what we want to prepare for food. Or shall we just order pizza?' Mirthe changed the subject.

'Pizza is fine, but I think we also want to have breakfast tomorrow morning and the drinks and the like also have to be picked up. Shall I drive to the village with Emma?' Bente proposed, which was gratefully accepted with general voices.

Together they made a list of what had to be done, and Emma took her car key to drive to the village.

When they were in the car, Bente looked at Emma with a conspiratory look. 'That was enough Miranda for the rest of the weekend huh? Despite the fact that these women also miss her, it is a bit more sensitive to me.

And for you it is not nice to listen to it for other reasons, even now that it is behind you, or am I wrong about that?'

'Actually, I didn't mind at all. As if all this had nothing to do with Ernst-Jan and me. Only that comment about their second marriage promise I found confrontational. But I think when they had made that comment, they also realised that this was not pleasant for me to hear and immediately changing Mirthe's subject.'

Bente briefly focussed her attention on the route planner to track the right way to the nearest supermarket, before giving Emma an answer.

'Shall we agree that if one of us all gets a bit too much this weekend, we will withdraw for a while. Then we do offer to prepare the food or something like that. Not that I expect this to be necessary, but we are both not used to being around with so many women for a whole weekend.'

'Thank you, Bente, I think I think that's a reassuring thought. Although I think I had my baptism of fire in that regard during my volunteer work on the ship, because I had little privacy there for a month.'

'Yes, it is, but I still have to go through that experience. I'm looking forward to it, but I'm also looking forward to something if I'm honest,' Bente confessed.

'Belief me, from the moment you get off the plane and are greeted like a VIP at the airport in your MercyShips t-shirt, until the moment you receive your certificate the day before departure, you will have the same feeling as any other crew member has experienced. A sense of togetherness, of love and gratitude. Grateful because you have been able to help the people there, regardless of the gratitude you receive from people whose lives have become a little less heavy through us.'

'Have you never regretted the fact that you sold your well-run business and retrained yourself as a nurse and now even as an assistant in the OR? That work seems very difficult to do to me and then you are also paid very poorly. While I think you earned a fortune when you still had your own business.'

Emma looked at Bente with raised eyebrows. As if she had never been asked such a strange question, and Bente could fill in the answer herself.

'Bente, no one has ever become happier because they deserve a fortune, but because they can give meaning to their lives. And of course I'm lucky that I never have to worry about money because I once made a lot of money. Moreover, I have kept such assets from the sale of my company that I could get by with it for decades even without working. But believe me when I tell you that even without that, I would never want to do anything else with my life than work that matters. And I am convinced that my previous work has not been of any significance. Because if managers do their job properly, then functions such as advisors and the like are completely unnecessary.'

'You really mean that, Emma, and I also understand what you mean. You may think I have also held such a position, but I have always

Satisfaction from my work and miss it a lot. It's just what I'm good at and what I've felt appreciated for.'

'You have to do what you know makes you happy and what gives you satisfaction. And if the job you have now been offered through LinkedIn makes you happy, then you have to be fully committed to it. And, Bente, you would help me a lot if you showed me the way to help Ant, because I want to keep my promise to Laura, but I'm not sure how to do that yet.'

By now they had arrived at the supermarket and after Bente replied that she was looking forward to her new job because she was more than fed up with it, and Emma was always allowed to ask her for advice if Emma thought she could show her the way to help Ant get through his first months as a widower, they walked in to fill the shopping cart according to the list they had received

Which she eventually supplemented, because essential things like butter for the sandwiches for breakfast were apparently overlooked.

## Chapter 63

When Emma and Bente returned to the bungalow, the room layout was now made and they did indeed share a room together.

They found everyone in the garden and fortunately the bungalow was far enough away from the farmhouse and the mini-camping to avoid nuisance for the residents and other guests.

Emma, who was somewhat used to in the coffee room during her breaks at work, could not imagine how eight women could apparently talk simultaneously and still seemed to know what someone else was telling.

Diana walked inside with them to help clean up the groceries and Mirthe came after them to take the wine and the glasses outside.

'That wine is still lukewarm Mirthe, I'll put it in the freezer first, so you have to make do with a cup of coffee or tea,' Diana intervened when she saw what Mirthe's intention was.

Liberra also walked into the kitchen and took over the work of Emma and Bente, so that they too could install themselves in their room.

Attracted by the smell of fresh coffee, not long after, Emma and Bente also walked into the garden and took a seat on one of the chairs placed along a long table.

Meanwhile, the sound was slightly muffling and Emma could even perceive the sounds of the chirping ducks swimming in the ditch behind their bungalow, which overlooked the meadows and where Emma could see the church tower in the distance, which stood above the roofs of the houses.

Tedje announced that she had found a new game that she had taken with her and wanted to play that night.

'If only it's not such a weird game as in Valkenburg, Tedje, because then you just leave it in your bag,' teased Nanda, who may have had very unpleasant memories of the game where everyone had to answer a question in truth, but which had ultimately led Denise to meet her father Bart and Nanda was reunited with him after more than twenty years. And only because Nanda had given an honest answer to the question of whether she had ever had an affair with a married man.

'No, this is a completely different kind of game, you don't have to answer questions this time,' promised Tedje.

Emma still had to get used to the mutual dynamics of these women, but as the evening progressed she felt more and more at ease.

Tedje's game turned out to be even stranger than the game they had taken to Valkenburg. They each had to write an event of their lives on a piece of paper and depict this to the rest of the group. They then had to guess what event it was on the basis of questions they were allowed to ask.

It was a bit of a middle ground between hints and who of the three, and as the bottles of wine became empty, the hilarity increased. The only two events that were guessed were that of Nanda, who depicted her marriage by throwing a bunch of dandelions - which she had picked in the garden - over her shoulders and Ana, when she pointed busy towards the caravans that stood further down the site, and in this way she tried to make clear the road trip she had made with her husband in the winter.

But it didn't deter the fun they had with this game and before they knew it it was time to go to bed, because they wanted to start their bike ride early the next day.

Mirthe had arranged cycling at two starting points, so that they could cycle different sections of the Elfstedentocht, while spending the night in the same bungalow. Around half past one in the afternoon they had taken plenty of time to have lunch, so that they could be satisfied with a few sandwiches in the bungalow that evening, and they had had enough

break to complete the approximately 130km that they would cover over two days, without effort.

The bike ride had a soothing influence on the group, and while cycling there was little talk and especially enjoyed the wide views, the sound of the birds and the pleasure boats, from where the people greeted them cheerfully.

Everyone seemed to especially enjoy the moment and engrossed in their own thoughts. Thoughts that Emma mainly went out to Matt, and their short vacation they had recently spent together in Spain.

But her thoughts also slipped to Laura and her last days, which had come faster than anyone had expected.

She thought of Mike, and the ease on which he had accepted Emma as his father's new girlfriend. Elza had finally given in and promised Matt that she wanted to have the house appraised and pay him the part he would be entitled to.

Matt was not so much about the fact that he wanted to have access to the money, but mainly that he could close the chapter of his life with Elza, and the only thing that bound them would be Mike. Something that Emma also applauded wholeheartedly.

Suddenly, as if some secret sign had been given, everyone started talking at the same time again and Diana came up next to her bikes.

Bente had previously told her that Mirthe and Tedje were the most present in the company and Diana and Liberra generally behaved a bit calmer.

According to Janneke, Diana was also the sweetest of the couple and the most committed to everyone. Where Tooske seemed to show interest mainly out of meddling, Diana was always sincerely committed to everyone, without interfering in what would be best for you.

'Do you have some fun, Emma,' Diana asked with her warm, somewhat singing voice that Emma had noticed from the first moment.

Before Emma could answer her question, they were disturbed by the loud roar of motorcycles, caused by a large group of motorcyclists who passed their Harley Davidson motorcycles.

'It's nice of you to ask, but I really enjoy every moment,'

'I'm glad to hear that, because I can imagine that when we talk about things from the past, you have no idea what we're talking about of course.'

'If I have to be honest, I find your stories amusing enough not to mind that sometimes I don't quite understand who you're talking about, or how long ago something happened. Especially if Tedje tells something, where she seems to use all her body parts,' Emma reassured her.

"Even when we're talking about Miranda?" Diana asked with a slight anxiety in her voice.

"Not even if you're talking about Miranda. Indirectly, Miranda has also been a big part of my life. I must even honestly admit that Miranda made my relationship with Ernst-Jan possible. Because of who she was, she gave him the opportunity to spend a lot of time with me without having to feel guilty about it,' Emma confessed.

Diana visibly had to think about it and shed her face in a grimace.

'But wouldn't you have preferred to have a normal relationship with him, without there being a marriage with Miranda?' Diana asked in surprise.

"I don't know, Diana. I never thought about that at the time and I'm not going to do that anymore. I'm happy with Matt now, and that's the only thing that matters to me. And don't forget that Ernst-Jan broke up our relationship about three years ago and I had already started to build a new life before he passed away. At the time I saw it differently, but now that I look back on it I have to admit that it was nothing but correct that he first broke off our relationship before he wanted to give his relationship with Miranda a new chance. I would have loved it if he had kept me on a leash while he was building a normal relationship with Miranda again. Then I would have really had the feeling - and I would



still have it now - that he had kept me on the bench, in case it turned out to be Miranda's a success after all.'

"Yes, I understand that. I even think Miranda would have understood if she had known. Although I am sure that was not the case, because she would have told us that extensively and with the necessary drama,' Diana replied with conviction. 'But I'm glad you're doing well now and that you feel comfortable with us. Some of us can come across as rather overwhelming,' Diana admitted with a smile.

'Yes, I'm slowly but surely going to understand the group dynamics. And what I see most of all is a group of women who care about each other, and support each other,' Emma replied. For better or worse, right, Diana?'

"Yes, for better or worse."

## Chapter 64

The weekend had been pleasant And there had not been a single unspoken word. Ana had told at length about her trip she had made by motorhome, right through France, Spain and Portugal.

Although she had opposed being away from home for so long, she had eventually given in to her husband's desire to go overwinter under the sun. She had mentioned that she was only doing this because her daughter had promised to fly to them during the holidays, together with her family and had actually done so.

After that, a lively conversation had arisen about how great it was to be a grandmother. A conversation in which Emma, Bente, Nanda, Liberra and Janneke could not actively participate and they had discussed with each other how nice the bike ride had been.

On Sunday, Emma had felt fully included in the group, and had not regretted that she had accepted their invitation. Although at the end of the day she was happy that they would go home early the next day.

Mirthe had suggested cycling a bit before leaving and only driving home after lunch, but the rest had unanimously agreed that they would leave after breakfast.

Emma had enjoyed this weekend, and not least the company of this close-knit group of friends. But now it was time to go home, to her new life.

Matt had come to her right after work, and Emma couldn't wait to see him again and tell him about her weekend.

When she felt his arms around her again, she was overwhelmed by a blissful feeling. Coming home was no longer entering an empty apartment, but coming home was from now on a few arms around her.

There was nothing left of her old life, and Emma could not imagine greater happiness than what had happened to her in the past year: Africa, MercyShips, her friendship with Bente and Janneke, opening her heart. But above all, the love she had found with Matt.

The circle was round.

## Epilogue

Emma wallowed her toes through the warm white sand. She was back in Africa after once again volunteering for MercyShips.

This time not in the company of John, Michael and Oliva, but of Bente, who was also affected by the so-called MercyShips virus, and had enjoyed her administrative work on the ship.

And even now, following her work, she had taken the time to enjoy a holiday in Africa. This time no safari but to - in stark contrast to her work for MercyShips - enjoy white beaches, clear water, and all the luxury and comfort that the five-star hotel had to offer. And from Matt, with whom she had been living together for a month.

Bente sat next to her, her eyes closed, a book half open in her hand.

A little further on were two men playing volleyball together, two strong tanned bodies, who looked up laughing.

Emma slid up her hand sluggishly towards them, two men who had been friends in recent months.

The one divorced not so long ago, and who had found his happiness with another woman not long after his divorce. A woman he had met for the first time in her beloved Africa.

The other widower, a man who was still looking for his way in the new life in which he had ended up through fate. Helped by two strong women, who both knew what it meant to lose someone.

But one of the women, who was a widow herself, understood just a little better what it meant to lose your partner to death, while you had expected and hoped that there would be many more happy years ahead of you.

He understood that time does not heal all wounds, there would always be a scar, a silent desire, locked in the heart.

He understood that it would take a long time for Ant to be ready for a new love.

And who would be a good friend to him until that moment.

But also flawlessly felt that the moment would one day be there, when Ant could open his heart to her. Because not only Emma, Bente had also learned something valuable in her life: loss is not the end, but a new beginning.

And she would wait for that moment. Patient, and full of love.

Bente and Emma looked at each other smiling. Happy and content with themselves and their current lives.

The future was for later.

## **Note of the writer**

I ran into Ankie at Albert Heijn. We met from the running group Nesselande and Powerwalk Nesselande, and had a chat.

My third book "With an eye on happiness" was in its final phase and Ankie told me about her volunteer work for MercyShips. She had just returned from Sierra Leone and was still full of everything she had seen and experienced there.

I had never heard of MercyShips and had no idea what it meant.

Captivated by her enthusiasm, her report on Polarsteps and the information I found on the MercyShips site, I asked her if I could weave her experiences into my fourth novel.

Although both the characters and the storyline are fiction, the work that Emma does on the ship more or less describes reality, but processed in novel form and on certain points a free interpretation of me as author. All similarities with existing persons are purely based on coincidence.

***Mercy Ships** Started with a dream: hospital ships manned with volunteers helping the world's poorest countries by providing medical care. Show God's love to the poorest in a practical way. Over the years, Mercy Ships has helped more than two million people in developing countries with medical operations and development projects with a handful of ships. And every day, with every operation, every patient, we fulfil that dream.*

*We currently have two hospital ships in operation – the Africa Mercy and the Global Mercy, the largest private sailing hospital in the world. Both ships are specially designed to help people in the poorest countries in Africa.*

**Source:** <https://www.mercyships.nl/over-mercy-ships/>

I would like to thank Ankie for her input and all the volunteers for their commitment to helping people selflessly. I hope that in this way I have been able to give a little more awareness to this foundation, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year (2025).

I make this book available for free as a digital version, a donation to this foundation or KWF is of course always allowed and is more than welcome.

Look on [www.mercyships.nl](http://www.mercyships.nl) ore [www.kwf.nl](http://www.kwf.nl) And do a poisont.

Thanks voor reading my Books

Maj B Henrikson

