



CHAPTER 1

An image of perfection. A seemingly young, polished, smiling woman filled the TV screen, her flawless skin and youthful gaze giving her an ethereal glow. She moved through an upscale, modern home, as if untouched by time. The words "ReGen Essence" glistened below her in bold lettering, the background music swelling with inspiration.

"Empowering Life, Redefining Time," a smooth voice intoned as the woman held a small, glass vial between manicured fingers. Her lips curved into a serene smile. "In this new era, time is yours to control."

She glanced directly at the viewer, as if each person watching was the only one she was speaking to. "ReGen Essence—because life should be as limitless as you are."

The screen faded to white, the ReGen Essence logo glowing softly. Then it cut to black. With a soft click, the channel changed.

A news anchor with a serious expression appeared, shuffling papers before delivering the report. "Breaking news today: five women found illegally pregnant were apprehended at the central airport by the Population Control Task Force."

An image of the airport filled the screen, a grainy video clip of the women being escorted by officers in dark uniforms. The anchor's voice droned on, matter-of-fact and cold. "These women were reportedly trying to leave the country to illegally give birth. Sources say they will face mandatory termination of pregnancy and subsequent sterilization as

outlined by the Population Control Law.”

The channel flipped again, this time to a rally where the city’s Mayor stood on a podium, his voice raised to a fervent pitch. The camera panned over the crowd—a mix of eager supporters holding signs and a smaller, isolated group of pro-life activists, their faces steely with defiance.

“So, I ask our dear citizens to stay vigilant!” the mayor boomed. “Report anyone who could be illegally procreating. Let’s save our planet from the cataclysm caused by overpopulation! Let’s say no! No to illegal procreation! No to overpopulation!”

The mayor’s supporters erupted in cheers, fists raised, while the activists shouted back, their chants lost beneath the mayor’s amplified words.

The channel switched once more, landing in another ReGen Essence commercial with another flawlessly attractive woman:

“I’m sixty years old but I look no older than 21, thanks to the ReGen Essence.”

“Goddamn Lifers!”. The waitress sighed heavily and clicked the remote once more, finally landing on the Music Video Network. She set the remote down on the counter with a look of finality. “Finally...enough of that bullshit propaganda.”

The cashier glanced up, smirking. “What? You don’t want to get eighty to a hundred more years? Looks like you could use some.”

The waitress shot him a look over her shoulder, with both eyebrows raised and a slight smirk on her face. “In exchange for never having kids and growing old alone? No, thank you.”

On the other side of the café, Samantha and her friend Sydney sat with half-empty coffee cups in front of them, a faint scent of roasted beans and pastry filling the air. The August sun poured through the windows, casting a warm glow that seemed to contrast with the cold reality outside.

Sydney leaned in, shaking her head as she gestured toward the now-muted TV. Her attention was on the TV but her mind seemed to be somewhere else. “This Population Control Law is so ridiculous. It’s like they’re deciding who deserves to exist and who doesn’t. Those stupid, rich assholes sure loved playing God.” Sydney, the 23-year-old blonde usually likes to gain attention from everyone, though this time she isn’t as loud as before. Something’s up, Samantha thought.

She's only 2 years ahead of Samantha, but most of the time she acts more of a big sister to Sydney who she always bails out of trouble. Samantha's parents moved from Korea to the US before she was born. She had always been fond of Sydney since they were children and considers her like a sister. She brushed her silky black hair with her fingers to the back as she nodded with a thoughtful expression. "I know. It's... scary. I'd like to have kids one day too. But at this rate? They're practically turning it into a crime for us who cannot afford a procreation permit."

Samantha looked at Sydney closer. "Are you alright Syd? You seemed a little off this morning." Sydney glanced around, trying to check if anyone would be listening. She leaned down closer to Samantha. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Hey Sam, I haven't told anyone else, but..." She took a shaky breath. "I'm... I'm pregnant."

Samantha's expression froze for a moment, waiting to see if Sydney was serious. A cautious, nervous smile almost formed; in case this was some sort of dark joke. But the look in Sydney's eyes was anything but a joke.

"What?" Samantha asked softly, her eyes widening. "My God, Sydney."

Sydney's hand reached across the table, clasping Samantha's. "Please... Please don't tell anyone. I just found out last week. I'm leaving the city, go somewhere north... Someone told me about this community out there that supports people like me and you know, the freedom of being a mother. I'm arranging a meeting with them soon. I need to get away from all this. So please, Sam?"

Samantha squeezed Sydney's hand tightly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes, of course. I won't tell anyone. Just... just be careful, okay?"

Sydney nodded, a hint of a relieved smile softening her face. They held hands for a moment, the weight of the silent promise between them feeling heavier than the August air.

Finally, Samantha glanced at her watch and sighed. "Syd, I need to be at the clinic by nine. Call me when you get there and if you need my help, alright?"

They stood up, Sydney giving one last thankful hug as they left the café together, stepping out into the sunlit morning that felt just a little darker now.

Samantha stepped into the pediatric wing's nurse station, where the

familiar hum of machines and faint antiseptic smell mixed with the soft voices of her colleagues. She noticed a small group of nurses gathered by the counter, leaning in close to speak in low voices. Their faces looked tense, brows furrowed, and she caught snatches of their murmured conversation as she approached.

“Really?” Samantha’s voice broke through, curiosity and unease in her tone. “Where did you hear that?”

One of the nurses, a petite woman with sandy hair named Karen, glanced over her shoulder and sighed. “We’ve got sources down in HR. Word is, they’re going to lay off more of us in pediatrics. They can’t justify keeping this many nurses on staff anymore—there just aren’t enough kids to take care of these days.”

Samantha felt a twist in her stomach. She had suspected as much, but hearing it confirmed struck a chord of worry. Marisol, a senior nurse who’d been at the hospital for over a decade, shook her head and chimed in.

“It’s happening everywhere. My sister got laid off from the local kindergarten just last week. The principal told her they only had two new students this year. Two,” she said, holding up her fingers. “They can’t afford to keep all the teachers with numbers like that.”

The nurses exchanged uneasy glances, and Beth, another nurse with a sympathetic look in her eyes, sighed heavily. “Jesus... It’s all because of this Population Control Law. It’s been, what, over twenty years now? Just look around—barely any kids in the city. At this rate, they’ll start closing down entire schools and pediatric departments.”

Samantha swallowed, her mind flickering with the image of an empty schoolyard, eerily silent. She tried to picture a future without the sound of children’s laughter echoing through hallways, and the thought weighed heavily on her. “I’m glad we were born before that law was passed,” she muttered. “Otherwise, who knows if we’d even be here.”

Just then, the head nurse, Linda, poked her head into the room. “Sam, can you give me a hand?” she called, motioning toward one of the exam rooms.

“Sure”. Samantha nodded, giving the other nurses a reassuring smile before following Linda. Inside, a little girl, maybe five years old, sat on the exam table, her feet swinging nervously. She clutched a small stuffed animal in her hands and glanced up at Samantha with wide, uncertain eyes. Her mother stood beside her, giving Samantha an apologetic smile

as if to say, She's a little scared.

"Alright, sweetheart," Samantha said softly, kneeling to the child's level. "I'm Samantha, and I'm here to help. Are you ready for your vaccine? I promise it'll be over before you know it."

The girl nodded hesitantly, squeezing her stuffed animal tighter. Samantha gently held her arm, talking her through it with a calm, soothing voice, and quickly administered the injection. She couldn't help but smile as she looked at the girl, imagining for a brief moment what it might be like to have a child of her own.

"All done! You were so brave," she said, giving the girl a playful thumbs-up. The little girl managed a shy smile, glancing up at her mother, who mouthed a thank-you to Samantha before they left.

As they walked out, Linda placed a hand on Samantha's shoulder, her expression shifting to one of regret. "Samantha... I'm so sorry. I didn't want to tell you like this, but... today will be your last day with us."

Samantha's chest tightened, though a part of her had been expecting this moment. "Our department just isn't getting enough patients anymore. We're cutting back, and HR made the decision," Linda continued, her voice filled with quiet sympathy.

Samantha nodded, swallowing hard as she forced a small smile. "I understand. Thank you for letting me know, Linda."

The rest of the day felt surreal as Samantha went about her usual tasks, the familiar routines now tinged with a sense of finality. When her shift ended, she returned to the nurse station to clear out her locker. The nurses she'd shared so many shifts with gathered around, offering hugs and murmured condolences.

Karen's eyes were misty as she pulled Samantha into an embrace. "I'm so sorry, Sam. I hope you find something else soon. You're one of the best we have."

Samantha forced a reassuring smile. "Thanks, Karen. I'll be alright. It was... it was great working with you all."

She turned to leave, her footsteps feeling heavier as she made her way to the door. Behind her, she heard Marisol's voice, her tone somber. "My God... Do you think we're next?"

Beth's voice replied, tinged with worry, "I think I'd better start updating my resume. With the way things are going..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "That goddamn Population Control Law."

Samantha took a deep breath, letting the door close softly behind her,

stepping out into the summer afternoon. The warmth of the sun on her face felt like a bittersweet reminder of change—a world moving forward without her, as the laughter and energy of children grew scarcer by the day.

Samantha adjusted the boxes in her hands, the weight awkward as she tried to balance them while heading toward the exit. The elevator ride down had been suffocatingly quiet, and now, just as she reached the main lobby of the hospital, a man in scrubs barreled into her shoulder, almost sending her sprawling.

"Hey—" she started, but the aide didn't even glance back, his pace frantic as he disappeared around the corner toward the emergency wing. Samantha sighed, steadying her grip on the boxes. "Rude."

She'd barely taken another step when another figure rushed past—a nurse, her hair disheveled and her expression tight with urgency. Then a security guard jogged by, followed by a second. The sudden activity pulled at Samantha's curiosity. Her instincts as a nurse flickered, though the sting of losing her job still weighed heavily on her.

"What's going on?" she muttered aloud, looking around.

At the reception desk, a nurse stood craning her neck toward the commotion. Samantha approached her, setting her boxes down with a soft thud. "Do you know what's happening?" she asked, gesturing toward the flurry of activity down the hall.

The receptionist leaned forward slightly, lowering her voice as though sharing a juicy piece of gossip. "Some guy was rushed in this afternoon," she said, her tone a mix of intrigue and unease. "His eyes were bloodshot, skin all blotchy and dark, like he had some weird rash or bruises everywhere. His nose was bleeding, and he was—get this—biting at people like some rabid animal."

Samantha frowned, her nursing instincts kicking into overdrive. "What? What kind of symptoms are those? It doesn't sound like anything I've seen before."

The receptionist shrugged, brushing it off. "Probably just another junkie from a bar on 14th Avenue. You know how it is—booze, drugs, maybe some bad meth. They come in all the time acting crazy." Her dismissive tone was punctuated by a quick roll of her eyes.

Samantha wasn't convinced, her mind running through the possibilities. Drugs could explain erratic behavior, sure. But the description—red eyes, skin discoloration, and violent aggression—was

unsettling. It wasn't the kind of presentation she'd easily forget.

Another set of hurried footsteps passed by, drawing her gaze back to the emergency wing. The sense of urgency in the air was palpable, tension humming like static electricity.

"Did they lock the wing down?" Samantha asked, glancing back at the receptionist.

"I heard they're thinking about it," the receptionist replied, biting her lip. "It's not the first time we've had someone come in acting wild, but something about this one feel... I don't know, different. Even security looks nervous."

Samantha nodded absently, her thoughts elsewhere. She glanced at the hospital doors just ahead, the soft whoosh of the automatic glass opening to let in the cool afternoon breeze. Her freedom was just steps away, yet her curiosity nagged at her. She wanted to go back and see what was happening, but the weight of her boxes and the knowledge that she no longer belonged here held her back.

"Good luck out there," the receptionist added, her voice light but with a hint of pity. Samantha barely heard her, her mind replaying the strange symptoms over and over.

"Thanks," she muttered, picking up her boxes again. She hesitated for a moment, her gaze lingering down the hallway toward the emergency room. Then she shook her head and headed out the doors, letting them close firmly behind her.

As Samantha stepped through the glass doors of the hospital, the warm sunlight momentarily eased the unease that had settled in her chest. She adjusted her grip on the boxes, determined to leave the strange tension of the emergency room behind her. But just as she reached the curb, the low hum of engines caught her attention.

Four sleek black SUVs pulled up to the hospital entrance, their tires crunching against the pavement. The vehicles parked in synchronized precision, and almost immediately, the doors swung open. A dozen men in black suits, each wearing a patch emblazoned with the PCTF insignia, filed out. Their movements were swift and methodical, exuding an air of authority that turned heads from bystanders outside the hospital.

Samantha froze, watching as the men marched past her and into the hospital. Their boots echoed against the polished tiles of the lobby. Whatever urgency had drawn them here, it wasn't ordinary.

"What the hell?" she murmured under her breath, her grip tightening

on the boxes.

Her mind raced, piecing together the strange events of the past few minutes. The commotion in the emergency wing, the descriptions of the patient with bizarre symptoms, and now this. The PCTF—the Population Control Task Force—didn't just show up for routine medical cases. Their presence often meant something far more serious.

One of the security guards standing near the entrance shifted nervously as the men in suits strode past, his hand twitching near his radio. Samantha caught his unease and couldn't help but feel a shiver run down her spine. Whatever was happening inside, it wasn't over.

She hesitated for a moment, torn between lingering to figure out what was going on and leaving to get on with her evening. Her phone buzzed in her pocket, snapping her out of her thoughts. Balancing the boxes awkwardly, she managed to pull it out. It was a text from Saul: "Where are you? We're about to start!"

Samantha glanced at the time. "Shit," she muttered. She was already cutting it close.

Her curiosity itched, but practicality won. She needed to leave. Whatever was going on inside the hospital was no longer her problem—not anymore.

With a determined breath, she stepped away from the entrance and toward the street. She waved her hand, hailing the first cab she saw. As the vehicle pulled up and she slid inside, she couldn't resist one last glance back at the hospital.

Through the glass doors, she caught a fleeting glimpse of the PCTF men disappearing down the hall toward the emergency wing. Whatever they were after, she didn't want to know. At least, that's what she told herself.

"Where to, miss?" the cab driver asked, breaking her train of thought.

"M-Vierzig Music bar, 12th Avenue please" she replied, snapping her seat belt into place.

The cab pulled away from the curb, merging into traffic. Samantha's grip tightened on the boxes in her lap, her thoughts flickering between Saul's gig and the unnerving events she'd just witnessed. The PCTF's presence lingered in her mind like a shadow, but she pushed it aside. Tonight wasn't the night to dwell on mysteries. Or so she hoped.

The dim lights of the M-Vierzig Music bar pulsed in rhythm with the bass,

casting shadows over a small crowd that had gathered near the stage. Saul was front and center, his fingers flying over the guitar strings, shredding out the riff to one of his band's original songs. His voice, raw and intense, filled the space as he sang about a world consumed by greed and the consequences of humanity's endless pursuit of more.

♪ "We feed on fire, and choke on smoke, ♪

♪ Trading time for a dollar sign, ♪

♪ In the end, it's all just lies we spoke, ♪

♪ Falling down the line." ♪

The chorus kicked in, a powerful riff that echoed through the bar. Some of the audience members were singing along, fists raised in the air, while others banged their heads to the heavy rhythm, lost in the music. The song was a dark anthem, reflecting the cynical world that Samantha and Saul had come to know.

Samantha sat at a table near the back, a half-empty bottle of beer in her hand. She watched Saul with a small smile, trying to shake off the heaviness that had settled on her shoulders since the layoff. The music filled her ears, momentarily drowning out her thoughts, but her mind kept drifting back to the hospital, to the quiet emptiness of the pediatric wing and the lack of laughter in the hallways.

The final chords rang out, and Saul gave a final, lingering strum before stepping back from the mic. The audience erupted into applause and whistles, and his band mates gave him a quick slap on the back before heading offstage, shouting goodbyes over the noise.

Saul weaved through the crowd, making his way back to Samantha's table. The 22-year-old front man gives an astonishingly heavy 'rock star' appeal with his rugged bravado and lean physique. Saul is also an immigrant from Southeast Asia. They moved to the US when he was 10. Saul worked as an apprentice mechanic during the day and plays with his band during nights. He leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead before pulling up a chair. "What did you think?" he asked, grinning as he took a seat. But his smile faded when he noticed the distant look in her eyes. "Everything alright, Sam?"

She exhaled slowly, setting her beer down. "I... I got laid off today. They're cutting back at the hospital because, well, there just aren't enough kids coming in anymore. Pediatrics can't afford to keep us all on staff."

Saul's hand found hers across the table, his thumb brushing over her

knuckles in a reassuring gesture. "I'm sorry, Sam. But hey, we'll manage. I'm still here. I can cover things until you get back on your feet." He gave a small, hopeful nod toward the other end of the bar, where a bald, heavysset man in a too-tight suit sat nursing a drink. "Plus, rumor has it that guy over there is a talent scout. There's talk about a possible contract with a record label."

Samantha forced a smile, following his gaze to the scout. "That's good, Saul. I hope it works out." She paused, then asked, "How many kids did you even see today?"

Saul tilted his head, thinking back. "Two... maybe three? Not like the old days when kids were everywhere. I guess it's just how things are now."

"Because of the Population Control Law," Samantha murmured, almost to herself. She looked down, fingers tracing the edge of her beer bottle. "I'd like to have a child one day. But the government is so strict with procreation permits now. And they're pushing sterilization left and right, offering a discount on that ReGen Essence as some kind of reward."

Saul's mouth twitched as he looked away, a shadow passing over his expression. "Sam, I get it. But... the world's already bursting at the seams. We're using up everything we've got. Maybe it's for the best, you know? At least they're trying to stop things from spiraling out of control."

Samantha looked at him, her eyes darkening slightly. "Don't you want a family, Saul? Don't you want a child of our own one day?"

Saul sighed, scratching the back of his head. "We don't need to have a child to be a family, Sam."

She pulled her hand away, her voice laced with frustration. "That's where you're wrong. It's more than just... us. It's about bringing someone into this world, someone who's part of us both. Someone we can raise, teach... love."

An uncomfortable silence settled between them, the murmur of the crowd fading into the background. Finally, Saul reached out, his expression softening. "I'm sorry, Sam. You're right." He gave a gentle smile, as if trying to erase the tension. "I do want that. I'd love to have a little kid someday—a cute little boy or girl. It doesn't matter, as long as it's ours."

Her face softened, and she took his hand again, a small smile playing at her lips. But a wave of drowsiness washed over her, and she felt an uncomfortable twist in her stomach. "... I think I need to use the

restroom," she murmured, getting up unsteadily.

In the bathroom, Samantha leaned over the sink, her palms pressed against the cold porcelain as she took a shaky breath. Her stomach churned, and she barely had time to check that the stalls were empty before nausea overcame her, forcing her to lean over and retch.

After a moment, she straightened up, wiping her mouth and splashing her face with cold water. Her reflection stared back at her, pale and weary. She took a deep breath, steadying herself before heading back to the table.

Saul glanced up, concern flashing in his eyes as she approached. "Hey, you okay?"

Samantha gave a faint nod, her hand lightly touching her stomach. "I think I just... need to go home."

He reached for another bottle, raising it with a grin. "Come on, just one more. For old times' sake?"

She shook her head, pulling him up by the hand. "I don't feel so good, Saul."

His face softened, and he placed some cash on the table before following her out into the cool night air. As they walked, his arm wrapped protectively around her shoulders, and Samantha let herself lean into him, seeking comfort in his warmth as the quiet streets stretched out before them.

That night, Samantha lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling in the dim light. The night had felt heavy, the news of her layoff hanging over her, and her conversation with Saul replaying in her mind. She hadn't told him everything—about the strange bouts of nausea that had hit her in the mornings, the sudden mood swings, the flashes of exhaustion that left her feeling drained. She'd brushed it off as stress, even though part of her sensed there was more to it.

Carefully, she slipped out of bed, leaving Saul asleep, and padded softly to the bathroom. She opened the cabinet, pulling out the small pregnancy test she'd picked up on impulse earlier that week. Her hands shook as she unwrapped it, her mind racing with a mixture of hope, fear, and disbelief. She'd always wanted children—she knew that. But not like this. Not in a world that had made bringing new life into it a crime.

Taking a deep breath, she followed the instructions, then set the test on the counter, waiting as the seconds ticked by. Her heart thudded, the

sound filling the quiet of the bathroom. She closed her eyes, breathing slowly, mentally preparing herself for either outcome.

When she finally looked down, two lines appeared on the test—bright, unmistakable, confirming what part of her had already known.

Her breath caught in her throat as her mind registered the reality of it. She pressed a hand to her mouth, a soft, shaky gasp escaping her as tears pricked her eyes. She was pregnant. Here, in a world where pregnancy was a privilege granted only to the few, a dream she'd never imagined would come true now felt like both a blessing and a terrible risk.

The tears came then, silently streaming down her cheeks as she held the test in her trembling hands. Emotions swelled within her—a fierce, protective love for the tiny life inside her, an overwhelming fear for what lay ahead, and a sense of defiance that made her stand a little straighter. This was her child, her family, something she'd always wanted but never allowed herself to believe was possible.

For a long moment, she stayed there, staring at the test, absorbing the enormity of what this would mean. She wasn't sure how she'd tell Saul, how they'd hide this, or what they would do, but in that moment, a quiet resolve took root within her.

Gently, she placed the test back on the counter and pressed a hand to her belly, her heart beating in time with the new life growing inside her.

CHAPTER 2

Fifty years ago, in a modest laboratory in Boston, the Velasco brothers worked late into the night. The dim overhead lights cast long shadows over stacks of research papers and the clutter of glass vials, syringes, and beakers on the lab tables. Tony Velasco, and his younger brother Andrew, both had the same determined glint in their eyes as they studied the latest batch of test results. They'd been at this for years now, barely scraping by on a modest salary while every extra dollar went back into their research.

Their mother, Marta, had always been the heart of their small family. She was a woman of resilience, who had held them together through the hardest years after their father's death. But in her mid-40s, Marta had been diagnosed with a rare condition—Mitochondrial DNA Depletion Syndrome—a disorder that accelerated her aging, stripping her of strength day by day. Tony barely remembered a time when she was healthy, and Andrew, who'd been even younger, clung to faint memories of her as a vibrant figure, full of life.

They had brought her from Manila to America six years earlier, hoping to find better treatment options. But conventional medicine had no answers. Watching her waste away became their ultimate drive, pushing them to devote themselves to biochemistry, searching for something, anything, that could stop the degradation of her cells. Tony, the older brother, approached their work with fierce focus, while Andrew, more soft-spoken and reflective, often spent late nights poring over scientific literature, seeking new ideas and techniques.

They weren't alone in their efforts anymore. Through a colleague, they had met some unintended investors, black market capitalists with deep pockets and an eye for emerging biotech innovations. Their investors had become their primary financial backbone, forming Velasco Biotech to support their research. The person behind it was a complex man, old-money aristocracy with a fascination for longevity—rumored to have invested in cryogenics and gene therapy startups on the side. For these investors, Tony and Andrew's research held promise not just for curing disease but for extending life itself and an endless, and overflowing revenue stream. The brothers, however, had simpler ambitions. They just wanted to help their mother.

Years passed. By day, they ran animal trials, testing various combinations of compounds, pushing their theories to the limit. By night, they sat by Marta's bed in their cramped Boston apartment, watching her struggle through each breath, her once-bright eyes dulled, her skin pale and fragile. She held their hands with what little strength she had left, always managing a smile. But with each passing month, her health declined.

"Do you think it's working?" Andrew murmured one evening in the lab, adjusting his glasses as he peered through a microscope. His voice was hesitant, as if afraid to hope.

Tony glanced at him; eyes hard. "We have to make it work, Andrew. For her."

Andrew looked away, his gaze drifting toward the window. "Sometimes I wonder... are we meant to do this? Isn't it... unnatural?" He barely finished the sentence, as if ashamed to voice the doubt.

Tony's expression tightened. "If nature gave up on her, then it's our job to fight back. We're her only chance."

That conviction kept them going through setbacks, failures, and even ethical concerns from colleagues who whispered about the "Velasco project." The Vatican and prominent Catholic communities condemned their research, claiming that interfering with life and death was a violation of the natural order. Religious leaders took to media platforms, branding life extension research as a dangerous affront to humanity. Tony dismissed the uproar with a wave of his hand, unwilling to let ideology hinder their progress, while Andrew took on the weight of it silently.

In time, their persistence paid off. They developed a prototype serum

and, to their astonishment, it worked. The serum slowed cellular degradation in animal subjects, targeting mitochondrial DNA and halting the aging process. They named it ReGen Essence, a tribute to the regeneration it promised.

But the breakthrough came too late. Marta Velasco passed away just as their prototype cleared the final stages of testing. Tony and Andrew sat beside her in silence, her hands cold in theirs, a weight settling heavily on them. The loss was a wound they both carried differently—Tony, with an even more ruthless resolve, and Andrew, with a quiet grief that settled like a shadow over his demeanor.

Shortly after Marta's funeral, the brothers pushed ReGen Essence into human trials. According to them, the results were remarkable. Aging slowed dramatically, cellular functions improved, and the subjects began to experience physical rejuvenation. Their Black-Market investors urged them to file a patent immediately, and in 2029, ReGen Essence was officially born. The product launched on a global scale, quickly gaining the attention of the wealthy elite, who were willing to pay any price to stave off aging.

Within a decade, Velasco Biotech had grown into a corporate giant, rebranded as VBCorp. ReGen Essence became synonymous with luxury and privilege—a serum that allowed the rich to cheat death, to preserve their youth and vitality in a way that seemed miraculous. But with success came consequences. As people began living longer, population numbers surged, straining already-scarce resources. Cities grew overcrowded, food and water shortages became commonplace, and governments worldwide scrambled to keep up with the demand for infrastructure and housing.

Public outcry intensified, and by the 2060s, the United Nations stepped in. They passed the Global Population Control Act, a sweeping law aimed at reducing population growth. Procreation became a privilege, something that required governmental approval. Unauthorized pregnancies were deemed illegal, punishable by mandatory abortion, sterilization, and, for repeat offenders, even death. The act divided societies, pitting those who supported population control for the “greater good” against those who saw it as an assault on basic human rights.

The Velasco brothers publicly supported the law, their position clear: humanity could not survive without drastic measures. VBCorp helped fund the Population Control Task Force (PCTF), a specialized unit created

to enforce the population restrictions, especially in countries like the United States where resistance was mounting. The corporation's funding and influence turned the PCTF into a powerful force, equipped with advanced surveillance tools and trained officers dedicated to keeping the population in check.

But not everyone was content to comply. Resistance groups began to form, like militant factions who believed the Population Control Act was a crime against humanity. Tensions rose, protests turned violent, and in a tragic twist of fate, Andrew Velasco was killed in an attack by one such group. The news shook the world, but it hardened Tony's resolve. The loss of his brother became his justification for supporting the PCTF's harsh methods, and he threw VBCorp's full weight behind the enforcement of the Act.

In a controversial move, local governments began offering free doses of ReGen Essence to individuals who agreed to sterilization, positioning it as a "public health initiative." Billboards with slogans like "Secure Your Future, Secure the World" promoted sterilization as a civic duty, a way to preserve resources for those already alive.

The divide between "lifers"—those who accepted sterilization and used ReGen Essence to extend their lives—and those who resisted, clinging to family values and natural lifespans, grew into a chasm. Society was reshaped, divided between survival and morality, between the desire for longevity and the instinct to preserve future generations.

The year is now 2080. Tony Velasco, a man who should by all rights look his age at 85, stands alone in his sleek, glass-walled office. His reflection stares back at him from the window—smooth skin, dark hair untouched by gray, the same face that he had in his 30s. The ReGen Essence had made him a living symbol of his company's success, a man who had conquered time itself.

Behind him, General Gordon, the head of the PCTF, clears his throat. Tony turns, nodding for Gordon to continue.

"Our latest numbers," Gordon says, sliding a report across Tony's desk. It's filled with statistics—arrests for illegal pregnancies, intercepted escape attempts, and updated details on the PCTF's new methods. "Our new and improved tracking drones are performing as expected."

Tony raises an eyebrow. "Efficient?"

"Very," Gordon replies with a thin smile. "But there's one more matter.

Rumor has it there's a place—the Sanctuary, they're calling it. It's supposedly a haven for procreation violators, a community where they're living together, breeding freely and uncontrollably."

Tony studies Gordon, his expression unreadable. "And you need my funding to investigate?"

"Yes, sir. To find it and root it out," Gordon nods. "With your support, we'll make sure this 'Sanctuary' doesn't grow into a real problem."

Tony considers this, a slight frown forming. "You know I don't simply invest in rumors, General Gordon". Tony straightened out the badges from General Gordon's uniform. "Bring me proof—real, verifiable evidence that this Sanctuary exists—and then we'll talk."

"Sir, these people have been attacking our outposts, stealing our supplies, ambushing our men, and freeing our prisoners." Gordon insisted.

Tony did not show any change in his stand. Gordon looked down, conceded, knowing better than to push. As he leaves, Tony turns back to the window, gazing out over the sprawling city that his company had helped shape. His reflection looks back at him, as youthful as ever, a stark reminder of the life he has engineered. Behind him, the screen on his desk flashes with an alert from Gordon: "Sanctuary location verification underway."

General Gordon went down into the parking lot where a PCTF agent met him there. The agent was on the phone until he saw General Gordon. "Hold on." He told the person on the other line. "General. We just got a lead from one of our sources. There's a pickup happening tomorrow." General Gordon lit a cigar, then responded, "Good. Tony needed a proof. We need to give him that."

"Yes sir!" After General Gordon boarded his expensive government Cadillac, the agent took out his phone and continued talking. "Alright, tell me everything I need to know. Just remember, we have your daughter. Tell us where the pickup will be, and who that person is."

Tony strode back into his expansive office, his polished shoes clicking softly against the marble floor. The room, a pristine blend of glass and steel, exuded both power and opulence. But tonight, it felt stifling. He glanced around, scanning for any signs of his assistant. The desk was empty, the lights dimmed. Satisfied he was alone; Tony crossed to the door and turned the lock with a firm click.

For a moment, he leaned against the door, allowing the silence to settle over him. He pulled out his silk handkerchief and dabbed the sweat forming along his temple. His meeting with General Gordon had gone as planned, but the weight of his responsibilities—and his secrets—pressed heavy on his chest.

Tony straightened and walked purposefully toward the far side of the room. A sleek walk-in closet stood there; its doors polished to a mirror-like sheen. He stepped inside, his reflection staring back at him from the broad mirror at the far end. Approaching it slowly, he studied his face.

His sharp, angular features bore no immediate signs of fatigue, but he wasn't fooled. He leaned closer, narrowing his gaze as he inspected his right eye. There it was—a faint red spot beginning to surface. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but Tony noticed every detail. It was a warning, a harbinger of something far worse if left unchecked.

He let out a slow breath and reached for the corner of the mirrored wall. His fingers found the light switch but hesitated. Instead of pressing it, he pulled the cover aside, revealing a hidden compartment embedded within the wall. A sleek fingerprint scanner gleamed under the dim light.

Tony pulled his tie forward and used the tip to wipe his thumb meticulously, ensuring no smudges or moisture would interfere. With precision, he pressed his thumb against the scanner. A soft beep confirmed his identity, and the locking mechanism released with a faint metallic click. The mirror swung forward, revealing a secret door.

He pushed it open to reveal a stark contrast to the luxurious office outside—a compact, sterile laboratory bathed in a cool, white glow. Shelves of vials, syringes, and medical instruments lined the walls. The air was crisp, almost biting, with the distinct smell of antiseptic.

Tony moved to a cooled shelf near the back of the lab and opened it. A thin mist escaped as he lifted the lid, revealing rows of neatly arranged vials. Each one contained a shimmering, pale-blue solution. He selected one, holding it up to the light. The liquid inside seemed almost alive, shifting with an iridescent glow. He gave the vial a gentle shake, watching the fluid swirl before setting it down.

With practiced efficiency, he assembled an injector. The hiss of the vial locking into place was the only sound in the room. He shrugged off his tailored black suit jacket, hanging it carefully on a nearby hook. Then, with deliberate motions, he rolled up the sleeves of his sky-blue shirt, exposing his forearm. The veins beneath his skin seemed to pulse with

anticipation.

Tony positioned the injector against his arm, pressing the trigger. A faint whir was followed by the sting of the needle piercing his skin. He watched, mesmerized, as the pale-blue solution coursed through the veins of his arm, spreading like liquid light.

A sharp chill rippled through his body, starting from the injection site and radiating outward. His muscles tensed involuntarily, and his vision blurred for a brief moment. He stumbled slightly, catching himself against the reflective glass panel to his side. Through the haze, he saw his reflection—sweat glistening on his forehead, his jaw clenched tightly.

Then, slowly, the effect took hold. The red spot in his right eye began to fade, dissolving into the natural white. His breathing steadied, and his vision cleared. He exhaled deeply, a sound that carried both relief and exhaustion.

Tony turned and sank into the chair in the corner of the lab, letting his head fall back against the cool steel. His hand lingered on his forearm, tracing the faint mark left by the injection.

For a moment, he allowed himself to relax, to feel human again. But as he glanced at the shelves lined with vials, a flicker of unease crossed his face. This was no cure—just a temporary reprieve, a leash holding back the inevitable. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and muttered to himself, “Not yet... not yet.”

The moment passed, and Tony rose, composed once more. He carefully rolled down his sleeves, adjusted his cuffs, and retrieved his jacket. Stepping out of the lab, he ensured the mirrored door closed seamlessly behind him. With a final glance around the room, he straightened his tie and unlocked the office door.

As he walked back to his desk, the confidence and composure returned to his stride. The man who emerged from the lab was once again Tony Velasco, untouchable CEO of Velasco Biotech Corporation. But deep inside, he knew that the clock was ticking.

CHAPTER 3

The rain drizzled against the windshield as Saul drove through the city, wipers sweeping in steady rhythm, the city's gray haze blurring through the glass. It was a quiet Sunday morning, but there was a weight between them that made the silence heavier. Samantha sat beside him, her hands resting in her lap, fingers twisting around each other as she replayed their morning conversation in her mind.

Earlier that day, she'd woken up before dawn, the pregnancy test still on the bedside table. She hadn't been able to get a proper sleep all night, mind racing with the discovery she'd made just the evening before. When Saul finally stirred, he'd found her sitting up, staring out the window.

"Hey... Couldn't sleep?" he'd asked, his voice still rough from sleep. "Was it the layoff? I told you, babe, I've got it. No need to worry about that."

Samantha had managed a thin smile, "No, it's not that." Then she turned, reaching for the bedside table. She grabbed the pregnancy test and held it out to him. Saul took it from her, staring down at the two faint lines in silence. For a couple of minutes Saul didn't say a word, he pulled Sam closer, holding her tightly. After a long moment, he'd whispered, "Sam..." He gave Sam a soft kiss on the forehead, and continued, "Don't worry... We'll figure it out." Samantha had leaned against his shoulder, feeling a rush of relief at his quiet support.

But now, as they drove through the rain to her parents' home, that initial relief was mixed with guilt, anxiety, and an undercurrent of fear. She could feel the weight of his silence as well, and knew he was trying to

process the reality of it all. She glanced over at him, searching his face.

"Are you okay babe?" she asked softly.

For a moment, Saul didn't answer, his gaze fixed on the road ahead. In his mind he is still trying to process and digest the situation they're in. Yes, 'they'. He thought. He is with Samantha in this no matter what. He finally nodded, then forcing a small, but reassuring smile. "Yeah... yeah, I'm fine babe."

She wasn't sure if she believed him, but she let it go. They were heading to her parents' house for her father's birthday, and she'd barely decided whether to tell them or not. The uncertainty gnawed at her, each mile bringing them closer to a conversation she wasn't ready to have.

The rain had let up by the time they arrived, the gray skies clearing just enough to let a sliver of sunlight through. Samantha knocked on the wooden door. "Knock-knock". Moments later Samantha's mother, Maria, opened the door as they approached, a petite woman in her 60s with dark hair, fancy dress, and a bright smile. She pulled Samantha into a hug, squeezing her tightly. "Baby!"

"Hi, Mommy," Samantha murmured, hugging her back. Saul gave Maria a hug too, greeting her warmly.

"Where's Daddy?" Samantha asked, glancing toward the kitchen.

"In there, making your favorite *Jap-Chae*, of course," Maria replied with a laugh, shaking her head as she let them in. "You know how he loves his Korean cooking on special occasions."

Samantha smiled, and with a gift-wrapped box in hand, she made her way to the kitchen. Her father, Han, was busy stirring noodles in a pan, a spatula in one hand, his other free hand opening for a hug when he saw her.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!" She leaned in, giving him a long hug. He held her tightly, patting her back.

"Thank you, love. Is that for me?" he asked, nodding at the box in her hands with a twinkle in his eye.

"Of course! You're 67, looking younger than ever even without any of that *magic serum*," she teased.

Han chuckled, waving a hand. "Just look at your mom. She looks almost as young as you, doesn't she?"

Saul joined them, grinning. "Must be all that gym time paying off, right?" Han indeed looked young for his age, and yes, no magic serum or anything. It is likely just good genes, clean diet, or maybe even the days in

the gym Saul was talking about. Han is now 67 but still packs some serious muscle gains.

Han chuckled, pulling Saul into a hug as well. "Glad you could make it, Saul. How's the band going?"

The two men fell into an easy conversation, chatting about music and recent gigs. Samantha drifted back to the living room with her mother, the familiar warmth of the house filling her with a bittersweet comfort. She knew she couldn't keep it a secret any longer.

"Mom..." Samantha began, her voice low. Maria looked at her expectantly. "... I need to tell you something."

Quietly, Samantha explained everything—the layoff, her worries, and then finally, the pregnancy.

"Oh my god, baby..." Maria's expression shifted from surprise to worry, her brow furrowing as she took it all in. When they returned to the kitchen, Han quickly picked up on the tension in the room.

Later at the dinner table, all four of them ate almost in silence. There were little conversations but the enthusiasm that was there when they arrived was gone. Even the savory scent of the meat, the juicy aroma of the noodles, nor the sweetness of the cake that followed did little to ease the somber mood. They all knew the risks, the uncertainty. Samantha's father finally broke the silence after the meal.

Han took Samantha into her old childhood bedroom, then he pulled an envelope from his pocket and placed it on Samantha's hand. Samantha opened the envelope and saw a bundle of cash.

Samantha shook her head, her voice thick with emotion. "Dad, no... I can't take that." She tried to hand it back to her dad, but Han shook his head.

Han's eyes softened as he met her gaze. "It's my birthday, love. Take this—for you and my grandchild. Please?"

Her throat tightened. She glanced down at the envelope, fingers hesitating over it. "But, Dad... you know what will happen if anyone finds out, right?"

He nodded slowly. "I know. I know... That's why I want you to go out of the city. Your grandfather has a house down by the mountains near the grand lake. Han took out a set of keys and a piece of paper with the address and placed them into Samantha's pockets. No one is living there and we never really use it anymore. There's an old greenhouse there. You can raise hogs, chickens, and grow your own food. You'll be safe

there until the baby comes out. You can raise this child the way we raised you." His hands closed over hers, pressing the envelope into her grasp. "And please, take this. It's from us. And call me if you need more"

Tears blurred her vision as she looked back at him. "Thank you, Daddy. I'll take care of this child. But... will I ever see you again?"

He smiled softly, patting her hand. "Of course. I'm still young. We'll come and visit you there, somehow." Samantha gave her dad another long and tight hug, like the ones she used to give him when she was a little girl.

When they finally left, Samantha's parents stood in the doorway, watching as she and Saul made their way to the car. Maria and Han waved goodbye, their expressions tinged with sadness and hope. Samantha gave another look at them from behind the car until they took a turn.

The PCTF Supply Outpost was eerily quiet, the faint hum of fluorescent lights the only sound as a group of agents unloaded a large, reinforced crate from their truck. The crate rattled violently, as though something inside was desperate to escape. Loud thuds echoed as whatever was within banged against the metal walls, accompanied by guttural growls and feral snarls—sounds not entirely human but not quite animal either.

Two agents exchanged uneasy glances as they maneuvered the crate onto a large dolly. "What the hell is in there?" one of them muttered under his breath.

"Orders are to get it inside," another replied curtly, gripping his rifle tighter. "Let's not find out the hard way."

They wheeled the crate into a pristine, sterile facility where researchers, clad in white lab coats and medical masks, moved about efficiently, monitoring equipment and scribbling notes. A containment cell stood at the center of the room, its reinforced walls and tempered glass reinforced by steel bars—a chilling hybrid of a laboratory enclosure and a maximum-security prison.

The agents carefully aligned the crate with the cell's entry chute. Inside the crate, the banging and growling suddenly stopped, replaced by an unnerving silence. The agents froze, the abrupt quiet setting them on edge.

"Why'd it stop?" one agent whispered, his voice trembling.

Another agent circled the crate cautiously, his ear pressed to the cold

metal. "I think... it's just sitting there," he said, though his tone betrayed his doubt.

The silence grew heavier until one agent, his nerves fraying, slammed his baton against the crate. "Come on, move!" he barked.

The response was immediate and terrifying. The crate rattled violently as the thing inside erupted with rage, clawing and throwing its body against the walls. Then, without warning, the door to the crate sprang open, revealing a man—or what used to be one.

The figure lunged out, crashing into the containment cell with unnatural speed. His bloodshot eyes darted wildly, his skin a sickly grayish-black mottled with crimson veins. His mouth was smeared with dried blood, and his teeth gnashed as he tried to bite through the cell's glass. He emitted guttural, animalistic snarls, his movements erratic yet filled with an unrelenting ferocity.

"Close it! Close it now!" one of the agents shouted, backing away instinctively. The cell's automated systems hissed as the containment door slid shut, sealing the man inside.

A researcher approached, clipboard in hand, her expression neutral, unperturbed by the violent display before her. "Thank you for the delivery," she said to the agents, her tone dismissive. "You're no longer needed here."

The agents lingered for a moment, their eyes flitting between the rabid figure in the cell and the calm researcher. Finally, they exited the facility, their tension palpable as the door clicked shut behind them.

The researcher stepped closer to the cell, her eyes studying the man as though he were an insect pinned under glass. She leaned into a small microphone embedded in the cell wall. "Can you understand me?" she asked, her voice clinical and detached.

The man didn't respond with words. Instead, he flung himself at the glass again, smashing his fists and teeth against it, leaving streaks of blood in his wake.

Another researcher joined her, watching the scene with a furrowed brow. "Is this the one they got from the hospital?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, scanning the information on her clipboard. "The report said he collapsed at their office looking pale and disoriented. A few hours later, he began exhibiting these symptoms."

"Did he bite anyone?" the second researcher asked, his voice tense.

"No," she said, flipping a page. "He tried, but the nurses restrained him

during a seizure. That's when the transformation started."

The second researcher exhaled in relief, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. "Thank God for that. The last thing we need is for this to get out before we're ready."

The two researchers stood in silence for a moment, watching as the man-turned-monster in the cell pounded against the glass, his rage unyielding, his humanity a distant memory.

"Ready the testing protocols," the first researcher said, her voice calm, almost cold. "We need to know exactly what we're dealing with here."

Later that night...

The rain had picked up again by dusk, drizzling over a dark, muddy trail winding through dense woods. It was a desolate path, slick with fresh mud and riddled with rocks and roots, but a lone figure ran through it, coughing, huffing, desperate, and stumbling. The woman's breath came in sharp, panicked gasps, her designer shoes sinking into the ground with each step. One shoe got stuck. She knew those aren't the best type of footwear she'd use on a muddy trail. She decided to take them off and continue running, clutching a medium sized backpack tightly to her chest, her bare feet slipping in the muck. She could hear the faint whir of drone propellers slicing through the air. She didn't dare look back.

Her foot caught on a root, sending her sprawling forward, her backpack tumbling down a slight slope. She scrambled after it, her heart pounding as she spotted it snagged on a tree root a few feet below. "No, no, no, no..." she muttered under her breath, reaching for it with one hand while steadying herself on a nearby branch. But she can hear the drones getting closer, and she knew she didn't have time.

Reluctantly, she pulled back, hurriedly covering the bag with leaves and dirt before stumbling up the trail once more. She could see the faint glow of headlights ahead, a sliver of hope that the highway was just beyond the trees.

She broke through the line of trees, only to find herself blinded by the harsh glare of headlights as two armored vehicles skidded to a halt, blocking her path. PCTF agents piled out, clad in black armor, their guns trained on her. "Hands in the air!"

She stopped, panting, the bright headlights glimmers at her face that's streaking with mud and tears. Her soaked and muddy hair covered over half of her face. "I said hands in air, now!" An agent angrily screamed

while aiming his rifle on her. She shakingly raised both her hands right away and the other agents moved closer still aiming their guns at her. She didn't fight as they cuffed her from behind, her shoulders slumping in defeat. One of the agents—a tall man in a black leather uniform, a chilling grin, and a hard to miss golden tooth glinting in the low light—approached her, his face marred by a scar running from his lip to his jaw. J. Howard was written in his name tag.

"Well... You run fast, blondie," he sneered, his voice laced with satisfaction. Then he went closer to the woman's face, briefly sniffing the perfume through her neck, and then looked back at her again. "Just not fast enough." He gave a creepy smirk as the other agents began moving the woman away. "You know, the police usually read you your rights, but... we are not the police."

The woman shook her head to move away the stray hair covering her face and then looked to meet Agent Howard's gaze with defiant eyes, her chin raised even as tears streamed down her cheeks. She didn't say a word as the agents dragged her toward the waiting vehicles, leaving behind her muddy trail, her hidden backpack, and the faint whisper of freedom that had been so close, yet so far. Agent Howard went and grabbed the woman's wallet from her jacket pocket. He read the name in the woman's ID out loud. "Sydney..."

Agent Howard was looking back at the trail where the woman came from. "Hey, where are the others?" He asked the other agents. "There's no one else here sir." Agent Howard looked around to see anyone waiting. He didn't see anything aside from a pickup truck that's on the other side of the road. As he faced the truck it slowly moved away.

CHAPTER 4

Saul and Samantha moved around their apartment with a quiet urgency, filling boxes and deciding what would come with them and what to leave behind. The once-comfortable space now felt hollow, stripped of familiar comforts.

"I can't believe we're really doing this," Samantha murmured, folding one of Saul's shirts and setting it carefully into a bag.

Saul walked over and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We are, and I'm with you, Sam. All the way. Whatever happens, we face it together, alright?"

She looked up, searching his face for any trace of doubt, but found only resolve. She managed a faint smile and nodded. They continued packing, moving deliberately through the motions. They have also re-listed the apartment, and sold anything non-essential, and finally, Saul quitting his day job. When he withdrew the last of their savings, they both felt the gravity of the choice they'd made.

After hours of packing, they stood in the doorway, glancing back at the now-empty apartment.

"Ready?" Saul asked, squeezing her hand.

"Yeah, let's go." she replied, though her voice wavered slightly.

They first drove to the nearest gas station to fill up the tank. As Saul attended to the pump, Samantha stepped inside to grab food for the road, casting subtle glances around the store. Her pulse quickened when she noticed a PCTF agent patrolling nearby, a large canine at his side. She tensed, shifting to the other side of the aisle, pretending to read a

shampoo label. The agent walked by her but didn't seem to pay her any attention and continued past. The canine briefly looked at her but also continued their way out. "Shit..." Sam whispered. She put the shampoo bottle back and quickly finished her shopping errand and went quietly out of the shop.

When she returned to the car, Saul noticed her unsettled expression. "Something wrong babe?" he asked.

"No...just saw an agent with a dog." She paused a bit. Saul started to look worried but then Sam continued. "But don't worry, he didn't notice me," she replied, still tense. "Let's just keep moving."

As they hit the highway, Samantha monitored the traffic on her phone, planning their route. Her eyes kept darting between the map and the rear-view mirror.

"So, we should be there by around 11 tonight if all goes smoothly without stopping." Sam suggested.

"You sure babe? You're gonna want to take bathroom breaks from time to time, right?" Saul responded jokingly.

Sam gave a darted look but with a smile. "No, I'll be fine. Let's just get there as fast as we can."

"Alright ma'am, you got it". Saul said as he turned into the main highway.

Then, suddenly, they spotted a long buildup of vehicles, and a line of flashing lights ahead—it was a PCTF checkpoint.

"Saul," she whispered urgently, "there's a checkpoint up ahead. Look, they're using a pregnancy detector."

Without hesitation, Saul's hands tightened on the wheel. "Shit... Hold on." He quickly turned the car around, aiming to escape before they were spotted.

"Hey! See that car turning around?" a voice shouted from behind them. Through the side mirror, Samantha saw a patrol car rev its engine, blipped the siren and started pursuing them.

"Damn it," Saul muttered, glancing at her. "You okay?"

"Just drive," she replied, gripping her seat as he accelerated onto the opposite lane. They sped along, weaving between cars, the sirens blaring closer. Saul's gaze flicked between the road and the rear-view mirror until he spotted an off-road path leading into the woods.

"We're going in, hold on" he said, steering sharply off the pavement.

Branches scraped the sides of the car as they barreled through the

forest, finally losing sight of their pursuers. But then, with a sickening jolt, the tires sank into deep mud.

"No, no, no, no... come on man!" Saul grunted, pressing the gas pedal to no avail. The wheels spun helplessly, and the car refused to budge.

Samantha sighed, exasperated. "It's stuck, I think we should just go on foot."

"We'll come back for these, for now let's just take what we can carry and move on." Saul suggested as he closed the trunk of the car.

They gathered their essentials from the car, slinging bags over their shoulders as they set off through the woods.

The air was thick and damp, and the silence was broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves.

"At least it wasn't raining, right?" Saul uttered.

They walked in silence for a while, each of them absorbed in the tension of the moment.

After hours of walking, Samantha's face grew pale, and she staggered slightly, reaching for a tree to steady herself.

"Hey Sam, are you okay?" Saul asked, noticing her pallor.

"Just...a bit dizzy," she admitted, swaying slightly. "I think I need to rest."

As if on cue, they spotted a small roadside motel just a few minutes away. Relieved, they approached the entrance. "We'll stay here for the night," Saul decided, helping her inside.

Once in the room, Sam sank onto the bed, her breathing shallow. Good thing the room was quiet, allowing both of them to get a decent sleep after what they just went through that day.

The next morning, Saul got up early and quickly went into the shower. He came out already dressed up and packed. "Hey, I'll get us some food and water for the road," Saul said softly. "You just keep resting. We'll leave when I get back"

He headed downstairs, leaving her to freshen up and prepare for their journey. Saul hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door, but the low-quality paper slid down and fell. Moments later, a housekeeper was walking down the hall, pushing a trolley filled with cleaning equipment and supplies. She noticed the "Do Not Disturb" sign was on the floor. So she knocked lightly at the door. When nobody answered, she took out her keys to open the door and entered, just as Samantha was in the bathroom, feeling nauseous. Samantha has been having a lot of morning

sickness at this current stage of her pregnancy. The nosy housekeeper observed for quite a while, watching, listening, contemplating. She looked closely at Samantha's neck, looking for a pregnancy permit mark.

"No markers, she's an illegal..." the housekeeper exclaimed softly as she heard Samantha gagging. She quietly observed for a longer, looking suspicious. Then she backed out of the room quietly, eyes wide, and pulled out her phone as she moved down the hall.

Samantha was almost finished packing when someone entered the door. She thought it was Saul and just casually walked through the living room. But she was shocked when she saw that it was a PCTF agent who entered. "Ma'am, please come quietly." He said. Samantha quickly tried to get away. The agent quickly tried to grab Samantha, but she resisted, tearing the sleeve from her shirt. "Please, ma'am, I don't want to hurt you." The agent was persistent and once again grabbed Samantha from behind trying to cuff her. Samantha was fighting hard to get away and pushed the agent backwards. The agent got pissed and smacked Samantha using his back hand. Samantha fell down the floor, blood on her lip. "Jesus, I'm so sorry ma'am." She was a little dizzy from the hit, but managed to get her sights on a nearby flower vase. When the agent was about to grab her again, she quickly took the vase and broke it on the agent's head. The agent flinched a little, but the big guy did not falter. "Don't make me hurt you ma'am." Samantha quickly ran towards the bathroom and locked the door. There wasn't any other exit in the bathroom and the window was too small for her to fit.

The agent was knocking hard on the door hard. "Please open the door ma'am!" Samantha can see the door cracking from her side and when it was about to give in, she heard some loud noise from the outside. Saul was wrestling with the agent, disarming him. Samantha can see through the gap on the broken door that the agent was also fighting hard. He was trying to reach his radio which flew over when Samantha hit her in the head earlier. The agent fell down after Saul punched him in the temple, but his pistol also fell and on the ground. The agent quickly tried to reach for it and Saul was also dashing his way to grab it. Both their hands were holding the pistol, and since Saul was on his feet and balanced, he was able to leverage his weight to turn the pistol around back to the agent's direction. The agent being a big guy was overpowering Saul as he hit him in the head twice using his elbow. Saul fell down the floor. The agent was about to come back for his pistol but it

wasn't there. When he looked to the right, Samantha was already aiming at him. The agent raised his hands briefly trying to calm Samantha down. "Please put the gun down ma'am, you don't wanna do this..." Samantha was five feet away from the agent, her eyes planted firmly on the big guy waiting for him to make a move. "Saul, get up!" Saul was still on the ground holding his head. When Samantha briefly turned her attention to Saul, the agent quickly charged forward at her. A shot was fired. When Samantha opened her eyes, the agent was already on the floor face down. Still shocked on what just happened, Samantha stood there frozen. Saul finally got up and quickly grabbed Sam and their bags. They checked the window to see if they can use the front entrance.

"Saul," she whispered urgently, her voice barely above a breath. "There are PCTF agents outside rushing their way in."

"They must have heard the gunshot. We need to go, now." he replied, calm but intense, ushering her toward the emergency exit.

They moved down the narrow stairwell, emerging behind the motel. The only viable escape route was across a shallow stream. "There's no other way out of here Saul." They heard agents shouting on the other side of the motel.

"Search every room, question everyone, guests, staff, all of them!" an agent ordered, his voice echoing in the quiet morning air.

Sam and Saul decided to cross the stream, hopping over the railings, the cold water seeping into their shoes.

They pushed forward, cutting through the path until they reached a cornfield. Saul led the way, parting the tall stalks for her to follow, until they stumbled upon a small shed nestled within the field. There, they caught their breath, each taking a long drink of water and splitting an energy bar.

Saul opened the map on his phone. "We're about twelve miles out. We can make it by nightfall if we keep a good pace."

She nodded, looking at him with gratitude in her eyes.

He reached over, squeezing her hand gently. "We'll get there, Sam. I promise."

After walking a couple more miles uphill, they have finally reached their destination, her grandfather's cabin.

"Wait here Sam, I'll quickly check the perimeter". Saul inspected the surroundings of the house quickly and when he's convinced that it's clear, they unlocked the door and entered.

As they sat down the bed that night, Sam was still reflecting over the fact that she just shot a PCTF agent. Saul noticed that she was feeling uneasy. "Sam, are you alright?" Samantha remained quiet for a while, but later on talked, "I just shot someone, Saul". Saul gently grabbed Samantha closer. "I know... He could have hurt you and our baby, or worse." Samantha tried her best to get some sleep while holding her belly, but the day's traumatic events denied her any peace that night.

That same evening, back in the city, Sam's parents, Han and Maria were about to turn in for the night when they heard a loud and aggressive knock at the door. Exchanging a worried glance, Han approached the door and opened it slightly, only for PCTF agents to force their way inside.

"What...what's going on?" Han stammered, as the agents began tearing through the house.

"Mr. Han? We are looking for your daughter, Samantha?" Agent Howard asked coolly, his expression unreadable. He handed Han a search warrant. "She's under suspicion of illegal procreation, possibly conspiring with the rebels, and even shot one of our agents."

Maria stood frozen, hands covering her mouth, her gaze darting between her husband and the agents dismantling their home. "Our daughter...no, you can't just—"

"We can, ma'am. And we will," Howard replied firmly. "Search the house." His voice softened slightly. "Look, I know this is difficult, but if you're aware of her whereabouts, it would be better for everyone if you cooperated." Agent Howard pulled out some documents and laid them on the table. "Your daughter suspiciously closed her account, re-listed her apartment, and disappeared... So as her boyfriend 'Saul Keene'. He quit his job, ditched his band, and just... vanished. Why would anyone do that so suddenly?" Han replied, "We don't know. We haven't seen her for months" Agent Howard leaned back on the couch unconvinced.

Hours later, after an intense search and round of questioning, the agents finally withdrew, "She's not here sir", leaving the home in disarray. Before leaving, Agent Howard placed his card on the table, pulling his dark sunglasses down and locking eyes with Han. "If you find anything...if she contacts you, call me immediately. Alright?" He gave a nasty grin, exposing his golden tooth. "You both have a good night".

The door shut behind him, and the house fell into a heavy silence. As

he saw the agents drive off, Han put an arm around Maria, who had begun to cry softly. He held her close, whispering, "Our baby is strong Maria." Han lifted Maria's chin. "Hey, Sam will be fine."

Maria nodded, though her face was etched with fear. Together, they clung to each other, sharing an unspoken resolve to keep their daughter safe, whatever the cost.

CHAPTER 5

A muted hum of voices filled the café as patrons sat scattered across the tables, some sipping coffee while others scrolled through their screens. A TV hung in the corner, broadcasting a news segment, catching the attention of a few patrons as the screen shifted to an eye-catching commercial for ReGen Essence.

The screen flashed with sleek, glossy visuals: a model of youthful beauty stood in a shimmering field, her skin flawless, her eyes gleaming with vitality. The calm, authoritative voice of the announcer filled the room, underscored by a mellow but insistent music track.

“ReGen Essence,” the voice intoned, “your key to vitality, health, and life beyond limits. Today, we are committed to offering the best—at a rate adjusted to meet the rising cost of premium resources.”

The screen displayed a small graph, red arrows pointing upward to indicate the price increase. “As demand grows, so too does the investment needed to provide this extraordinary serum. Please be advised that effective immediately, ReGen Essence prices will be adjusted to reflect the necessary enhancements to maintain its unrivaled quality and efficacy.”

The model on screen smiled, her skin radiating with a synthetic glow. Then, a serious tone interrupted the previously serene mood.

“Attention: Users are reminded that stopping ReGen Essence intake abruptly can lead to serious complications, including fatigue, disorientation, rapid cellular deterioration, and, in some cases, irreversible damage. Consult your healthcare provider to discuss dosage adjustments during this time of price transition.”

In the café, a pair of voices rose above the din. Seated by the window, a middle-aged woman and her friend were leaning close over their table, discussing the announcement.

"Can you believe it? I'm barely affording ReGen Essence as it is," the woman muttered, worry etched on her face. "They know we're hooked. It's like they're forcing us to pay more just to stay alive."

Her friend leaned in, her expression uneasy. "I heard that when someone stopped taking it, they aged thirty years in a month. Imagine that! They're calling it '*Rebound Degeneration.*' And now, with the price hike? It's practically blackmail."

Across the room, a man at a nearby table overheard, casting a concerned glance their way. The murmurs of unease spread, as snippets of conversation filled the air, all with the same apprehensive theme: dependency, expense, and the creeping fear of what might happen if ReGen Essence was suddenly out of reach.

The TV commercial concluded with its usual slogan, "ReGen Essence—Empowering Life, Redefining Time." But to those in the café, it sounded less like a promise and more like a reminder of just how tightly their lives were gripped by the serum's hold.

The northern forest stretched vast and untouched, a fortress of towering pines that shielded the Sanctuary from prying eyes. Deep within, nestled close to the Canadian border, lay a bustling and close-knit community known only to those seeking refuge from the lifers, the population control law, and the oppression of the government who should have stood and protected them. Here, under trees that stretched over a hundred feet high, people found safety and purpose—a second chance to the life denied to them by the outside world. The Sanctuary stood as a testament to resilience and rebellion, its pathways lined with makeshift homes and sturdy prefab houses, each structure quietly defiant.

A tall woman strolled through the residential area, nodding at families who greeted her with waves or quiet smiles. Minerva, the 50-year old ex-army medic, originally from Kenya, passed one of the outer walls, where Psalm 127:3-5 was scrawled in chalk: "*Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.*" These words were more than scripture—they were a quiet reminder of why they risked so much to be here.

Minerva's motivation goes deep into her past. Just as soon as she got from her last assignment, both her children were taken and executed by the PCTF for illegal procreation. Their wives were both arrested and sterilized. Ever since then, Minerva dedicated her life into serving and helping other women and families who are oppressed by the current justice system. Here in the sanctuary, they are safe, they are protected, they are loved.

As she approached the newest cluster of houses, she spotted Diana, the Sanctuary's tech genius and unofficial energy manager, balanced on a ladder, adjusting a solar panel on a rooftop. "Diana, how's that last panel coming along?" Minerva called up to her.

Diana, a striking young charmer, glanced down, grinning. Her silky, curly hair dangling as she waved. "Oh! Almost ready! Should have it up in a minute." She gave a playful salute, her fingers agile as she connected the wiring. Originally from Ethiopia, Diana and her parents 'Rey' and 'Hope' moved to America to pursue a better life. Just nineteen, Diana had experienced more than her share of loss and injustice. She'd been forcibly sterilized at seventeen after the PCTF discovered her pregnancy, a cruel punishment that only fueled her determination to help the Sanctuary thrive. Now, she was one of their greatest assets, managing everything from the solar grid to the encrypted communications that kept them hidden.

"We're expecting new arrivals in the next few days," Minerva continued, her gaze sweeping over the row of prefab houses. "Let's make sure they have a roof over their heads."

"You got it," Diana replied, securing the last of the wiring. She climbed down and dusted off her hands, a sense of pride evident in her grin. "That should do it."

Just then, a white jeep rumbled to a stop beside them, and Bradley, one of the council members, stepped out. A retired farmer in his 70's with a knack for greenhouse farming, Bradley had turned the Sanctuary's once-sparse landscape into a fertile haven of green.

"Morning, Minerva," he greeted, offering her a firm handshake.

"Morning, Bradley. How are things down at the farm?"

He chuckled, wiping his brow with the towel slung over his shoulder. "Got eight new piglets, healthy as can be. And the crops are thriving—this summer's heat has done them good."

"That's excellent news," Minerva replied, a glint of satisfaction in her

eyes. "Tonight, we're picking up a new recruit. Diana did a background check; she's pregnant, clean record, a green activist. And she's vegan."

Bradley raised an eyebrow. "A vegan, huh? I'll have to convert her if she's sticking around. Maybe get her trained on fishing or hog raising. We need to get her protein up." He chuckled, giving Minerva a conspiratorial wink. "Hey, be nice. Everyone's got their own food preference. Well, if she at least knows how to make them vegan sausages, that would be amazing" Bradley shook his head as he laughs. "I can never understand you vegans, and your fake meats."

She shook her head with a smile. "Well, let's see if she's cut out for the place first. We'll keep her in one of the outposts for the first week, then move her here if she passes the screening."

Nearby, Miguel was climbing down from the guard tower, radioing his team. "All clear on the west end. Good work today." He turned to one of his lieutenants, Joel, a big, bearded man with a quiet presence. "I'll be heading out with Minerva this evening for a pickup. You're in charge while I'm gone."

The man nodded, his face lighting up with a grin. "Got it, sir." Miguel hopped on his Pickup Truck and drove over the north gate.

As Miguel's truck got closer, Jim, one of the guards, opened the gate. While waiting, Miguel stopped and double-checked the signal jammers. "Jim, make sure these stay on all night. Last thing we need is anyone picking up our signal."

Jim gave a thumbs-up. "You got it, Miguel."

Miguel was about to move forward but paused again. "Oh, and I heard the supply truck might have some ice cream on board."

Jim smirked. "We'll make sure to keep an eye on it. Might be a rare treat for everyone."

Miguel arrived in the residential area where Minerva was speaking with the kitchen and medical team. As the truck's horn sounded, Minerva climbed into the driver's seat, pulled out a map and rolled it neatly on her lap.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, settling back as they rolled out of the gates. "Let's go. She's supposed to be waiting at our pickup point in highway 67."

Miguel drove in comfortable silence as the Sanctuary faded into the distance, replaced by dense forest. The path was familiar to him; he'd driven it countless times, and each twist and turn was etched into his

memory.

They merged onto highway 67, where the road stretched clear under the darkening sky. "Seems like a good night for a drive," Minerva murmured, glancing out at the empty road.

Miguel remained unusually quiet. Minerva turned her head on Miguel for a while, but eventually he answered, "Yeah, it sure is." A light drizzle began to fall, the first whispers of an incoming storm.

Lightning flickered in the distance, illuminating the clouds, and a moment later, the rain intensified, drumming steadily against the roof of the truck. Miguel adjusted his grip on the wheel, his eyes sharp as they approached the exit marked on the map.

Minerva pulled the map again. "Alright, we're two exits away. She'll be waiting on the other side of the highway," Minerva said, folding up the map. "Get ready—we'll need to make this quick."

As they neared the pickup point, Minerva spotted a flurry of activity on the opposite side of the highway. Flashing lights and the dark silhouettes of armored vehicles broke through the rain. Her heart sank as she recognized the unmistakable uniforms of the PCTF agents surrounding a woman struggling in their grasp.

"Shit... Pull over, Miguel," Minerva ordered, her voice tense. Miguel guided the truck to the side, watching the scene unfold across the highway.

"Is that her?" Miguel whispered.

Minerva's eyes narrowed; her fists clenched. "Yes... damn it, that's her."

They both stared, torn between the urge to help and the hard truth of their vulnerability. The PCTF had anticipated them, and to intervene now would mean certain capture—or worse.

Miguel gritted his teeth, a hand tightening on the steering wheel. "Should we..."

Minerva shook her head, the tension evident in her posture. "No... we can't risk it. We're compromised here. Let's turn back."

As Miguel reversed back onto the road, Minerva cast one last glance at the young blonde woman, now cuffed and being pushed into a PCTF van, her face pale and defiant despite the tears streaming down her cheeks. Minerva swallowed hard, guilt twisting her stomach as she looked away.

"Damn," she muttered as she smacked the dashboard, her voice

barely above a whisper. "This area is already compromised. We're gonna have to find a new pickup location. But... how did they know?"

Miguel's jaw clenched, a dark understanding passing between them. "Think we've got a spy?"

Minerva exhaled slowly; her gaze fixed on the rain-soaked road ahead. "It's possible. I'll speak with security. We need to root this out before it costs us more lives."

As they drove back toward the Sanctuary, the weight of their failure hung heavily between them. The rain blurred the world outside, a reminder of how easily the life they'd built could slip through their fingers.

Back at the Sanctuary, Minerva made her way to the security office, her mind churning with thoughts of betrayal and lost trust. She found Diana already there, monitoring the signal jammers and double-checking the communication logs.

"Diana," Minerva said quietly, "I need you to run a security sweep. Check for any unusual signals or activity over the past few weeks. We might have a mole."

Diana looked up, her face set with quiet determination. "I'm on it. We'll find out who it is." "And Diana," Minerva paused for a second, then continued, "let's keep this between us for now, alright? I'll have all other operations held off for now while we're figuring this out. No raids, no rescues, no supply runs." Diana gave a nod as Minerva walked out the door.

Later that night as Minerva sat back on her porch, she took a long puff from her cigarette, holding it for a while before exhaling the smoke, allowing the stillness to calm her. The children's laughter drifted through the air, the sound softening her tension. This was what they were fighting for—a chance for people to live freely, to bring new life into the world, unbound by fear and oppression.

But with every passing day, the threat grew closer. Minerva looked up at the towering trees, a silent prayer on her lips: "Let this sanctuary hold."

Tomorrow, she knew the fight would begin again.

CHAPTER 6

The snow fell in thick, quiet layers, cloaking the cabin and the surrounding woods in a blanket of white. Inside, Samantha was wrapped in a heavy sweater, her hand resting on her rounded belly as she watched the snow pile up on the window ledge. She had been craving meat for weeks now, an urge so strong it nearly overshadowed the discomforts of her second trimester. She sighed, glancing at the nearly empty pantry and their dwindling stock of canned goods. They had been rationing carefully, but with the roads blocked by the last storm, resupplying wasn't an option.

Saul paced by the door, glancing out at the thick woods. He knew the risks of leaving her alone, but Samantha needed nourishment, real protein, to keep her strength up. The thought of her struggling through her pregnancy while he stood idly by gnawed at him.

"I'm going to hunt," he said finally, turning to her with a resolute look.

Samantha looked at him with a mix of worry and gratitude. "You sure it's safe out there?"

He nodded, his eyes hardening with determination. "I'll be careful. I have the old crossbow—your grandfather's." He took the crossbow from the closet, running his hand along the polished wood and metal. It was sturdy, a relic from the days when he'd spent long weekends in the woods with his father, learning to track and hunt.

Samantha gave him a small, encouraging smile. "Be safe, Saul."

He wrapped himself in layers, securing his hat and gloves before stepping out into the snow. The cold hit him immediately, sharp and

biting, but he pushed through, moving deeper into the woods, each step sinking slightly as he adjusted to the crunch of fresh snow beneath his boots.

The forest was silent, save for the occasional creak of tree branches under the weight of ice and snow. Saul kept his pace steady, his senses sharpening as he scanned the ground for any sign of animal tracks. Hours passed, and all he saw were empty trails and occasional clusters of rabbit prints, too small to make much of a meal. His muscles ached from trudging through the deep snow, but he pressed on, knowing he couldn't return empty-handed.

Finally, just as the sun began to dip behind the tree line, he spotted it: a faint set of hoof prints cutting across the snowy ground. He knelt, inspecting them closely. They were fresh, just barely dusted with the last snowfall. The shape and spread of the prints confirmed it—a deer. A surge of excitement rose within him, but he forced himself to stay calm. Deer were skittish and sensitive, every noise a potential threat to their survival. Saul adjusted his crossbow, ensuring it was primed and ready, and began following the tracks.

The trail wound deeper into the forest, weaving between the trees. Saul moved carefully, his boots landing softly in the snow to avoid crunching too loudly. Every few paces, he would stop, hold his breath, and listen, scanning the woods for any hint of movement.

After nearly an hour of tracking, he saw it: a flash of brown through the trees. The deer stood a few yards ahead, its head lifted as it sniffed the air, its large eyes scanning the area for danger. Saul froze, barely daring to breathe. He slowly raised his crossbow, taking aim. But before he could release the bolt, the deer's ears twitched, and it bounded off into the trees, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

Frustration bubbled up within him, but he kept his focus. The fresh snowfall was both a hindrance and a gift, muffling his steps but also covering the tracks he was trying to follow. Saul continued after the deer, knowing that persistence was his only option.

The snow began to fall again, this time in thick, heavy flakes, descending in a veil that obscured his vision and provided the cover he needed. He moved quickly, pushing through the cold as the deer's tracks reappeared. After another half-hour of tracking, he saw it again, this time grazing quietly, head lowered as it dug through the snow to reach the dry grass beneath.

Saul dropped to one knee, steadying himself as he raised the crossbow. He exhaled slowly, allowing his breath to steady and his muscles to relax. The deer's head was still lowered, oblivious to his presence. He aimed carefully, focusing on the spot just behind its shoulder, where the shot would be quick and clean.

The crossbow released with a soft thump, and the bolt flew true, striking the deer in a swift, silent arc. The animal staggered, its legs buckling before it collapsed onto the snow-covered ground. Saul approached cautiously, making sure the deer was down before reaching out to place a hand on its side. The warmth of its body seeped through his glove, a fleeting reminder of the life it had held just moments ago.

"Thank you," he murmured, a quiet acknowledgment of the life taken to sustain another.

The task of dragging the deer back to the cabin was grueling, each step weighted by exhaustion and the steadily deepening snow. Saul's breaths came in heavy, misty clouds, and his muscles screamed with each pull, but he pressed on, his mind focused on the image of Samantha waiting for him, the relief that would cross her face when she saw the food he'd brought.

By the time he reached the cabin, darkness had fully settled, and the stars glimmered faintly through gaps in the clouds. Samantha rushed to the door as he approached, her face lighting up when she saw the deer slung over his shoulder.

"You did it!" she exclaimed, her voice full of gratitude and relief.

"Yeah," he panted, setting the deer down near the door. "It wasn't easy, but... here we are."

They worked together, preparing the meat as best they could. Samantha had to pause often, her energy waning, but she was determined to help, seasoning the cuts and laying them carefully by the fire to cook. The rich scent of venison filled the cabin, thick and savory, a balm against the biting cold outside.

As they sat down to eat, Samantha savored each bite, the flavors warming her from the inside out. She glanced at Saul, who was watching her with a soft smile, his eyes full of quiet pride.

"Thank you, babe," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

He reached across the table, taking her hand in his. "You won't have to find out."

They finished their meal in silence, the comfort of companionship filling the small cabin as the snow continued to fall outside, cocooning them in a fragile world of peace and warmth—for tonight, at least.

The cabin was warm, the faint crackle of the fireplace filling the quiet as the smell of the roasted deer still lingered in the air. Snow fell softly outside, blanketing the world in a serene, icy stillness. Samantha sat on the worn couch, a pillow tucked under her arm for support, her hands resting on the gentle curve of her belly. She smiled as Saul returned from the corner of the room, a guitar in hand.

“Was that my grandfather’s old guitar?” she asked, recognizing the instrument instantly.

Saul nodded, plopping down onto the opposite couch. “Yup. Found it in the garage. It looked like it hadn’t been used in years, but it’s still in decent shape. I cleaned it up, polished it, greased the strings. I figured... we could use some music around here.”

“That’s so thoughtful,” Samantha said, shifting on the couch to get a better view.

Saul gave her a crooked smile as he adjusted the tuning pegs, his fingers nimble and practiced. The soft twang of the strings filled the room as he tested each one, his brow furrowed in concentration. Once satisfied, he leaned back, cradling the guitar in his arms. He began plucking in a slow, deliberate rhythm, the melody soft and wistful.

Samantha tilted her head, her curiosity piqued. “What song is this? I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

“It’s something new I’ve been working on,” Saul replied, his fingers dancing across the strings as the melody began to take shape.

The notes rose and fell, weaving a tender tune that filled the room with warmth. Samantha watched him, her eyes tracing the curve of his lips as he began to sing. His voice was raw but steady, carrying an emotion that resonated deep within her.

♪ When you feel lost and in doubt, ♪
♪ You look around but see no way out. ♪
♪ When dark clouds veil the once bright sky, ♪
♪ And heaven just starts to cry. ♪

Samantha blinked, the words sinking in like a gentle wave washing over

her. The melody swayed her, tugging at her emotions in ways she hadn't expected.

*♪ When the path you're on begins to stray, ♪
♪ You cling to hope but it decides to betray. ♪
♪ When the shrouds of despair come seeping, ♪
♪ And you begin to question why you're living. ♪*

Saul's gaze lifted, meeting hers briefly. The intensity in his eyes made her throat tighten. He poured everything into the next lines, his voice firm and unyielding.

*♪ Just let go, let go of all the pain and fear, ♪
♪ Just remember, remember that I am here. ♪
♪ Just let go, let go of the weight that pulls you. ♪
♪ No matter how, no matter how far it is, know that I'll find you. ♪
♪ I'll find you. ♪*

The final note lingered in the air, the silence that followed heavy with emotion. Samantha sat still, her hands gripping the pillow tightly as tears welled in her eyes.

"Saul," she breathed, her voice trembling. "That was... beautiful."

He ducked his head, a hint of a sheepish grin pulling at his lips. "Thanks," he said, his fingers idly plucking at the strings. "Still working on the chorus, but... pretty much, that's how it goes."

"It's perfect," Samantha whispered, her voice barely audible. She wiped a stray tear from her cheek, the lyrics reverberating in her mind. "You're amazing, you know that?"

Saul chuckled softly, shaking his head. "I just... I don't know. I wanted to write something meaningful. Something for you... and for Noah," he said, glancing toward her belly. Her chest tightened, and she smiled, her heart swelling with love. "Noah?" Samantha asked. "Oh, yeah. I just thought that if it is a boy, we can call him Noah." Saul said.

Samantha chuckled, "Noah. I love it. Noah's going to love hearing this one day."

Saul began playing the song again, his fingers surer this time, and Samantha leaned back, letting the melody wash over her. For the first time in weeks, she felt safe, grounded, and tethered to the moment. The

world outside could wait, but for now, in their small cabin amidst the winter wilderness, it was just the three of them, held together by a melody that would forever be etched in her memory.

The warm glow of Christmas lights softened the corners of Han and Maria's modest living room, casting a gentle hue on the walls lined with cherished memories. The scent of pine filled the air from a small tree in the corner, adorned with handmade ornaments and strings of lights that blinked softly, like tiny stars. Maria was humming quietly to herself as she arranged a row of porcelain figurines on the mantle, each a small symbol of the season—tiny carolers, reindeer, and a miniature nativity scene.

Han was by the fireplace, carefully hanging stockings. There were only three—one for him, one for Maria, and one for Samantha. He held Samantha's stocking in his hands for a moment, fingers grazing the embroidered "S" at the top, his expression distant. His gaze shifted to a photograph on the mantel, capturing a moment from years ago: a young Samantha, her face half-covered in purple yam icing, her eyes wide with innocent delight. Her little fingers were coated in the vibrant icing, and she wore a mischievous grin, oblivious to the mess she was making.

Maria looked up, catching him staring at the picture. She walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder, following his gaze. "You remember that day?" she murmured, a soft smile tugging at her lips.

Han nodded, his smile bittersweet. "I remember. Her fourth birthday. She'd been so excited, practically vibrating with energy. Before we could even cut the *Ube (purple yam)* cake, she just grabbed a handful and stuffed it in her mouth." He chuckled, shaking his head at the memory.

Maria laughed quietly, warmth in her voice. "The look on her face when she realized she could have as much cake as she wanted." She paused, her smile fading as her eyes softened. "She was so happy that day."

Han's expression grew somber as well, and a shadow passed over them, like the flicker of a candle caught in a draft. "Do you remember her wish that year?" he asked softly, glancing at Maria.

Maria nodded, her gaze lowering. "She wished for a brother. She thought... she thought maybe you and I could just go and pick one up, like a toy from the store."

A heavy silence fell between them, each lost in the memories of that time. Samantha's innocent wish had been a painful reminder of their reality. They had wanted another child, dreamed of giving her a sibling.

But that year, the Population Control Law had tightened its grip, and their application for a second child had been denied. The hope they'd carried with them had been crushed in a government letter, a cold rejection of their dream of a larger family.

Han swallowed, his voice barely a whisper. "I remember how excited she was, going on and on about having a baby brother. She'd even picked out a name. And then... we had to explain why it couldn't happen." He shook his head, his gaze fixed on the old photo. "She didn't understand, not fully. I'm not sure we did either."

Maria's hand found his, giving it a gentle squeeze. "We did the best we could, Han. We made sure she knew she was loved." Her voice wavered, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. "And now... now she's out there, with a child of her own on the way."

Han looked over at her, his face etched with worry. "We haven't heard from her since she left. The last time she was here, I could see it in her eyes—the fear, but also the determination. She's so much like you, Maria. Brave, stubborn."

A faint smile touched Maria's lips, though sadness lingered in her eyes. "She has Saul. He'll look after her. I have to believe that." Her voice dropped, barely above a whisper. "It's all we can do now."

They stood there in silence, watching the small flickers of light dance along the tree. The feeling of powerlessness gnawed at them both. They knew reaching out would be too dangerous, any call or message a potential risk that could expose her location to the PCTF. Every day without word was a test of patience and faith, trusting that she was safe, that Saul was by her side, protecting her.

After a while, Maria placed her hand over her heart, closing her eyes. "I just want her to know... that we're here, waiting. That no matter what, this home is hers."

Han wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. "She knows, Maria. She's our daughter. She knows."

As they stood there, a quiet prayer formed between them, unspoken but shared—a hope for their daughter's safety, a wish that she would find the happiness they once dreamed of for her. The lights continued to blink softly, their warmth a fragile contrast to the world outside. Together, they clung to that warmth, to the memory of their little girl with cake on her face, to the love that bound them across the distance. It was all they had, but in that moment, it felt like enough.

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