



# LOVE TO THE MOON AND BACK



*Maggie Sun*

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# Chapter One

Awoken by a ray of soft light that stole into his bedroom, Joe made a yawn under the blanket. He stretched out a hand and pressed a button beside the bed to summon his servant as he cast a lazy look out of the half open window: in the grey sky of Magic Moon, two graceful birds with rainbow tails were wheeling through the air, escorting Dragon Eye to rise above the horizon.

Doodle, a man with a cat's face in a black livery, entered the door with a silver tray of neatly folded clothes on one of his hands—or paws.

“Good morning, Master.” The cat bowed his head, put down the tray on the bedside table, and opened the window wider to brighten up the somber room.

“Morning, Doodle.” Joe made another yawn, pushed the blanket to the side, and sat up. When he caught sight of the clothes on the tray, a deep frown crept into his face. “No, no, no, those won't do! Today is an important day! I need to go to see the Goddess for a consultation. Fetch me something better so that I can present myself decently.”

Without delay, Doodle went out. Two minutes later, he came back in, holding a white robe with golden embroidery and puffed sleeves—the one that Joe always wore for special events.

Joe got off the bed, put on the robe, and shuffled to the full-length mirror beside a basin stand. He rubbed away the lingering fatigue from his light brown eyes, combed his auburn hair with a soft brush, and cleaned his face with a warm wet towel served by Doodle. A good five minutes later, he moved out to the sitting room for breakfast.

Joe seated himself in a tall chair at the dining table, on which laid some fresh fruits, poached eggs, and a basket of bread. Doodle poured some tea for Joe before sitting down on a small chair at a far corner of the table.

As usual, Joe took a small sip from his cup before darting a glance at Doodle, waiting for him to start their conversation of the day, only with more impatience this morning.

Doodle swallowed his first bite of food in a hurry. "Ahem, Master Joe, may I know what this consultation is about that you are seeking from the Goddess?"

"Of course, not that it's anything of a servant's concern." Joe put on airs in his habitual way that he knew had lost effect. "Well, the thing is, I dreamt of Jasmine again last night. She just can't stop bugging me with her dreams and troubles. And this time ..." He paused for suspense.

"Really!" Doodle widened his eyes. "What did Princess Jasmine tell you this time, Master Joe?"

"You can't believe it if I tell you! She asked me to go down to Earth to take care of her daughters for a whole Moon day!"

"Really?" Doodle seemed genuinely curious now. "But why? How come? What happened?"

Joe was satisfied with the cat's reaction. It was not fair for him to bear the anxiety alone. If he had to do what was asked of him by Jasmine, Doodle would have to join him anyway. "As you know, it will be my father's birthday in two days. The whole family are invited to the party, even the guards. All of them but me!" Joe thumped the table with a fist before he took a deep breath to regain his composure. "If Jasmine and Bruce don't show up, the King will investigate their whereabouts and uncover their secret in no time, so they have no choice but to attend the party. In the meantime, their daughters need to be looked after by someone, who, according to Jasmine, would be me."

"It sounds like a reasonable request from a trusting sister, Master. But it's my duty to remind you that every day up here on Magic Moon is equivalent to one whole year down there on Earth."

"Yeah, I know! That's why it troubles me so. I don't want to spend that long—an entire year on Earth—to take care of two little human beings whom I barely know!"

"But you know them, Master Joe. I mean, we both know the

two little girls well. It was only last week that we were invited there and spent a whole month together with Princess Jasmine's family. I have to admit that it was a remarkably happy time for me."

"Happy for you maybe, but not for me." Joe grimaced. "I was tricked to learn how to cook, how to put the girls to bed, how to do shopping, how to have a polite conversation with their human neighbors, how to use a cellphone and a computer, and even how to drive a car. All those things are of no use to me!"

"My guess is that while Princess Jasmine enjoyed the sweet vacation with you, she also made it an opportunity to prepare you for the task of looking after your nieces."

"Yeah, of course that was the reason," Joe grumbled in despondency. "Who wants to spend a real vacation with *me*?"

"Don't get me wrong. It's obvious that she really cares about you and loved the time spent together with you. You are the only one to whom she confided her secret after all."

"Whatever!" Joe shrugged off Doodle's words, unwilling to acknowledge the truth in there. "Moreover, if we go down to Earth, we will age like those human beings! I will have lines in my face and probably gain weight. It's unbearable! I may be a bastard, but I have the best looks in the family!"

"I have to point out that, Master Joe, you are over concerned about your appearance. Your beauty is impossible to be marred by one year's time on Earth; there's no doubt about that!"

"Well ..." Joe was somewhat relieved. "I still have to consult with the Goddess. She is the one I trust the most. If she thinks it's the right thing to do, I will do it."

Doodle seemed in doubt. "Are you sure? I mean, Master Joe, you must think it through before you disclose such critical information to anyone else. It may put your sister's happiness to jeopardy."

"Doodle, you have forgotten your place! How can you talk about the Moon Goddess in this way? You question her trustworthiness or the quality of her advice? She cares about me and will never hurt anyone that I care about!" In furious defense of the deity he worshiped, Joe forgot to mention the more important reason for

the visit. "Now finish your breakfast and prepare for the trip!"

\* \*

Once the coach pulled by a dozen seagulls was thoroughly cleaned by Doodle, Joe climbed into the cushioned seat and took out a small mirror to scrutinize himself again. He wanted to be perfect in front of the Goddess—the deity of justice and beauty who could turn a life into a statue and sustain her youth for eternity. Joe was more than her admirer; he loved her as a mother that he'd never had, as a woman with unparalleled allure, and as his idol with the influence that he dared not dream to gain.

Not long after the coach started, Joe put down the mirror and watched out of the small window. On both sides of the road stood rows and rows of magnificent orange mansions with dragons sculptured on the flying rafters and deities painted on the walls. They were passing the wealthiest and most influential commoner region, where people in orange silky robes were mainly scholars and artists. The finest of them provided consulting, artwork, and entertaining service to the royals. Some of them were so popular that they were almost as worshipped as the Goddess. Joe's humble villa was located on the edge of the royal golden zone but not far from here. Although he considered it a huge shame to live out of a palace, living in such proximity to the most stylish group of people—the Orangers—did give him a glow of satisfaction.

Half an hour later, the coach passed by red zone where more than half of the well-appointed redbrick buildings served as shops. Here people in fine red coats were mainly merchants. Some of them dealt directly with the royals, supplying them with the best food, clothes, jewelry, and other luxury items.

When the coach drove through yellow, purple, and green zones, Joe didn't bother to look out anymore. Those were merely uninteresting places full of run-of-the-mill buildings designed with nothing but pragmatism in mind. The Yellowers and Purplers were different types of workers in different phases of production process before final products were collected by the Redders for sale, and the Greeners were farmers who provided the whole planet with grains,

vegetables, and fruits.

Once they reached blue zone, the poorest territory where the majority of residents were miners, Joe couldn't help looking out again. There were children chasing after the coach, begging for food and money. He loathed the filthiness of the unsightly scene outside, but his heart ached hearing the kids' crying. He raised a hand to signal to Doodle; the cat immediately started to hand out the leftover of their unfinished breakfast—carefully wrapped in small bags—to the youngest kids out of the window.

One of them—a cute little boy of about six or seven, who finally got a bag of food—stopped to catch his breath and enjoy his hard-earned breakfast. But before he could even open the bag, a big teenage boy snatched it from his hand and finished the food in three big bites. Caught off guard, the little boy stood frozen. When he saw the empty bag thrown away and the big boy turn on his heel to take off, he sank down to the floor, starting to cry, “G-give me back m-my food ...”

“Damned!” cursed Joe. “I hate to pass here!” The Goddess set her silver palace not far from blue zone on the opposite end of the Moon to the dragons, so he had to cross all the six regions to reach her.

Joe fished out a few coins from his pocket and handed them to Doodle. “Give these to that boy, and make sure that no one rob him this time.”

With a big smile splitting his face, Doodle got off the coach and walked to the boy who now stopped sobbing and stared at the approaching figure with fear. As Doodle gently slipped the coins into his palm, he stood up and bowed deeply at the cat with tears of gratefulness rolling down his cheeks.

Watching him from the coach, Joe felt a lump in his throat; now he was almost glad that they had to travel across this hell of a place today.

“What a lovely kid,” muttered Doodle who still couldn't take his eyes off the boy even as the coach started again. “Too bad that he was born in the unfortunate zone.”



“Too bad that so many of us were not born royals”—Joe grunted—“legitimate royals!”

## Chapter Two

The coach finally arrived at the silver palace that took the form of a half moon and stylishly decorated in three colors—silver, white, and jade green. It was not very big, nor as spectacular as the royal golden palaces, but the whole place exuded artful fineness and transcendent sublimity.

The Goddess, Ivory, was sitting at the round table in her exquisite garden, her black hair draping around her shoulders, a stunning smile hanging on her lips, and her favorite pet—a jade rabbit—snuggling in her arms.

Joe kissed Ivory's hand with unreserved reverence and took the opposite seat across the table.

"Joe dear, long time no see," she greeted. "You've been busy?"

"No, not really busy, only troubled. I have a big favor to ask of you."

"Go on." She stroked the rabbit's soft ears with casual hands.

"My sister—the eldest one, Jasmine—eloped down to Earth about 2 weeks ago."

"Really?" Her hands paused. "With whom?"

"Bruce—her tutor and guard."

The rabbit suddenly slipped down and hopped toward the gate at the far end of the garden where Doodle was standing.

"Spoiled beast!" yelped the Goddess who seemed to be startled and annoyed by her pet. Then she looked back at Joe with resumed serenity. "I appreciate your trust in me. What can I do for you?"

"Jasmine and Bruce will attend my father's birthday party the day after tomorrow. I know you are invited there, too. Can you talk with her then and convince her to come back for good?" pleaded Joe. "She doesn't want to listen to me. In fact, they've already had two kids—two little girls—who would need to be looked after when their parents are gone."

"I guess your sister has asked you to take care of her kids?"

"Exactly. What should I do? I really don't want to babysit two human kids for a whole year. Do I look like a babysitter?"

Ivory stood up, paced back and forth for a spell, then sat down again and stared Joe intensely in the eye. "I think you should go to help your sister. You need to show her that you love her and are as trustworthy as she wants you to be. If you don't, what reason does she have to stay here on Magic Moon? You know how much she cares about you."

"I know." Joe did appreciate Jasmine's affection for him. While there wasn't much love shared among the dragons, she apparently regarded Joe, Joe alone, as a true family member. She'd told him that he had a big heart despite his obsession with looks, although Joe wasn't sure about that, nor did he care—it wasn't worth a tinker's dam since it didn't help to improve his life at all. "But I know nothing about kids, especially girls."

"How old are they?"

"Elena, the big one, is turning 13; Wendy, the little one, almost 6."

"Hmm, so you have a teenager to deal with," mused Ivory. "Indeed, it's not going to be easy—you yourself are only a few years older than Elena. But you don't have a choice, Joe. You have to take the task with courage. That'll increase the chance of Jasmine giving up her life on Earth. However, if she wants to come back with the kids, she will have to tell the truth to King Aldrich. Maybe he wouldn't allow her to stay in marriage with Bruce anymore, but I'm sure he will at least grant her the right to live with her kids." She regarded Joe with motherly fondness and added, "Just like you. Although you are not a legitimate kid of the Dragon King, you have always been well supplied in life, haven't you?"

"Have I?" Joe pondered in doubt. "I haven't even been invited to my father's birthday! What do you think that means? No one gives a fig about me in my family, except Jasmine."

"All the more reason to cherish her love for you. I know better than anyone that real love is hard to come by—not just for you but for everyone. You are lucky that you have your sister who treasures

you. You think she really doesn't have anyone better suited for the job of babysitting her kids? She asked you only because she thinks of you as family." Ivory reached out to hold Joe's hands and fixed him with the brightest, most penetrating eyes that left him with no choice but to listen and nod. "I know you have a deep affection for Jasmine, too. And you don't want her to squander her life on Earth."

"Indeed! If she stays on Earth, she will die there real soon here! That's my biggest concern." Jasmine now looked older by more than a dozen years, since once passing the border from the Moon to Earth, even a dragon became a normal being—losing all magical power and aging as fast as a human. But she seemed not bothered at all by that and determined to live on Earth until dying from old age. By the time she did die there—even if she could live to 100—at most seventy days on Magic Moon would have passed. How horrible it would be!—Joe would lose his sister in about two months! It was the main reason why he wanted to see Ivory. Despite the fact that the Goddess held no power over any dragon, it was no secret that all the princesses admired her and more than a few took her into their confidence. He believed that she was the only one who was able to change Jasmine's mind.

"I know, I know, my dear." Ivory patted Joe's hands. "That's why I will do my best to bring her around."

She seemed to have more to tell but was distracted by a sudden commotion out of the garden made by a luxurious wagon pulling over at the door.

A handsome man a bit older than Joe in a silky orange robe came out of the wagon. He strode up to Ivory and saluted her with a deep bow. "Goddess, it's always such a great pleasure to see you." He gazed at her with unconcealed pining. "Your beauty is growing more irresistible every day!"

"I'm flattered," replied Ivory a bit icily. "What brought you here today, Master Taylor?"

"I made a full-length portrait for you, as a gift." Taylor gave a sideway glimpse at Joe who was standing quietly beside the

table, as if only then did he notice the presence of the younger man. When Joe greeted him with a courteous nod, he only ignored him and continued talking to the Goddess, “It’s a bit daring, but a perfect exhibition of your unequalled charm. Enjoy it.” With that, he produced a long roll of parchment out of his sleeve and opened it on the table.

Joe’s cheeks flushed at what he saw: elaborately depicted in the painting was the Goddess who just emerged out of her bathtub, her shapely body covered in a clingy white robe with a thigh-high slit; her lustrous hair hanging over her slender shoulders was still dripping at places, soaking through the silk fabric to unveil just the right amount of her outline. Although not much skin was revealed, every detail suggested seduction and tempted desire.

Ivory herself was expressionless, with no way for others to tell how she thought of the gift. She simply raised the corners of her mouth to give half a smile, and said to Taylor without inflection, “Thank you. It’s a nice one. But now I’m a bit occupied, as you can see that Prince Joe is here. Maybe we can find another time to catch up.”

After a disdainful glare at Joe, Taylor grinned at Ivory. “Just give me five more minutes, my goddess, and then I will be out of your hair.” He clapped his hands twice toward the driver at the door before two boys in blue tatters were dragged out of the wagon and brought into the garden.

“These are two little thieves who tried to trick money out of me on my way here. They need a good lesson from our Goddess of Justice,” explained Taylor while forcing the boys to kneel down on the floor.

“I saw them both on my way here too,” blurted Joe. “The little boy was robbed of his food by the big—oh, so they were actually working together ...” He trailed off when he came to the realization that he’d been a victim of the two tricksters, but the moment he looked at them—both with their mouths gagged by rubber tape and their hands bound with rope—he pitied them more than he blamed them.

Doodle was also staring at the boys with a worried frown, especially the small one whose thin body was shaking nonstop. He opened his mouth, but quickly closed it because Joe darted him a look that said “You know better—a servant was in no position to talk under such circumstances.”

The Goddess walked gracefully to the boys and bent down to study them in the face. “What are your names and how old are you?” At the same time, she removed the tape on their mouths with a gentle hand.

“L-Liam, m-my name is Liam,” answered the little one with trembling lips. “A-and he’s my b-brother, Jack. I’m 7, and he’s 14.”

Jack scowled at his younger brother and kept his mouth shut, refusing to make any eye contact with the Goddess.

“Is it true that you two played tricks on these two gentlemen on the road to get money from them?” Ivory talked in such an amiable way as if she was in a tea party with her friends.

“Yes. B-but we are really hungry,” confessed Liam.

Ivory stood up and riveted her gaze on Joe, a spark of inspiration kindling behind her iridescent eyes. “Joe, what do you think we should do with Jack and Liam, seeing that Master Taylor is telling the truth?”

Without hesitation, Joe replied, “I think they are only kids, and we should give them a chance and let them go, as long as they promise not to do it again.”

Doodle flashed an approving smile at Joe.

“We won’t do it again! We won’t! We promise!” avowed Liam.

“No way!” cut in Master Taylor whose face gave away his disgruntlement at not being consulted and his anger at Joe’s cheap clemency. “These filthy low-borns, they will repeat the same crime again and again if we let them go so easily.”

Ivory’s lips curved into a smirk. “Thank you for your opinion, Master Taylor, as unsolicited as it is.”

Taylor’s expression turned sour, but Ivory ignored him and turned toward Joe. “However, when it comes to justice, I have to stick to the law. What the boys did is certainly against the law—

it's a crime. Whether they will commit it again or not in the future, they will have to accept due punishment for what they have already done. So, I have no choice but to turn them both into statues—"

"What?" gasped both Joe and Doodle.

"Let me finish my sentence," chastised the Goddess with a tender voice. "For two weeks—I will turn them into statues for only two weeks, by the end of which they will be freed and let go."

Joe breathed a long sigh of relief. Jack cast a relaxed gaze at his little brother and Liam's tensed up shoulders now hung loose, so did Doodle's.

"Isn't it too easy for them?" Taylor challenged the verdict.

"Master Taylor, thank you for having kindly caught the offenders and sent them here. But it is my job to render fair judgement. You and I, we are done today." Before her last words were finished, Ivory had already turned her back to the man.

Taylor's mouth made a thin line before half a smile registered at one corner. "Sure. I've just remembered that I have something important to deal with this afternoon. See you soon, Goddess." Before he left, he didn't forget to shoot a dirty look at Joe.

## Chapter Three

Ivory approached Liam and Jack, loosening the rope binding their hands. “Kids, now it’s time to accept your punishment. Don’t be afraid. It will be for two weeks only. You won’t feel a thing, as if you are in deep sleep.”

Almost idly, she waved one of her flowing sleeves at the boys, in the wake of which a thick layer of mysterious mist started to rise around them. It writhed and crawled from the boys’ feet up to their heads until their entire bodies were out of sight as if swallowed whole by an invisible phantom. An instant later, the mist began to disperse and grow diaphanous. Eventually it cleared out without a trace, revealing two statues that clung close to each other with the bigger one’s arms protectively circled around the smaller one’s shoulders.

Joe tore his gaze away from the statues, forcing the feeling of unease out of his mind. “It’s a good lesson for them. I hope they will know better in the future.”

“Definitely, I’m sure they will,” affirmed the Goddess with an alluring smile. “They are not the first kids punished in this way. Believe me, it works wonders on those rebellious young minds. The same goes to your nieces on Earth. Don’t you see that I just showed you an example of how to discipline kids? Your younger niece is of similar age to Liam, and the older one to Jack. How coincident it is!”

“Indeed. But I don’t have any magical power,” grumbled Joe. “If they are as untamed as these two, how can I deal with that?”

“Dear, even if you have power, you can’t exert it once you descend down to Earth. No one can, including me and the Dragon King. However, we can still ‘transport’ some magic from here to Earth—at a certain price.” From her sleeve, Ivory took out a sleek baton of jade no longer than a kid’s hand, one end in the shape of an arrow. “Look, this is a special tool that I’ve spent a year to forge.



Call it a magic wand if you want. During this entire year, I had to avoid using any magical power so as to save it into the wand, which can then be used on Earth—for two times.”

“Why did you take such a big trouble to do that?” Joe was perplexed.

“You know that I am not only the Goddess up here, but also a worshipped goddess of justice on the east part of Earth. Humans on East Earth love me and pray to me every day. The more they believe in me, the more power I can wield; hence I need to strengthen their faith in me by going down to show myself to them from time to time and helping them punish a villain occasionally with a magic wand like this. During the long years, only a few extra wands have been saved for special purposes.” Ivory reached Joe’s hand and put that wand into his palm. “This, my dear Joe, is one of them. Take it. It will make things easier for you on Earth. It can turn a life into a statue for two weeks there.”

“Really? Wow—but no, no!” Joe hesitated. “I can’t ... I can’t possibly accept such a precious gift.”

“Joe,” Ivory cooed with a tinge of amusement, “do you not trust me? Or do you not know how much I care about you?” She raised a slim hand to stroke his hair lovingly. “I care a great deal about you, Joe. I want you to go down to Earth with this wand and help your sister out. You can use it to protect yourself and the girls if anything bad happens, or”—she glided to the statues of Liam and Jack, tracing the outlines with the tip of a long finger—“if your nieces really need to be disciplined, like these two naughty boys, the wand will be your most effective tool. To use it, you just need to point the arrow at the one you want to give a lesson to and say the word ‘statue’ out loud.” She smiled softly at Joe, her black eyes radiant and warm, her flowing hair reminiscent of a velvety dark sky on a clear night. “Remember, it can only be used twice. And don’t give it to anyone else, because other than me, only someone like you with dragon’s blood is able to call out its power.”

\*\*\*

It was past noon When Joe and Doodle left the silver palace.

Dragon Eye had risen to its zenith in the pale sky, turning around at a steady pace to scatter its light evenly on Magic Moon. Joe sat in the coach and fiddled with the wand absent-mindedly, eyes far away out of the window.

Doodle cleared his throat to break the silence. "Master, I think the Moon Goddess is right—we should go to Earth to help Princess Jasmine."

"Of course she's right," agreed Joe, waking from his trance. "She's always right."

"However, I don't think you should apply the power of that wand to the girls. They can be naughty or difficult at times, as all kids can, but it's not right to punish kids in any situation in that way—even just for two weeks."

"But you realize that when we go to Earth, you cannot help me with a damn thing as you will become a real cat."

"Yes, it's true. I am sorry for that, Master Joe. But I promise I will still do my best to help you out. I'll still have the same eyes, ears, and mind, and I can talk with you."

"Certainly, what an extraordinary pet you will be! You can even talk!" Joe threw a sarcastic look at his servant.

Doodle appeared to have swallowed his humiliation uninjured. "I feel bad for Liam and Jack. What they did was not right for sure, but they aren't offered any better way to improve their life, either. Most importantly, they are only kids, especially Liam! That was too severe a punishment for a young kid his age." The compassionate cat lowered his voice at the last sentence, as if worried that his implied criticism against the Goddess went over the line.

Joe didn't react in anger; he simply heaved a sigh. "The Goddess can't do anything else. What choice does she have? It's the law here. She's in charge of helping the King maintain the order of the Moon. Any commoner that's committed a crime will be punished in the same way, perhaps with variation of duration. I guess two weeks is the minimum."

"So, it's settled!" Doodle jumped back to the original topic. "We're going to Earth!" He rubbed his paws together with palpable

exultation.

“Why are you so eager to go there? Why is Jasmine so happy living there? It’s only a magicless place!”

“Master Joe, maybe there *is* something there that’s more powerful than magic.” Doodle locked Joe with the deepest look he could manage with his cat’s eyes. “For example, love.”

Joe sniffed with derision. What could a cat know about love? What did so-called love matter anyway? It was just an empty word!

\* \*

After Joe drank the sleep-inducing tea, he lay down in bed and stared out into the murky sky across which night hung like a giant curtain. Soon, he closed his eyes and fell into slumber, ready to meet with his sister.

Since Jasmine’s arrival on Earth, Joe had started to meet her regularly in dream—for him every night and for her once a year—as dreaming was the only communication channel in which the time gap between Magic Moon and Earth could be overcome.

When Joe entered the wood and arrived at the clearing beside a tinkling stream that was encircled by wildflowers and soft grass, Jasmine was already there, sitting on a smooth rock beside the stream with her bare feet dipping in the water.

Feeling strangely at home, Joe took in the surroundings at a glance: the azure sky was occupied by a flock of birds flying in ever changing formations; the faraway mountain was splashed with vibrant colors of yellow, red and orange; and a large fireball was hanging languidly behind treetops, halfway in its slow descent down to the west.

“It’s the sun, remember?” explained Jasmine, following his gaze. “Brighter and warmer than Dragon Eye on Magic Moon.”

Joe nodded as he continued blinking at the sun with his eyes sheltered by a raised hand. “Of course! It’s not the first time we’ve met here. Besides, I’ve spent a month on Earth, remember?”

“Yes, you are right. I forgot that the visit was only a week ago for you.”

“I like it—the sun—and many other things here. They feel like

safety. They are lively and colorful, more colorful than before.”

“You have observant eyes,” praised Jasmine. “It’s autumn now. That’s why we see more bright colors. Last time we met here, it was in summer, and the sun was scorching hot, remember?”

“Right. The sun doesn’t feel so hot this time, only pleasantly warm.”

“Do you also remember the other two seasons on Earth?”

“Uh ... spring and winter?”

“Super! You are indeed a fast learner. It’s wonderful to have four different seasons in a year, each with its unique beauty, isn’t it?”

“Is that what you wanna talk about—seasons and the natural beauty on Earth? Don’t you want to know my answer?” Joe cut to the chase but remained soft-toned.

Jasmine stood up and moved toward Joe, nervousness creeping over her face. “Yes, of course. Tell me.” She took Joe’s hands into her own and fixed him with an expectant gaze.

“I decide to do it!” declared Joe, a jolt of excitement escaping his grudging voice.

“Great! Great! Great!” Jasmine burst with delight and jumped up and down like a little girl. When that was not enough, she threw her arms around her brother’s neck and hung herself there for a good five seconds with her face rubbing against his chin.

Joe pulled himself away before getting choked, feeling a heart-felt smile touching his lips. He quickly regained his coolness and cleared his throat. “Don’t be so exhilarated yet. I have no clue how to babysit two little girls. Don’t blame me if anything goes wrong.”

“Nothing can go wrong—or seriously wrong. If you can change diapers and prepare smashed food for babies, which you did perfectly last time, you can definitely deal with two bigger girls.”

“So, your invitation last time was indeed just a training for me.” Joe was a little straight-faced.

“No, not at all! How can you say that? It was a long-expected vacation for all of us! You can’t imagine how much I’d missed you and wanted to show you my daughters—the joy and pride of my life.” Jasmine cast a glance at Joe before going on, “Of course

whatever you've learned from last experience can still be put to good use on Earth. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

Joe looked at his sister out of the corner of his eye and shrugged.

Jasmine stood on tiptoes to give Joe a peck on the cheek before she pulled out a stack of paper from her pocket and passed it to him. "I really appreciate that you are willing to help, Joe, but I have to admit that it won't be a walk in the park. They are not babies anymore, but kids at any age can be difficult, just in different ways." She motioned Joe to open the paper. "This is a long list of information about Elena and Wendy, the house and the car, the school, the neighborhood ... everything that you need to know to have a happy experience on Earth next year."

Joe turned the pages quietly, his eyebrows furrowed with concentration. The first thing in his view was a picture of Wendy and Elena, both with long hair and a shiny smile. Wendy missed two front teeth under her upper lip, giving her slightly freckled face a funny look. Elena's forehead was thinly spread with pimples, which was perhaps the reason why she seemed not confident enough.

Joe continued flipping through the texts. After a few minutes, he lifted his eyes in disbelief. "Really? You need to share with me all this? Don't you think it's too much?"

"Which part specifically?" Jasmine looked a hundred percent innocent.

"The part that covers your neighbor's dog's preferred food, the names of your dentist's children, the favorite color of Wendy's teacher, the business schedules of all the stores, a whole page of passwords, and"—Joe raised a certain piece of paper and pointed his chin at the words that brought his voice down to a mumble—"Elena's menstruation cycle!"

"You will find all the information useful, sooner or later. Oh, also"—Jasmine adopted a more solemn tone—"don't forget to keep your identity card and driver's license with you all the time, and don't lose them. It took us days to have the fake cards ready for you."

"Oh my god! What have I brought onto myself?"

“Nothing but good, I promise!” claimed Jasmine with only the slightest hint of flippancy.

Joe expressed his suspicion and grouchiness with a strange noise from his nose, although he’d already started to remember every word in the paper by heart and decided to follow her instructions with sufficient, if not absolute diligence.

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On the day of King Aldrich’s birthday, as soon as Dragon Eye climbed above the skyline, Joe and Doodle headed off for the border between Magic Moon and West Earth.

The previous time they’d used the portal at the border to visit Jasmine’s family, Joe had been astounded by its proximity to where his humble villa stood as well as the ordinariness of the place. It took them only half an hour’s walk to arrive at the spot where nothing interesting grew or was built, only a few shapeless greyish rocks were scattered here and there. It was a place of ordinary desolation; no wonder very few on the Moon had knowledge of it.

As invisible as the portal was, it didn’t take Joe more than a minute’s scan to find it in between two rocks with somewhat sharper edges. Joe stood one step behind Doodle with a small bag over his shoulder. Doodle turned around to nod solemnly at Joe before he strode through the narrow space between the rocks with noticeable excitement in his face. Bright white sparkles glittered in the air, forming a shiny door frame above his head. His figure disappeared into the frame as soon as he crossed over. Seconds later, the sparkles vanished as fast as they’d appeared and rendered everything in the place back to normal, except that a piece of black clothes—Doodle’s livery—was now spreading on the formerly bare ground.

Joe fastened his mind on the hidden world beyond, hesitated a little, then shook his head and moved forward. When the door frame glittered again, he closed his eyes and prayed hard that he wasn’t going to feel sorry for what he was setting out to do now.

## Chapter Four

When Joe recovered from the dizziness that'd lasted no more than a few minutes, he couldn't believe what he saw. In fact, it was what he felt—the chilliness in the air—that overwhelmed him before anything else. Then it was the beauty of the world in front of his eyes that made him forget about the coldness: little whitish, feathery snowflakes were flying all over the sky, covering the ground with a marvelous silver carpet; they whirled and twirled playfully in the air, glistening on his hands, and kissing him in the face.

Joe wrapped his arms around himself and raised his head to look for the sun in his unconscious effort of seeking warmth. Unfortunately, it seemed like nighttime with no sign of that fireball in the sky. Instead, he spotted a crescent moon dimly glowing from behind the cloud up above the pine trees that were all around them. He understood that it was not the same as Magic Moon. That moon was Earth's sole natural satellite that illuminated at night. In fact, it didn't have its own light; it shined simply because its surface reflected sunlight. At least that was how Jasmine had explained to him.

"It's cold," a black cat meowed at Joe and jumped into his arms. It was Doodle who now took the form of a real cat whose language could only be interpreted by Joe on this planet.

Joe began to regret that he didn't wear anything warmer. He only had a thin shirt and a pair of light pants on—the clothes Jasmine had bought for him the first time he'd come here at the beginning of summer. He hadn't known that this time he would arrive in winter, and he'd never imagined that winter could be so cold, at least in this part of Earth—a place that Jasmine called "Montreal in Canada."

Drawing a deep breath, Joe folded the cat more closely to his chest and started to walk toward Jasmine's house as fast as his

trembling legs could manage. He remembered its location—a bit more than an hour's walk from where they were.

Ten minutes later, they left all the trees behind and reached a big street surrounded by countless buildings, most with two or three levels and a handful more than a dozen, shooting high up into the sky. From time to time, there were cars running past them, a few with luminous signs of "TAXI" on top. He knew those were vehicles you could pay to take you to your destination, but he didn't have the money.

He squared his shoulders and continued his stiff march on the right side of the street. "This is on Jasmine—she could have warned me of the coldness in this goddam place!" He half closed his eyes when a gust of icy wind lashed him in the face.

"Sir"—a silvery voice came to his attention—"I have a blanket here for you. It's clean and you can use it as a cloak." A little girl barely half of Joe's height was standing in front of him, with a fluffy red blanket carried in both hands. She was about 7 or 8 years old, wearing a wool hat and a heavy winter coat.

"Um, th-thank you ..." Joe hesitated, partly surprised by the casual kindness, partly in doubt of the girl's intention. "I'm fine. I don't need it."

"But you are shaking, so is your cat." The girl made a step closer to Joe and held the blanket up toward him. "Please, at least warm the cat with it." She looked at Doodle with enchanted eyes and asked, "Can I touch it? It's so adorable."

"O—Ok, go ahead." Joe took the blanket from the girl's hands as he lowered his arms for her to reach Doodle.

With a radiant smile, she caressed the cat and mumbled, "Oh, so cute, so soft ... What's its name?"

"Doodle," answered Joe.

"Sweetheart," a young woman suddenly called out at the girl from beside a car a dozen meters ahead, "are we done?" From such a distance in the dark, Joe could only discern her tall and slender figure. It must be the girl's mother.

"Coming." The little girl hurried back to the woman after a quick



kiss on Doodle's head, then ducked into the car and took off.

Joe still couldn't believe what had just happened. He examined the blanket meticulously and sniffed at it with caution—it looked clean and smelled good—before he gave it several vigorous shakes in the air and spread it across his shoulders with Doodle covered underneath.

"What a kind little girl!" Doodle sounded rather funny with its muffled voice. "And adorable, with gentle hands—"

"Can you stop talking? I'm concentrating here on finding the way."

"I thought you knew the way—don't you now?"

"No, not now." Joe grunted. "I knew it under bright daylight. Now it's as dark as your hair and I can't see well."

At a crossroad, Joe stopped and looked around to decide on the right direction but remained clueless after a long while. It was now deep at night. He knew that he couldn't possibly find the right way without asking someone. He chose the street that was the most lit by various coffee shops, bars, and restaurants, and walked toward a small but nicely decorated café that was largely empty.

Joe opened the door and entered. A young man with blond hair standing behind the counter greeted him, "Welcome to Chez Liliane!"

"Uh ... I don't want to drink or eat," said Joe a little embarrassedly as he made a few steps toward the barista. "I just need to find my way home. Do you happen to know how to reach Street Saint-André in Central Plateau?"

"Sure," answered the man with a good-natured smile. "Are you with your car or would you like to go there by bus?"

"Neither. I'm on foot."

"Oh, that will take some time." The man took in Joe's thin shirt under the half open blanket, looking somewhat concerned. "It's only about 15 minutes' drive, but you probably need to walk an hour to reach there."

"I know how long it takes to walk there, but don't know *how* to from here." Joe was a little impatient—he didn't like being pitied at.

“No trouble. I can draw you a simple map to show you the way.” The man took out a piece of paper and a pencil from behind the counter, starting to produce the map. “But sir, if—just if—anything bad has happened to you, don’t hesitate to tell, since we have a cop right here right now.”

“Oh, come on, Max!” another man grumbled from the corner, almost making Joe jump—he hadn’t seen him at all until now. The cop was a middle-aged man in a disheveled uniform. He had a slightly hooked nose and retrieving hairline. But what stuck out a mile in him were his sparse eyebrows above those protruding ridges, which gave him a strangely angry look.

The cop stood up from his seat, put his hat back on, and walked a few steps toward Joe. “What’s your name, sir? Can I help you?”

“N-no, I don’t need any help, except a point of direction toward home.” Joe didn’t want to involve a policeman, not to mention one that looked so unfriendly.

“Don’t worry, sir. I’m here to help, not to investigate ... unless you’ve done something wrong.” The cop locked Joe with hard eyes for a while. When Joe’s expression turned rigid, he broke into a laugh and patted Joe on his shoulder. “Relax, pal! I’m only messing with you.”

He turned to the barista and pointed at his coffee cup on the table behind him. “Give me a refill, will you, Max?”

“Sure thing, sir.” Max swiftly walked out of the counter with a kettle of coffee in hand. “But can’t you give this gentleman a lift to Saint-André? If I’m not mistaken, you live in the same block, don’t you?”

Before the cop responded, Max had already put a full cup of steaming coffee into his hand. He slurped his drink with satisfaction, then smiled at both Max and Joe. “It doesn’t matter where I live. I’m a cop. I go wherever I’m needed. Now are you ready to go home, pal?” The last sentence was obviously toward Joe alone.

“Really? You are going to drive me home?” Joe didn’t have the habit of assuming things, although he already felt he could breathe easy again.

“Yeah, absolutely!” The cop took out his car key from his pocket and moved toward the door as he signaled Joe to follow him. “Call me Andrew. And I can continue calling you pal, if you don’t want to tell me your name, PAL!”

Joe hurriedly bade Max goodbye and followed Andrew out of the café. “My name is Joe, sir—Andrew.”

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As the car drove smoothly into the Plateau area, Joe began to be able to recognize most of the establishments—nestled among residential buildings were some stylish boutiques, fancy restaurants, bed and breakfasts, convenient stores, a dental clinic, and an ice-cream parlor. Joe also remembered that a few blocks away from the residential zone stood a tangle of bustling commercial streets, high-rise office buildings, and one of the most prominent universities in the country. It was no wonder that the majority of the residents in Plateau were young professionals and university students, who created a rather lively culture in the place.

“What’s the number of your building?” Andrew’s question broke the brief silence, forcing Joe out of his reminiscence.

“Er ... actually, I’d like to walk back by myself from here. It’s only a few minutes’ walk now.” The truth was that Joe couldn’t wait to get rid of the cop who’d kept asking him personal questions all along the way—where he was from, whose house he was going to stay in, for how long, etc. He’d managed to answer all the questions in a breeze by reciting his rather boring background story concocted by Jasmine: he was a clerk working in the church of a small town called Tofina somewhere in the west part of America; it was so remote and insignificant that it couldn’t be located in the map; he was the only family member left of his sister, a local resident who was in need of his help to look after her kids as she and her husband had been assigned to a research project in America.

“As you wish.” Andrew didn’t insist. “It’s almost”—he cast a look at his watch—“nine thirty. Time for me to head back and hit the sack as well!”

“Thank you very much! Good night.” No sooner had the car

pulled over than Joe jumped out of the door with Doodle in his arms, welcoming a gust of biting but refreshing wind that blasted snowflakes in every direction.

“See you around.” Andrew offered Joe a casual two-finger salute before fishing a cigarette out of his pocket, his eyes fixed at Joe with a hint of half a smile.

Joe quickly wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and gathered the cat against his chest. After a final wave at the other man, he started to jog toward Jasmine’s house. Behind him, he could tell the cop’s vehicle was still unmoved. The man inside seemed to be having a smoke break, but Joe could sense that the pair of grey eyes under those sparse eyebrows were still following him—until he made a turn at the corner of the path.

A few minutes later, Joe arrived at the front door of Jasmine’s house. Before he knocked, the door was already opened. A small girl with curly brown hair stood inside, grinning a wide, toothy grin.

“Uncle—” The girl swallowed back the rest of the words with dropped jaws when she had a clear view of Joe, a tall man carrying a red blanket and a black cat.

Joe was also taken by surprise when he saw her under bright light—she was the girl who’d offered him the blanket about an hour ago. “You are Wendy, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes, I’m Wendy.” She recovered from the shock and moved aside to let Joe in. “So, you are our Uncle Joe.”

“Yeah, just call me Joe.” He entered the warm room with an exhale of relief from coldness. “You knew that I was coming?”

“Of course, Mom told us to wait for you tonight. But we didn’t know you would arrive so late.” Wendy looked at Joe up and down with curiosity before quickly switching her attention to the black cat. “Oh, Doodle, it’s you. Come to me.” She grabbed Doodle from Joe, gave it a smack on the nose and stroked its sleek hair with twinkling eyes.

In the meanwhile, Joe noticed that another pair of brown eyes were examining him from head to toe without much enthusiasm—

it was a straight-haired teenage girl sitting in a long sofa in front of a large TV.

“You—you must be Elena?” Joe moved to the sofa to sit beside the bigger girl.

“Uh huh.” Elena instantly stood up and left the sofa, as if a snake just climbed in.

“Wendy,” she called out at her little sister in a cold voice, “let’s go to sleep.”

Wendy threw a chastising glance at Elena and apologized to Joe, “Sorry, sometimes my sister is”—she raised one hand to cup around her mouth and lowered her voice—“annoying.” That didn’t escape the ears of her sister and brought on a hard stare from her. “But she’s right. We have to sleep now. Tomorrow is Friday, almost weekend, but we still have to get up early to go to school.”

“Uh huh,” Joe mumbled as he spread his limbs in the sofa and closed his eyes. “Then go to bed, girls. Me, too ...” He couldn’t understand why he felt so exhausted—crossing from Magic Moon to Earth didn’t seem to take much effort. Did he already start to age? He hoped not.

Doodle jumped onto Joe’s belly and meowed, “Master Joe, you should at least help Wendy brush her teeth and send her to bed before you rest. I think that’s what’s expected from you.”

“Go away!” Joe swept the cat off the sofa, turned to his side, and slipped into sleep.

## Chapter Five

It was already past noon when Joe woke up the next day. He sat up from the sofa, feeling the warmth of sunshine that streamed into the room through the large windows. He looked around to find no one else in the house except the cat who greeted him, “Good morning, Master Joe. Did you sleep well? You should’ve slept in your room. It’s a nice room with a soft bed.”

“I’m fine. I was too tired last night. And now I’m a little thirsty and hungry.” Joe stood up to search around for food.

“I’m sorry, Joe. I cannot help to prepare breakfast, or lunch, or anything ...”

“Not just for now—for a whole year,” grouched Joe. “On top of that, I have to prepare everything for *you* and the two girls—for a whole year!”

Joe found the coffee machine and brewed a cup of cappuccino for himself. It’s something he’d learned to do during his first visit. He opened the door of the refrigerator and saw several big boxes of prepared vegetables, meat, and pasta; every single one of them was labelled with Elena’s name on a small post-it. There were also lots of yogurt, cheese, milk, eggs, and some fresh fruits; the same post-it appeared on many of those items as well.

“Little rat! As if I care about your sticky notes!” Joe took out a pot of vanilla flavored yogurt—Elena’s favorite based on Jasmine’s information—and opened the cabinet to get a box of cereal that was also marked by the girl’s name. He mixed them together in a big bowl, brought his coffee to the dinner table and began to enjoy his late breakfast—or lunch. Then he remembered that someone else didn’t have anything to eat yet, so he prepared another bowl of cereal and carried Doodle up on the seat beside his own.

“Thank you, Master Joe.” The grateful cat began to munch its food with relish.

Joe smiled with satisfaction. “I have to say that the food is good,

and the cappuccino is delicious.”

After the meal, Joe went to his room—the cozy guest room of the house equipped with its own bathroom—and gladly saw that Jasmine had prepared enough clothes for him in the closet, both for winter and the other seasons, including T-shirts, sweaters, pants, jackets, boots, sneakers, hats, scarves, gloves, even some underwear and socks. He unpacked his small bag, took out the magic wand and placed it carefully into the drawer where Jasmine kept for him two credit cards, lots of cash, his fake identity card and driver’s license, the keys for the house and the car, as well as a cellphone. After a quick shower, he put on his new clothes, took some money with him, and left the house with Doodle for a promenade.

Following a quarter of an hour’s leisurely stroll, they arrived at the nearest park, a large one with a French name—Parc La Fontaine. Despite the low temperature, the park was more than half filled with people. There were young parents walking with their babies in strollers, a group of toddlers frolicking in the playground led by two daycare educators, and a few elders sitting on a bench chatting with each other. Everyone looked cheerful and every face relaxed or smiled.

“These people all look happy, as if they’re royals on the Moon,” uttered Joe with a bit jealousy.

“Oh, I think they are happier than that, and they make *me* feel happy, too,” declared Doodle as it tilted its head looking up at Joe. “Can I come to your arms? I feel really cold.”

Joe rolled his eyes at the cat before bending down to collect it into his arms. “Probably we should buy you a coat.”

“Do you mind lending me your scarf as a blanket?” pleaded Doodle.

“It doesn’t take long for you to settle into your new role as a pet, does it? Much more comfortable than a servant, isn’t it?” Joe satirized the cat as he wrapped his scarf around its body.

His seemingly solo conversation aroused attention from an old lady passing by. She smiled affably at Joe and said, “Young man, your cat is as handsome as you are.” With that, she ambled away

to meet with her friends waiting for her on the bench.

Joe stared at the lady's back and turned up the corners of his mouth into a sheepish grin. Then he blamed himself for being ridiculous to be lifted up by such a casual compliment from a total stranger.

Half an hour later, Joe started to feel the sting of winter chills. He sought shelter from a nearby café, had a cup of latté, and shared a freshly baked croissant with Doodle.

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Feeling invigorated, Joe half glided through the slippery street back to the house where he found his nieces already back from school. The girls went to the same school, one in the primary part, the other secondary. Sat in the sofa beside them was a young woman with curly long hair hanging loose below her shoulders.

When she saw Joe, she stood up and introduced herself, "Hi, you must be Wendy and Elena's uncle. I'm Ariana Crevier, Wendy's French teacher. I picked up your nieces to school this morning and sent them back home just now, as I heard that you had trouble getting up this morning after your long trip."

The woman was tall and slender, her expression genuine and warm. She was probably a few years older than Joe, but he was sure that no one else here thought so except Doodle, since he always looked more mature than his real age. His fake identity card showed he was 26—Jasmine thought it was a more appropriate age for an uncle of a 14-year-old—although he'd only turned 18 not long ago.

Joe made a step forward and extended his hand to her. "Nice to meet you, Ariana. My name is Joe ..." He didn't want to tell her his bogus family name Jasmine had come up with—it sounded absurd and bore no meaning—so he changed topic clumsily. "How cold it is today! Do you feel cold?"

Ariana shook his hand and laughed. "Yes, I feel cold, but I love it all the same—I mean, the wintry charm, the snow, etc." She cocked her head to one side and flashed an impish smile. "As long as we don't run around in a short-sleeved shirt in the middle of the winter, most of us are fine here."



Joe looked at her quizzically for a brief second, then realized that it was not the first time they met. “Ah, you ... you were with Wendy last night when she offered me the blanket, right?”

Ariana’s smile broadened. “The blanket is mine actually. But you can keep it if you want. I have another one in the car—we always keep something warm in the car during wintertime, you know.”

“Thank you. But I should wash it and give it back to you.” Joe was in earnest; his eyes never left her face.

“As you wish, but no hurry.” She looked at the clock on the wall and picked up her purse from the sofa. “Oh, it’s kind of late. I have to go home now. So, Joe, you will send the girls to school and pick them up back home next Monday, right? I understand that you will be their guardian from now on until their parents’ return.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Joe nodded and beamed with his mouth half open. “Thank you for your help, Ariana.”

“Madam Crevier, why don’t you stay here for supper?” proposed Wendy. “We have enough food in the fridge.”

“Thank you, honey.” Ariana roughed Wendy’s brown hair. “But I have something to do at home. And I’m sure that you two have a lot to catch up with your uncle tonight. So maybe next time.” She walked toward the door and waved a hand at everyone. “Bye, have a wonderful weekend!”

“Wait, Ariana!” Joe suddenly remembered something. “Where and when can we meet next time so that I can return your blanket?”

Ariana blushed slightly and replied with a low chuckle, “The girls have my number.”

She flew a kiss at Wendy and Elena before going out of the door.

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Supper time arrived after the sky grew dark and the streetlamps outside began to glow. Too lazy to prepare anything fresh, Joe heated food from the fridge for everyone.

At the table, Wendy sat beside the cat and never took her eyes away from it. “Oh, Doodle, you are so cute. Are you a boy or a girl?”

“A boy,” said Joe as Doodle muttered to itself “A man, actually,” although all the girls heard from it could only be a guttural purr.

“You are also a special cat who can go to toilet by yourself without the need of litter sand,” praised Elena who must have also been smitten by Doodle, despite her obvious dislike of its owner for some reason.

“All right, girls,” uttered Joe flatly. “Let’s eat. And when we eat, we don’t get ourselves distracted by the cat.”

Elena rolled her eyes and said no more, but Wendy enthused on, “Uncle Joe, can you cook?”

“Yes, I think I can.”

“Can you cook mashed potato with meatballs and green peas?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Can you cook fried rice with chicken legs and broccoli?”

“I think so.” Joe’s voice was tinged with annoyance.

“Can you cook lasagna?”

“No idea what that is.”

“Can you cook shepherd’s pie?”

“No! Why don’t you focus on the food that’s already in your plate?” Joe’s patience ran out and he let it show without disguise.

Wendy dropped her eyes and went into silence. Then the corners of her mouth turned down and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Look what you did!” Elena didn’t hesitate to scold her uncle. “Last time you came here, I was my sister’s age and you treated me with the same impatience.”

Joe realized that was the reason why she didn’t like him and had been giving him the cold shoulder all this time. Looking at Wendy’s miserable face, he regretted his severe tone but didn’t know how to make peace without losing dignity, so he only continued attacking his food with his fork.

Doodle sighed—loud enough for Joe to hear—and jumped onto Wendy’s lap, rubbing its head against her belly. The little girl cuddled the cat close and kissed it on the ear, her face brightened again and her mood turned around, although she didn’t talk with Joe anymore.

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Time slipped away faster than Joe had expected. The two girls didn't bother him much at all. Besides driving them back and forth between home and school, what he needed to do was mostly prepare meals for them, which was not a problem as his sister had left him a long list of recipes for the dishes the girls liked. Although Jasmine had asked him to help Wendy with her bedtime routine that involved making sure to brush her teeth properly and reading her a story book every night, he removed the task from his duty list since Wendy never asked for it. Most of the nights, he saw her sneak into her sister's room like a little mouse. He never thought to stop her and couldn't care less what the girls did, albeit his curiosity occasionally got the better of him.

One night, he edged to the half open door of Elena's room, listening to their conversation from outside.

"...a big fellow with thick arms and legs," said Elena who was in the middle of telling a story to Wendy, "he was the strongest and bravest man in that far-away land."

"Was he also handsome?" asked Wendy.

"Yes, Jack was. Most heroes in stories are good-looking, but in real life, it may not be the case. We are not supposed to judge people based on their appearance anyway."

"But I'd still like my hero to be handsome."

"That's superficial, Wendy. Many good people are bad-looking and bad people good-looking." Elena tried to impart to her sister a little wisdom in life, which reminded Joe of the similar lessons he'd received from Jasmine before. "Anyway," Elena continued, "Jack volunteered to battle against the four evil demons that had created chaos in many villages and stolen many children away from their parents. After four days and four nights' ferocious fight, Jack was scratched and bruised all over, but it was nothing compared to the demons—they were all fatally wounded and died a painful death. But"—Elena switched into a more ominous tone—"this is not the end of the story yet, nor the most interesting part of it!"

"What happened after that?" Wendy couldn't wait to learn

more.

“When people were singing and dancing on top of the mountain celebrating the victory, their hero, Jack, died.”

“What? How come?”

“He was tripped by a small rock on the ground and fell down, knocking his head on another small rock—and died!” Following her last word, Elena burst out laughing.

Joe chuckled behind the door. Elena’s story wasn’t meant to praise bravery, but to be funny. However, he didn’t hear Wendy laugh, not at all. Quite the opposite, when the little girl spoke, she sounded vexed. “Why is that laughable? Why are you laughing at a hero’s death? It’s not a good story. It’s stupid!”

Joe couldn’t help but laugh again, louder this time. Wendy’s interpretation of the story was even funnier than the story itself. He hadn’t had a good laugh since ... well, since forever! It felt good to laugh! He almost wanted to enter the door and laugh together with Elena. But before he made any move, the door was already closed with a slam, shutting him out and ending his intention for truce—the girls must have heard him, both affronted by his “snooping.”

He groaned to himself and walked away in silence. Although he was fine as long as they didn’t cause trouble, he wouldn’t be terribly bothered either if they talked with him more—communication between him and the girls had been rather scarce, and icebreaker was nowhere to be found.

# Chapter Six

Two months passed by, and days got warmer—or rather, less harsh. When the temperature rose from the average of minus 15 to above zero, some people had already started to put on spring dresses—to Joe’s amazement. Their smile went wider as the sky turned brighter and the grass grew greener.

Joe eavesdropped from some customers in a café that a very popular parade would take place two weeks on Saturday in Street Saint-Catherine—a few blocks away from where they lived. He decided to take the girls with him to watch it together. It would be fun, judging from the fervour with which people talked about it, and it would harm no one to relieve the tension between them a little bit. Besides, he hadn’t found any opportunity to ask them for Ariana’s number yet.

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The special Saturday finally came. Elena got up rather early in the morning. She was excited to watch the parade that was scheduled to commence at noon. She secretly hoped to see her uncle drop his jaws when he saw the boldness of the display.

“Let’s go watch the LGBT parade next weekend,” he’d said to them. When he’d asked Elena what “LGBT” stood for, she’d only shrugged her shoulders, pretending to have no idea. In truth, she possessed full knowledge of it. It was an event organized once every two years by lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans-genders, who spared no effort to express their pride and felicity in being who they were in every such march.

Elena stood before the sink in the kitchen, washing the coffee kettle while humming a song that was all the rage now on TikTok. She wanted to prepare a latté for herself. Her parents forbade her to have any caffeinated drink, but she’d received Joe’s acquiescence when she’d asked for his permission—it seemed that he was a total moron as a guardian.

When she closed the kettle filled with fresh water, she suddenly saw the reflection of a man's face on the surface of the silver metal lid—for just a split of a second. It disappeared so fast that she couldn't decide whether she'd seen the face before or not, but she was sure that it was not a friendly one, even hostile. She turned around quickly to check the room but saw no one. Was it a joke made by her idiot uncle? She walked toward his room. Through the crevice of the door, she saw him just getting out of his bed, stretching and yawning. Could it be a burglar? A burglar in the morning on weekend? Unlikely. She drew in a deep breath and shook her head, deciding to forget about it. Maybe she'd slept too late last night or watched too many horror dramas recently—again thanks to her uncle's zero discipline.

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The three of them and the cat arrived at a McDonald located on the same street of the parade to have lunch while waiting for the show to start. This was the first time ever they ate out. Joe decided to show more patience to the girls today since it was a sunny weekend and something entertaining was about to happen.

"What do you want, girls?" asked Joe who was checking the menu on the electronic board behind the counter.

"Fries and ice cream," answered Wendy and Elena in chorus.

Not a bit surprised, Joe gave them a nonchalant look, pretending that he didn't notice the mischievous sparkles in their eyes. "Nothing else? No salad? No vegetable burger?"

"Uh-uh." Both of them turned their heads from side to side whilst Elena avoided his eyes and Wendy grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Fries and ice cream it is! Plus a cheeseburger for me and a salad for Doodle." Turning a deaf ear to the grudging noise produced by the cat from Wendy's arms, Joe moved to the counter to place the order.

As Joe started to bite down on his delicious burger—something that regrettably lacked on the Moon—an orange-haired young woman in a black dress entered the fast-food restaurant. Despite her

attractiveness, something about her expression was off, although Joe couldn't put his finger on it. She looked at the menu with both curiosity and confusion in her eyes, then pointed at Pepsi coke and a chicken wrap on the electronic board. When she finally sat down and had the first mouthful of her wrap, she made a loud and satisfied noise, but after she got a sip from the cup of coke, she spat it out instantly, inviting puzzled stares from several customers.

A few claps and cheers sounded from people who were watching out of the window. Outside from the far end of Street Saint-Catherine, a long line of flamboyant display of strangely dressed people accompanied by bright-colored bandwagons were moving closer at an easy pace, with frequent pauses on the way to allow interactions with the audience.

Elena and Wendy stood up and rushed outside, followed by Joe and Doodle.

When the music from the floats became deafening, Joe was able to see clearly the bizarre costumes flaunted by the participants. A young man with a green wig was in a skin-tight black suit that exposed every curve of his muscular body. A woman with heavy makeup wore a nurse's uniform—a very short and close-fitting type—that squeezed out her breasts and displayed half of her tiny panties. Another woman was covered from head to toe in a large white cape; while her face was under the shadow of the hood with only her red lips visible, her ample bosom was entirely exhibited from two big holes cut out from the fabric at chest. Another one—whose gender couldn't be identified by Joe—hardly had anything on that could be called clothes, except some leather straps barely covering the genital part that looked like a man's and the breasts that looked like a woman's.

Joe was more than flabbergasted by the audacity of the display. This was unthinkable if it was on Magic Moon—anyone dressed in such unorthodox manners in public would be banned from any social rank and treated as an outcast or even a criminal. But here, no one cast a disdainful look or even raised an eyebrow at any of the performers; most people were singing, clapping, and dancing with

the music; some of them even jumped onto the wagons to celebrate side by side with those on stage.

“Having a good time?” asked someone out of the crowd close to Joe. It was the cop, Andrew, in his rumpled uniform. Beside him were two other cops trying to empty enough space in the street to allow the wagons to pass.

“Hi, Andrew,” greeted Joe, a little awkward as he saw Andrew staring at his nieces—maybe it was inappropriate to bring two young girls to such an unconventional event, although there were abundant other kids in the gathering.

However, Andrew only made a quick gesture of goodbye to Joe and moved on to help his colleagues. Whereas Wendy was fully engrossed in the march with wide opened eyes, Joe noticed that Elena had lowered her head to avoid eye contact with Andrew as soon as she’d seen him.

“Is there anything wrong, Elena?” asked Joe.

“Nothing.”

“Do you know the cop?”

“Sort of. He lives only a few blocks away from us.”

“Are you scared of him?” Joe bent down to get closer to Elena. He had a bad feeling about this man. The more he could learn about the cop, the easier for him to stay clear of unnecessary trouble in the future—his identity was fake after all.

Elena hesitated a bit, then stood on her tiptoes to talk into Joe’s ear, “Not really. But ... his son passed away a couple months ago on the surgery table.” She paused a second and added, “Mom was the surgeon.”

“Oh, so he’s angry at her?”

“Kind of. Actually, very much. He blames Mom for his son’s death, but I’m pretty sure that Mom didn’t do anything wrong.”

“She’s right,” a woman behind Elena spoke out to Joe, although he was sure he’d never met her before.

Elena turned around and called out gleefully at the sight of the woman, “Aunt Olivia!”



Wendy also cracked a big smile when she was collected into the woman's arms for an intense hug.

"My dearies, nice to see you both," said Olivia. "This young man must be your uncle Joe." She put Wendy down, extended her hand to Joe, and introduced herself, "I'm Olivia—your sister's colleague. Jasmine told me a lot about you. I hope everything is alright between you and your nieces."

"Nice to meet you, Olivia. So far so good." Joe couldn't let go of the disrupted topic that tugged at him, so he pressed on, "Sorry, what did you say just now—about my sister and Andrew?"

"Oh, right. I didn't mean to eavesdrop by the way, but you two were literally shouting—because of the loud music."

Olivia's expression turned more serious. She told Elena to watch her sister and gestured Joe to follow her to a quiet corner of the street where they could talk without having to yell at each other. "Jasmine is a good surgeon, but what the boy got was fatal. I'd never seen a brain tumor of that size before. It was already a miracle to be able to operate on him. Any other doctor would have recommended to give up treatment in this case. But Jasmine never gives up on any patient, and without surgery the boy couldn't have lasted more than a few weeks anyway, so she insisted on giving it a try, of course with the full consent from the father and complete disclosure of the huge risk. She did everything she could during the 8-hour operation—I was there assisting her the whole time—but after it happened, Andrew still totally lost control. He almost hurt Jasmine on the spot in the hospital." Olivia shook her head with mixed emotions, as if the drama still rattled her. "Although he apologized to her later, it was plainly a forced act. He is still under the shadow for sure—he couldn't even say 'Hi' to her if he met her in the street."

She gave Joe a level look and continued with a thin smile, "Since you are new in town, I figure it's necessary to fill you in about what just happened that's relevant to your family—you know, to avoid any misstep."

They forced their way back into the crowd beside the girls.

While Joe was pondering what Olivia had just told him, he got an unexpected smack on the lips from a man wearing only a pair of tight shorts. After the sneak attack, the man climbed back onto his wagon and continued his quirky performance, leaving Joe blushed and disoriented.

“He likes you!” concluded Wendy who pursed her lips to mimic a loud kiss, making Elena and Olivia hoot with laughter.

“I guess you kind of know the nature of this march now.” Elena turned to look up at her uncle.

“Kind of.” Joe exhaled, wiping his lips with his palm.

“Oh, that’s my friend over there,” said Olivia, pointing somewhere on the other side of the street. “I gotta go and meet him. Take care, girls.” She blew a kiss to Wendy and Elena, then disappeared in the crowd.

The line of the parade slowly reached the end of Saint-Catherine, turned onto the perpendicular street, and eventually was lost to sight.

At a leisurely pace, they walked home side by side. Although no one talked, it was unmistakable to Joe that the atmosphere of tension between them was no longer as nail-biting as before. It turned out that Doodle was right—doing something fun together did help to improve relationships.

They ambled by the edge of La Fontaine Park. A gnarled willow beside the pond was swaying against the gentle wind; some sparrows up in the tree and a group of wild ducks down on the water were twittering and quacking in concert, as if trying to decipher each other’s language; the whole world in front of their eyes was covered anew with green sprouts and tender buds. What an amazing season—spring! If only it also existed on the Moon!

When they passed by The Sunrise—the small café that Joe sometimes visited—he suggested to the girls, “Wanna have a muffin and a cup of hot chocolate here?”

“Yay!” cheered Wendy as Elena voted with her feet and directly stepped inside.