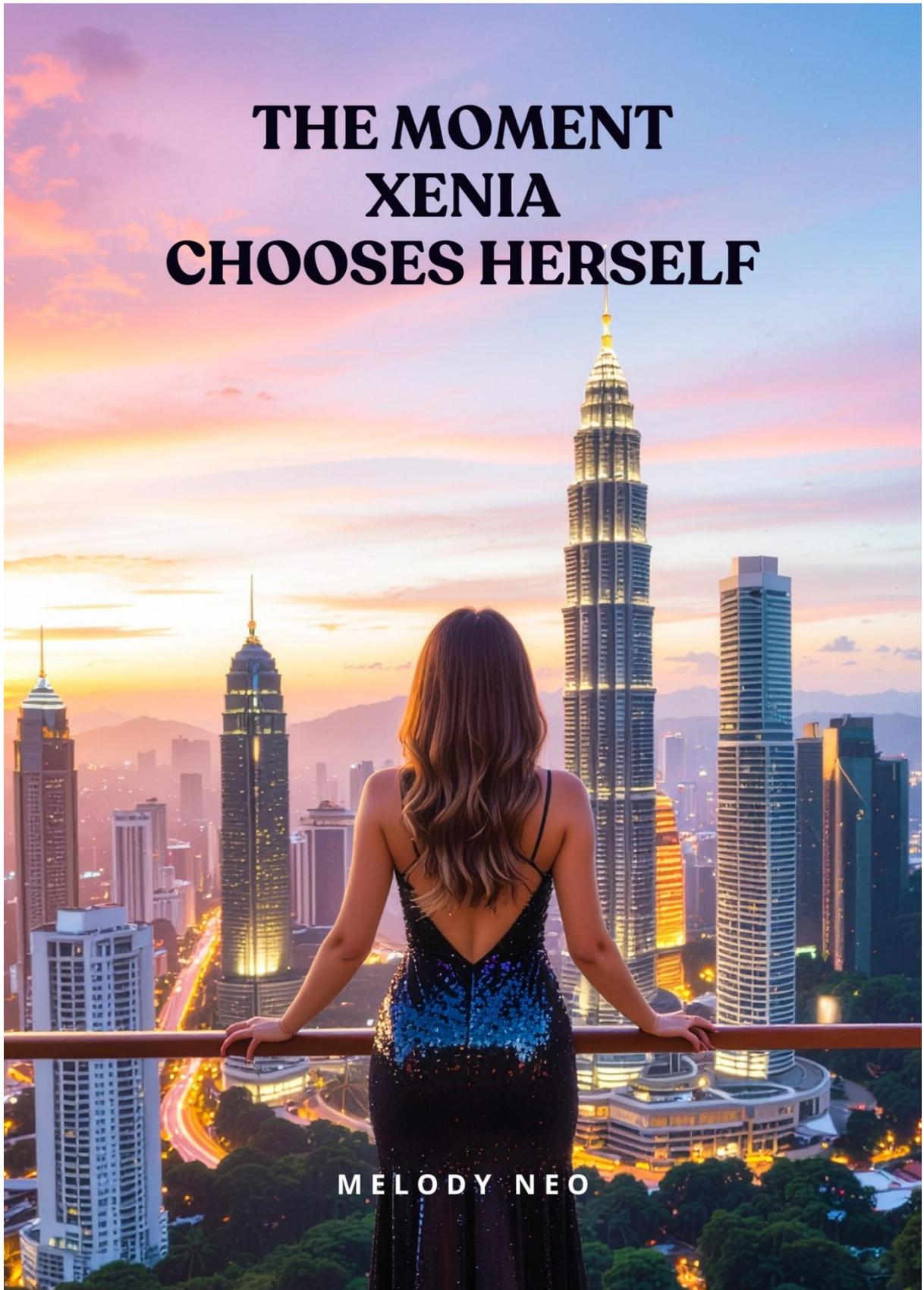


THE MOMENT XENIA CHOOSES HERSELF



MELODY NEO

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DEDICATION

For the ones who kept going even when they felt numb, who stayed because they were afraid to lose people, and who forgot they were allowed to choose themselves.

This story is for the Xenia in all of us – the part that learns, slowly and quietly, that walking away is not a form of weakness, and starting over is not failure.

May you find the moment you choose yourself too.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story began as a quiet thought – a small reflection about how easy it is to lose yourself in the wrong people, the wrong places, and the wrong versions of love. I wanted to write something that felt honest, something that captured the moments we rarely talk about; the confusion, the numbness, the fear of letting go, and the courage it takes to finally choose yourself.

Xenia's journey is fictional, but the feelings she carries are real for many of us. Her numbness, her attachment, her longing for stability, her fear of abandonment – they are emotions I believe many people have experienced in their own ways. My hope is that this story offers comfort, clarity, or even just a quiet reminder that choosing yourself is never an act of selfishness.

If you have ever stayed too long, held on too tightly, or loved someone who did not choose you back, I hope this book helps you feel seen. If you are still on your way towards healing, I hope Xenia's story reminds you that it is never too late to start again.

Thank you for reading, and for allowing Xenia's world to meet yours.

- **Melody Neo**

Chapter 1 – The World Xenia Grew Up In

Sri Hartamas had always been a strange blend of serenity and hidden intensity. By day, the neighbourhood was filled with cafés, small boutiques, families walking their children to enrichment classes, and joggers weaving through the residential lane. It was clean, organised and wealthy enough to feel safe.

Xenia often watched people pass by from her bedroom window – parents strolling with young children, couples holding hands, university students studying at the outdoor tables of nearby cafés.

It was the kind of neighbourhood that seemed designed for stability.

The kind of place meant for people who had their lives figured out.

She lived there.

But she didn't feel like she belonged to it.

Her own townhouse felt muted compared to Xerius' home next door – where the sounds of Valerius and Kyrius, laughing or running down the stairs, made the entire street feel warmer.

Sri Hartamas was a place meant for people ready for their future.

Xenia was still trying to find her own present.



On days when life felt too heavy, Xenia would drive to Plaza Damansara – a quiet commercial cluster where cafés sat shoulder to shoulder with yoga studios and minimalist boutiques. It was the kind of place people visited to slow down.

She often sat at a corner table in Solace Brew Co., nursing a latte she barely tasted, pretending to read while watching others move through their day with purpose.

Couples planned vacations.

Colleagues discussed promotions.

Freelancers typed passionately as though they had direction.

Xenia envied them – not for what they had, but for the clarity they lived with.

She wanted clarity.

She wanted a sense of herself.

She just didn't know how to reach it.



Hartamas Shopping Centre wasn't glamorous. It was an older mall with dimmer lighting, narrow walkways, small boutiques, and ageing décor. But it was familiar. Predictable. Quiet enough for comfort.

Christabelle loved buying children's clothes here.

Xerius used the old gym at Level 2.

The twins ran through the aisles on weekend mornings.

To Xenia, this mall symbolised ordinary life – a life she had always longed for but didn't know how to build.

Sometimes she would walk through the supermarket aisles alone, picking up groceries for her parents, watching couples do the same thing effortlessly.

They laughed over which cereal to buy.

They debated between two brands of milk.

They talked as though life was something manageable.

Xenia watched them with a quiet ache.

This was the version of adulthood she dreamed of – stable, calm, shared.

And yet, the life she lived with Kieran felt like the complete opposite – uncertain, distant, fragile.



The nightlife district was always alive – deafening music pouring out from open doors, people crowding pavements, neon lights reflecting off wet asphalt after the evening rain.

This was where her friend group felt most themselves.

This was where Lilith thrived.

This was where Kieran pretended the world was simple.

Changkat was a place of blurred thoughts and blurred boundaries.

Of promises made under the influence of alcohol.

Of emotions silenced by distraction.

Xenia didn't like drinking.

Xenia didn't like crowds.

She didn't like the way her chest tightened on nights out.

But she kept showing up because missing a night felt like losing a connection.

And losing connections terrified her more than the nightlife drained her.

To her, Changkat wasn't just a street.

It was a cycle.



Located near Kuala Lumpur (KL) City Centre, The Harmony was designed for young professionals – a sleek condominium building with tall glass windows, polished floors, and quiet corridors. It was perfect for a man who wanted convenience without commitment.

Kieran's unit was on one of the upper floors, always tidy, always minimal, almost like a hotel room he was temporarily occupying.

Xenia always noticed the silence there – a silence too curated, too empty, too clean. It lacked warmth, history, and belonging.

No framed memories.

No family photos.

No personal items that showed connection to anything outside his work and social circle.

The security guards recognised her but never greeted her with familiarity – she visited too infrequently, and Kieran never once introduced her as someone important enough to acknowledge.

The Harmony wasn't a home.

It was a waiting room.

A place where Xenia lingered, hoping for answers that would never arrive.

She didn't know then that one day, this place – with its silent hallways and hidden drawers – would break her heart wide open.



Mont Royale International College sat atop a landscaped hill. Its modern architecture distinguished by glass walkways, an open courtyard, and tall palm trees lining the pathways. Students gathered on the grass, discussing their future careers, internships, or weekend plans.

Xenia loved the atmosphere of the campus – the energy, the hope, the sense that everyone was moving towards something bigger.

She belonged there.

She almost grew there.

She nearly built a new identity there.

But her final year brought Kieran into the picture and everything she built for herself slowly shifted towards him.

Mont Royale International College wasn't just her academic history – it was the fork in her road, the place where the life she could have had, diverged from the life she ended up living.



Xenia often met her friend group here – Publika Shopping Gallery's artsy cafés and Solaris Dutamas' trendy restaurants were the perfect kind of mix of social buzz and modern aesthetics.

But every dinner, every drink, every gathering carried an undercurrent of tension for her.

She would sit at tables surrounded by laughter but feel emotionally miles away.

She watched Lilith talk over everyone else, watched Kieran laughed at jokes she didn't understand, watched strangers move through their lives confidently.

Publika was the place where she didn't understand her own life anymore.

It was the place where she started questioning herself.

Chapter 2 – The Edges of Her Quiet Collapse

There were the days when Xenia woke up already tired.

Not physically tired, but emotionally hollow. As if someone had drained the colour out of her before she even opened her eyes. She went through with her morning routine automatically – brush teeth, wash face, tie hair – each movement way too familiar enough to feel rehearsed.

She wondered when she had last done anything with intention.

When was the last time she felt excited about a day?

When was the last time she didn't feel like she was surviving in someone else's life rather than living her own?

Her phone buzzed with predictable messages.

Not from Kieran.

From everyone else except the person she waited for.

She swallowed the disappointment like she always did.

She told herself not to need too much.

She told herself he was busy.

She told herself love required patience, even though she rarely received any from him.

But the truth settled in her chest like a quiet bruise.

She felt more alone in a relationship than she did on her own.



Kieran's presence in her life was inconsistent, unpredictable, and always dependent on the world around him.

If work was stressful, he withdrew.

If his nightlife circle called, he vanished.

If he was in a good mood, he loved her loudly.

And Xenia adjusted each time, stretching herself thin just to meet wherever he was.

They had patterns – familiar ones she didn't know how to break.

He would disappear for days.

She would stay silent, not wanting to appear clingy.

He would return with a short apology and a kiss that never felt like a promise, just a temporary patch.

And yet, she welcomed him back because she didn't want to lose him.

Because losing him felt like losing the last thread tying her emotions altogether.

Because she thought loving someone meant enduring the pain they caused.

She never questioned why she felt safer tiptoeing around him than being herself.



It happened on an ordinary weekday evening.

Xenia stood in front of the mirror after her shower, staring at her own reflection – not at her features, but at her expression.

She looked small.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

Her eyes looked softer than she had remembered. Her shoulders seemed to fold inwards as though trying to occupy less space. Her chest felt tight, as if she'd been holding her breath for months.

She whispered to herself without meaning to, "who are you becoming?"

She didn't recognise the girl who avoided confrontation.

She didn't recognise the girl who stayed quiet to be loved.

She didn't recognise the girl who accepted loneliness as normal.

Most of all, she didn't recognise the girl who feared losing someone who barely stayed.

Her reflection didn't answer her.

It didn't need to.

She already knew.

She had lost pieces of herself long before she realised anything was missing.



The next morning, she drove to Solace Brew Co., again. She ordered her usual latte, but this time round, she didn't pretend to read nor watch strangers from her corner.

She simply sat.

Still. Breathing. Existing.

For the first time, she noticed the way sunlight hit the wooden counter, warm and gentle. The low hum of morning chatter – not overwhelming, just soft enough to feel grounding. The way her heartbeat started slowing, no longer in a rush with the usual anxiety she always carried.

Something inside her softened.

Something inside her loosened.

A thought came quietly, almost too fragile to hold. *What if I stopped waiting for someone to choose me?*

She didn't have an answer yet.

She wasn't ready to decide.

But a small part of her, a part buried under years of fear and numbness, finally stirred.

And it would grow, slowly, until it changed everything.



Her phone vibrated just as she stepped out of the café.

Kieran's name flashed across the screen.

For a moment, she hesitated. And she hated it.

She picked up anyway.

"Hey," he said. Voice casual, almost indifferent.

"Hi." She responded, trying to sound as natural as she could. But the softness in her tone betrayed her.

"You free tonight?"

It wasn't really a question.

It never was.

“I might be,” she said cautiously. “Why?”

“Just come over. I’ll order something. We can chill.”

Chill. She always wondered if that was his way of saying *I miss you*, or if it meant nothing at all.

“Okay,” she replied after a second too long.

He paused. “You sound...weird.”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

“You sure?”

No softness. No real concern. Just checking whether she would inconvenience him emotionally.

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Alright. See you later then.”

The call ended before she could say goodbye. She stared at her reflection in the dark phone screen.

Even his voice made her feel small.



That evening, she stood outside Kieran’s unit, hand hovering near the doorbell before she finally pressed it.

He opened the door half a second later, as if he’d been standing right behind it.

His hair was slightly messy. His eyes looked tired.

He still looked good, and she hated that she noticed.

“You took long,” he said, stepping aside so she could enter.

“There was heavy traffic.”

“You always say that.” He muttered, almost playful. Almost.

“I live in Hartamas,” she replied. “There *is* always traffic.”

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t tease her back.

He just walked to the couch and slumped down.

She followed, quietly, like how she always did.

He handed her a drink – not her favourite, not anything she particularly liked. Just whatever he happened to order.

“Thanks,” she murmured.

“You, okay? You seem off today..”

She blinked thrice. “Do I?”

“Yeah. You’re usually way more talkative.”

She hesitated, then spoke softly, “I was just thinking a lot today.”

“About what?”

“Us,” she said truthfully for once.

He looked at her, then away. A loud, dismissive exhale. “Again?”

Again.

As if caring about their relationship was exhausting.

As if she was exhausting.

She swallowed her words. “Fine. Forget about it.”

“Good,” he said, stretching his arms over the couch. “Didn’t feel like getting into anything deep. Been a long day.”

Her heart tightened in the way it always did around him – silent, privately.

He didn’t notice. He never did.



When night falls, the room fell into silence. Xenia tried again.

“Kieran, can I ask you something?”

He didn’t look up from his phone. “Hmm?”

“Do you ever feel like we’re drifting?”

He frowned ever so slightly. “Drifting? Where did that even come from? What are you on about?”

“I just... feel like things are different now. Like you’re acting distant from me, you know.”

“Hey look. I’m just busy with work,” he said immediately, brushing it off. “You’re literally overthinking things too much.”

“I’m not trying to accuse you...” she said gently. “I just want to understand why you’re behaving like this.”

He finally set his phone aside, looking at her.

His voice softened – not in a comforting way.

More like a tired father trying to sooth his child.

“Xenia. You really need to stop worrying about nonsense. We’re doing fine, okay? I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“But... but being physically here isn’t the same thing as -”

“Can you not?” he cut her off. “Like I said, I’m clearly not in the mood for whatever emotional stuff you’re trying to bring up.”

She froze.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Babe, look, I’m not trying to be a jerk. I just don’t know how to deal with all that deep-feelings kind of thing.”

“You don’t have to be perfect,” she whispered, voice trembling slightly. “Just present.”

“I *am* present.”

But that emptiness in his tone made the words feel sham.

The silence that followed was heavier than any argument they had.



Kieran turned back to the TV, the blue light washing over his face.

Xenia shifted closer, hoping he’d meet her halfway, hoping he’d take her hand or even notice her sadness.

He didn’t.

Eventually, she leaned her head slightly against his shoulder.

For a moment, he didn’t react.

Then he adjusted his posture – not to hold her, but to make himself feel more comfortable without acknowledging her presence.

The message was subtle, but clear.

She was close, but he wasn't reaching back.

Her voice cracked slightly when she whispered, "I miss you."

He didn't look away from the screen, "I'm right here."

But he wasn't – not emotionally, not mentally, not in any way that mattered.

She felt that hollowness swallow her again.



When she finally left his place that night, the corridor felt colder than usual.

The elevator mirrors reflected her tiredness so clearly, she looked away.

Her phone buzzed again.

Kieran:

'Let me know when you've reached home.'

A performative concern. One he only sent out of routine, not intention.

But she still replied.

'Okay.'

While waiting for the elevator, she whispered to herself, "I think I'm losing myself."

The doors slid open. Her reflection stared back at her in the mirrored walls.

This time, she didn't look away.



Xenia hadn't planned on joining Lilith's group of friends that night.

Back then, nightlife wasn't her scene, but Lilith insisted that they should celebrate their final presentation of the semester.

"Come on, it's just dinner," Lilith said, tugging her arm. "We worked so hard. You deserve one night out."

One night.

She didn't know that one night would change everything.

They ended up at a rooftop bar overlooking KL's skyline, the kind of place that felt too loud and too glossy for her comfort. She sat at the table quietly; fingers wrapped around a sweating glass of iced water while everyone else ordered cocktails.

That was when he arrived.

Kieran – laughing, confident, unapologetically alive in a way she never was.

He slid into the seat next to hers as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. "Lilith didn't tell me she invited someone new." He said, looking at Xenia with curiosity in his eyes, instead of polite disinterest.

"Uhm, she didn't invite me," Xenia responded softly. "I just came along."

He smiled – not the lazy smile she would later grow used to, but a bright and genuine one.

"Well, I'm glad you did."

It was a simple moment.

A small one.

But it lodged itself deep into her memory.



Later that night, the group shifted from the rooftop bar to a dim neon-lit club, The Neon Veil. Music thumped through the floors, loud enough to blur thoughts.

Inside, everything looked as though it was dipped in electric colours. Soft violet lights washed over the walls, pulsing in slow waves that mimicked a heartbeat, while streaks of neon pink and blue flickered like moving shadows. A thin haze floated through the air – part fog machine, part humidity – catching the lights in a way that made the entire room feel dreamlike, almost unreal. The ceiling was low and lined with LED strips that shifted gently between colours, as if The Neon Veil itself was alive, breathing.

Faces glowed under the neon, half hidden, half revealed. People danced their hearts out closely, silhouettes brushing against one another, their expressions blurred out by the haze and the fast-strobing lights. Laughter, clinking glasses, and bass-heavy beats merged into a single, overwhelming soundscape.

It was the kind of place where secrets could be kept in the dark corners, where emotions felt heavier under the bright coloured lights, where everything looked more beautiful – more dangerous – than it really was.

Xenia stayed near the edge of the dance floor, watching others move in bursts of energy. On the other hand, Kieran was surrounded by his friends.

He looked different.

He was expressive – animated, laughing loudly at jokes, slapping his friends' shoulders, breaking into spontaneous dances with them.

He wasn't distant, quiet, nor tired.

He was present.

When his eyes found Xenia, he walked over, still smiling.

“You, okay?” He asked her, leaning down slightly towards her so she could hear him.

“Yes,” she said, blushing shyly. “Just not used to places like this.”

He grinned from ear to ear. “Then I guess I’ll have to stay by your side. Can’t have you getting overwhelmed without me to distract you.”

And he did, for five whole minutes.

Until someone from their friend group yelled, “Kieran! Come! Shots!”

He looked back at Xenia, apology flickering briefly in his eyes.

“Hold on for a bit, yeah? I want to come back and talk to you properly.”

She nodded.

He ran back to them, laughter returning instantly, the vibrance she wanted so badly, directed at everyone else.

She stood alone at the corner, watching him shine. Not for her, not with her, but near her.

It was this version she fell for, the version that only appeared around others.



A week after that night at The Harmony, Xenia met her friend group at a café in Publika. The same kind of artsy spot they always chose – minimalist furniture, latte art, soft pop music floating through the air.

Lilith launched into a story immediately.

“You guys are *not* going to believe what happened yesterday,” she said dramatically, waving her hands. “Some guy tried flirting with me while holding his girlfriend’s hand. Men are *t-r-a-s-h*.”

Caleb, who had been quietly stirring his iced Americano beside her, looked up with the most unimpressed expression.

“Wow,” he said dryly. “Love being included in that statement. Really warms the heart.”

Lilith gasped theatrically. “Oh, *please*. You know you don’t count. You’re one of the good ones.”

“That’s not what you said 30 seconds ago,” Caleb teased, leaning his back against the chair. A small grin tugged at his lips. “All I heard was men are trash.” He tapped his chest lightly. “Man. Present.”

The group laughed as Lilith rolled her eyes before nudging him. “You’re so lucky you’re cute.”

“And you’re lucky I’m not emotionally fragile,” he said, ruffling her hair.

She swatted him away but softened immediately, her expression shifting into something warm – a quiet affection Xenia had always admired in them.

They fit together so naturally. Like two people who chose each other every day without needing reassurance.

Everyone laughed.

Xenia smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Are you okay?” One of the girls asked.

“Yeah. Just tired.”

“Being tired is your default setting now,” Lilith said, sipping her drink. “Is it your internship? Or... Kieran?”

Xenia’s breath stuttered.

It was her internship. Or at least, that was the easier answer.

For the past month, she had been working as a marketing assistant intern at NovaPulse Creative, a fast-paced agency where deadlines never slept and ideas were expected to appear instantly. Even when her brain felt foggy from fatigue. Mornings blended into evenings; evenings bled into more edits, more revisions, more slack pings at inconvenient hours.

There were nights where she left the office long after sun had set, clutching her laptop like a lifeline, shoulders aching from hours of pretending she wasn't overwhelmed.

But despite how exhausting it was, she still hesitated to blame her workload.

Deep down, she knew her tiredness came from more than just sleepless nights and tight deadlines.

"He's fine," she finally responded. Automatically. Reflexively. Defensively.

"Relax, I didn't say anything," Lilith teased, though something sharp hid beneath the humour. As if she'd already knew the truth Xenia refused to voice.

The table fell into another wave of chatter, yet Xenia felt herself drift – present physically, detached emotionally.

They talked.

They laughed.

They lived.

But she sat there feeling misplaced, like a puzzle piece forced into the wrong picture.

Once upon a time, she belonged with them. Now she felt like an echo in her own friend group, easily replaceable. And even worse, a quiet fear lingered beneath her ribs.

Maybe they all saw what she was refusing to admit.



After the gathering, Xenia made her way through the quiet evening corridors of Publika, crossing into the adjoining Solaris Dutamas parking area. The sky was turning gold and violet, casting soft shadows across the pavement.

But even as the evening light softened the world around her, her chest felt tight.

Maybe it was the conversation earlier.

Maybe it was the way Lilith said Kieran's name.

Or maybe it was just the exhaustion she'd been carrying for weeks, the same exhaustion she pretended was *just work* even though she knew it wasn't.



The next morning, she returned to NovaPulse Creative, already drained before her day even started. The office buzzed with lights too bright, and the constant tapping of keyboards. Her supervisor, Mira, dropped a stack of revisions onto her table, "Need this by lunch."

Xenia blinked. "This is the whole deck..."

"You're fast," Mira said, already walking away.

The sentence was meant to be encouraging, but it only made her stomach twist.

Her phone buzzed beside her laptop.

Kieran:

'Heading out with the guys later.'

No question mark.

No invitation.

Not even a pause between his world and hers.

She locked her phone screen without replying.

By noon, her head throbbed.

By 6 p.m., she had redone the same slides four times.

By 10 p.m., she was one of the only people still in the office.

The silence was suffocating.

She texted Kieran.

'Still working. Might be late.'

An hour later, he replied.

'Ok.'

Just that. No comfort. No concern,

Just acknowledgement, as if she were a background notification – seen but not felt.

When she finally left the office, her hands trembled from fatigue. She walked through the parking lot pressing her car keys, eager to go home and disappear under her sheets.

But as she opened her car door, she froze.

There it was again – that faint perfume scent in the passenger seat.

Not hers. Not Lilith's. Not anyone she had been with recently.

The previous time it happened, she dismissed it.

This time, the scent was clearer.

Something about it felt wrong.

She tried to rationalise it – *a colleague maybe? Her mother borrowing the car? A trick of the mind?*

But the scent lingered, sharp and unmistakable. Cutting through the excuses she tried to build.

She shut the door slowly. The cold silence of the car swallowed her whole.



The next day at NovaPulse, Xenia walked past the glass-walled meeting room just as Mira was speaking with another senior colleague. Their voices were low, but the tone was unmistakably evaluative.

“We still need someone reliable for the December pitch.” Mira said, flipping through the campaign proposals.

The colleague glanced at the intern list. “What about Xenia?”

Mira paused. A long, deliberate pause that made something inside Xenia tense up.

“She’s hardworking,” Mira admitted, “but I’m not sure she can handle all that pressure yet. Let’s keep our options open.”

It wasn’t harsh nor cruel. Yet it hurt in a way that made her breath catch.

Because even when she gave everything, even when she stayed late and pushed past exhaustion, she still wasn’t enough. She stepped away quickly before they could see her standing there.

But the doubt lingered like a shadow that followed her out of office and into the evening air.



That night, she returned to her townhouse in Sri Hartamas. The familiar quiet greeted her – the neatly arranged shoes by the entrance, the soft hum of the ceiling fan and air conditioning, the way the living room always felt a little too still when she came home late.

She set her bag down by the stairs and stood there for a moment, letting the silence settle around her.

It should have been comforting. Instead, it felt hollow.

Her phone buzzed, lighting up with a message from Kieran.

'Out late tonight. Don't wait up.'

No warmth, no context, and no sense that she was someone he wanted to check in with.

Just a distant message from someone who used to feel close.

She didn't reply.

Instead, she walked to the dining table and sat down in the dim light, resting her forehead against her palms. Her body ached from the long day, longing for a warm bath, but her mind kept replaying everything she had been trying to ignore.

Mira's hesitation.

The pressure mounting at NovaPulse Creative.

The exhaustion that clung to her skin.

The coldness in Kieran's messages.

The faint perfume in her car – the one scent that didn't belong anywhere in her life.

Every piece felt small on its own, but altogether, they formed a pattern she could no longer pretend not to see.

Under her breath, she mumbled into the quiet house, *"Something's wrong..."*

She didn't know how wrong yet, nor how close she was to the truth. But this exact moment – this quiet breaking in her own home – was the final step before everything began to unravel, in front of her very own eyes.

Chapter 3 – The First Crack in the Glass

The morning light filtered weakly through Xenia’s curtains. She woke up with the same heaviness that had been following her for weeks, the kind that settled into her bones before her feet even touched the floor.

Nothing felt obviously wrong.

But nothing felt right either.

She took a warm bath, brushed her teeth, tied her hair, then packed her laptop – every movement familiar, rehearsed, automatic.

Right before she left home, her phone buzzed with a message from Kieran.

‘Busy today. Talk later.’

No greeting. No warmth. Just a statement. *Just like always.*

She stared at his message longer than necessary, wondering when the space between them had grown so wide. Wondering if she had missed the moment the distance began.

She slipped her phone into her bag and left the house.

The morning air hit her skin like a quiet reminder, something was changing.

She just didn’t know what yet.



NovaPulse Creative was already buzzing when she arrived. The office lights were too bright, the conversations too loud, the deadlines too near.

“Xenia! Good, you’re here.” Mira handed her a stack of printouts before she could even put her bag down.

“I need you to refine the copy for December’s pitch, then update the visuals. And make sure that the tone is more aspirational optimism, the client loves that.”

Xenia blinked, trying to process. “This is due by...?”

“Two hours,” Mira said, already halfway to another desk.

Two hours.

For what usually took a team.

Xenia sat down, hands trembling slightly as she opened the files. She inhaled deeply, willing her mind to focus on the task at hand.

But the harder she tried to concentrate, the blurrier the words became.

Her exhaustion wasn’t just physical anymore. It was emotional. Mental. Icily quiet.

She felt herself slipping.



By lunch, her eyes burned from staring at her screen. She stepped out to get fresh air, resting her forehead lightly against the cool railing on the building’s rooftop.

Her phone buzzed.

Kieran had sent a voice message to her. She hesitated, then pressed play.

‘Hey, can’t meet tonight. Some stuff came up.’

A faint sound filtered in the background – giggles.

Not his, but a woman's.

Soft. Close. Familiar in a way she couldn't place.

Her heart stilled.

She replayed the message repeatedly. The giggling was unmistakable.

Not from a café, nor from a group of friends. It sounded like it was right next to him.

Her fingers tightened around the phone.

“Kieran...?” She whispered to herself, as though saying his name might clarify something. But nothing clarified.

The more she listened, the more wrong it felt.



When Xenia returned to her desk, she opened her bag to get her charger – and froze.

Her perfume bottle, the one she kept for touch-ups, was uncapped.

Not empty. Not spilled. Just uncapped.

She had always closed it.

Always.

Because the scent was strong, delicate, and expensive – and she hated it leaking into her bag.

But now, the cap was loose.

A memory flashed across her mind.

The faint floral scent in her car. Not hers, at least not the way she used it.

Her chest tightened.

There were too many coincidences. Too many things she had brushed aside because she trusted him. Because she didn't want to look too closely.

But the truth was beginning to form like a bruise to the surface.



That evening, Xenia stood in her townhouse doorway, finger hovering over the keypad. She didn't press it. She couldn't bring herself to enter. She stayed still, letting the silence wrap around her like something she wasn't ready to break.

She replayed the voice message again.

The woman's giggles ghosted through her phone speaker, curling into her ears like a cruel reminder.

Could she be overthinking?

Could it be someone from work?

Could it be something harmless?

She wanted to believe that.

She wanted to believe him.

She wanted to believe she wasn't the kind of person who could be blindsided.

But deep inside her – beneath the denial, beneath the fear – something had shifted.

Something she couldn't simply undo. She let out a shaky breath, "S...something's not right."

This time, the words didn't feel like a whisper.

They felt like a truth she could no longer run from.



Deep into the night, lying in bed, she stared at the ceiling until her eyes blurred.

Her thoughts kept circling the same points.

The perfume.

The distance.

The cold messages.

The voice message.

The giggling.

Finally, she unlocked her phone.

Her fingers hovered.

Should she ask Kieran?

Should she confront him?

Should she pretend she didn't hear anything?

She typed, 'Who were you with today?'

She didn't send it. Her fingers moving across the screen, trembling.

Eventually, she deleted the message.

Her chest ached.

Not sending it felt like protecting him.

Sending it felt like losing him.

But doing nothing felt like losing herself.

And for the first time in a long time, the thought of losing herself scared her more than anything else.



She finally placed her phone on the bedside cabinet and turned off the lights.

But sleep didn't come.

Her mind was loud.

Her heart was even louder.

And somewhere deep in her chest, a fragile truth whispered.

This is not the beginning of doubt. This is the beginning of discovery.

She closed her eyes, unaware of how close she was to the truth, the pain, and the moment that would break everything open.

Everything was about to change.

She just didn't know how soon.



The next morning, Xenia was prepared to drive to work with her windows down, in hopes of having some cool air to clear her mind. But the very moment she stepped into her car, her body stiffened.

The floral perfume scent was still lingering there.

Faint, but noticeable.

Settled deep into the leather of her passenger seat, as though someone had sat there long enough for the scent to sink in.

Not accidental.

Not a brief moment.

Not a coincidence.

Her chest tightened.

She didn't touch the seat.

She just stared at it, frozen in place.

Her keys remained in the ignition, her fingers trembling slightly.

She whispered to herself, "Why is it still here..."

Her own perfume didn't linger like this. She barely used it. She applied it sparingly, always capped it tightly.

No matter how she tried to rationalise it, the truth pressed against her, insistent, unignorable.

Someone else had been in her car recently. Someone who didn't smell like her.

She swallowed hard, forcing her breathing to steady. She didn't have the strength to think deeper.

Not yet.

She started the engine.

But the air felt heavier than before.



NovaPulse was incredibly loud that morning, filled with chatter and clattering keyboards, but Xenia heard none of it.

Her thoughts were too loud.

Her cursor hovered above her draft document for 10 minutes before she realised, she hadn't typed a single word.

Mira walked past her desk, pausing just long enough to say, "Xenia, the client wants the angle to be more heartfelt. Can you refine the emotional arc by lunch?"

"Sure," Xenia said automatically.

But her voice sounded far away, even to herself.

She tried again to focus on her screen, but her mind kept replaying things she didn't want to face.

The perfume.

The giggles in the voice message.

Kieran's cold replies.

The way he hadn't asked how she was in days.

A quiet dread coiled inside her stomach.

When her phone buzzed on her desk, she flinched.

It wasn't Kieran. It was Lilith.

'Free tonight? We're thinking dinner.'

Xenia stared at the message.

She should go. It would be good for her. Normal. Stable.

But she felt too fragile for normalcy today.

She typed back, *'Might be late. Work.'*

It wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the truth either.



About 3 p.m., Kieran finally texted.

'Are you still alive?'

A joke. A casual check-in.

Something that would've comforted her for once.

But today, it only felt strange.

She typed, *'Yeah. Busy day.'*

He replied almost immediately.

'Same here. Yesterday was insane. Didn't even get home until dawn.'

Xenia froze.

Dawn?

But the voice message he sent the day before, the woman's giggles in the background, the casual tone...

He hadn't sounded like a man overwhelmed with work. He sounded like someone relaxed, accompanied, someone who wasn't alone.

She typed slowly, *'Oh? What happened yesterday?'*

His reply came after far too long.

'Nothing. Just work stuff, you wouldn't understand.'

The lie was too neat. Too convenient. Too empty.

A small, cold understanding crept through her, chilling her from inside out.

Work that requires someone to be out for almost 24 hours. Reaching home at dawn from work that Xenia couldn't understand?



By the time she drove home, the sun had already dipped behind the rows of townhouses in Sri Hartamas. The neighbourhood was quiet, warm lights glowing from windows as families settled in for dinner.

It should have felt comforting.

It didn't.

Xenia slowed to a stop in front of her unit, pulling into the small car porch attached to the townhouse. The sensor lights flickered on automatically as she parked, casting a pale glow over the short driveway and the familiar front steps she'd walk up her entire life.

She reached out to turn off the engine. Her right hand gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles paled.

She didn't reach for the door.

Not yet.

The quiet of the neighbourhood pressed against her windows, gentle but suffocating, and for a moment she sat there, breath shallow, unable to move.

Her car still smelled like the perfume. And suddenly, it wasn't just a scent anymore.

It was a presence. A possibility. A warning.

Evidence of something she didn't want to name.

Her throat tightened as she whispered into the empty car, "Kieran...what are you doing?"

The silence around her didn't answer.

But inside her chest, something fragile trembled – a knowing she could no longer push away.

This was the first real crack.

The one that would spread.

The one that would make her see everything she had tried so hard to ignore.

And once it started, there would be no going back.



When Xenia finally stepped out of the car, the night air felt colder than it should have been in Kuala Lumpur. She walked up the porch steps slowly, unlocking the door as though every movement demanded more strength than she had left.

She hadn't expected her parents to be home so early.

"Nini?" Her mother called from the dining table, where the soft clatter of plates echoed through the room. "You're back earlier than usual!"

Her father looked up from the newspaper. "Long day again?"

Xenia forced a smile – fragile, practiced.

"Yeah. Just tired dad."

Her mother stood, walking towards her with a dish towel still in hand. "Come eat. We waited a bit longer today. You need proper food, not whatever cold leftovers you usually grab after work."

Normally, that would have pulled a small laughter out of her.

Tonight, it only made her chest tighten.

She changed into her indoor slides and sat with them at the table, the warm dishes filling the air with comforting smells – ginger, sesame oil – the familiar blend of home she'd grown up with.

Her parents talked softly about their day, about the neighbours, about weekend plans. She nodded answered when prompted, smiled when she had to.

But her mind wasn't here.

It was replaying the sound she couldn't shake off.

The soft, feminine giggling in Kieran's voice message.

The perfume that didn't belong.

The lie tucked neatly behind his casual tone.

Her mother reached over and touched her hand.

“Your eyes look tired, Nini. Are you sleeping enough?”

Xenia nodded. “Work's just...been a lot lately mum.”

Her father gave her a sympathetic look. “You're still young. Don't burn yourself out before your career even starts.”

She nodded again, swallowing the lump in her throat.

They didn't know the exhaustion she carried wasn't just from work. They didn't know how she felt like a thread pulled so thin she could break with one more tug. They didn't know the kind of loneliness that came from being loved poorly by Kieran.

After dinner, she retreated to her room upstairs, under the guise of needing to finish some drafts.

Only when the door closed behind her allowed her shoulders to fall.

Her phone buzzed.

Kieran:

'I'm turning in early tonight. Need rest.'

Her breath hitched – a small, sharp ache forming beneath her ribs. She typed, fingers trembling.

'Where did you go yesterday? You sounded really busy.'

Minutes stretched. Her pulse quickened.

Finally.

'Just grabbed drinks with the guys. Nothing special.'

Her stomach dropped.

She stared at the message, feeling the distant murmur of her parents' voices downstairs – steady, comforting, the sound of a home she had always felt safe in.

And yet, she had never felt more unsafe in her own heart.

She typed again, fear tightening her fingers.

'Which guys?'

His reply came too fast.

'The usual. Don't overthink.'

But something inside her recoiled.

Overthinking.

She heard that word too often, from people who didn't want her to trust her own intuition.

Her chest constricted.

Still, she typed.

'Where did you guys hang out?'

A pause. Longer. Calculated.

Then.

'Changkat. Same place as always.'

Her eyes stung.

He had told her just a week ago how much he hated Changkat. How loud it was. How he wanted quieter places now.

The contradiction sliced through her.

She dropped her phone onto the bed, pressing her palms against her eyes as the truth – the truth she didn't want – pressed harder, and harder against the edges of her denial. She typed the only thing she could without falling apart.

'Okay. Rest well.'

His reply came instantly.

'Goodnight.'

She placed her phone faced down.

Then she pressed her forehead against her knees, the glow from her bedside lamp blurring as tears she refused to acknowledge trembled at her lashes.

Her parents thought she was resting.

Her friends thought she was busy.

Kieran thought she was oblivious.

But inside her chest, a deep, relentless ache was spreading – and she could no longer tell if it was fear, heartbreak, or awakening.

He didn't know that one misaligned detail had already cracked something so fragile inside of her. And she didn't know how close she was to breaking open the truth she had tried so hard not to see.



Xenia stepped out, needing a moment of air before forcing herself to look at her drafts again. The night breeze was cool, brushing against her skin, but it did little to settle the storm twisting in her chest.

She stood on the small porch, arms wrapped around herself, staring out at the quiet streets as if the stillness could anchor her.

“Nini?”

She turned towards the voice.

Xerius was already walking over from the adjoining walls from their units, his footsteps soft against the pavement. He had seen her standing outside and immediately came over, concern etched clearly in his expression.

He gave her a small, gentle wave. “Hey. You’re out early today.”

She tried to smile.

Tried to sound as normal as she could.

Tried as hard to pretend she wasn’t unravelling in her thoughts.

“Yeah... Just needed some air.”

Xerius stopped beside her porch, close enough to be supportive, far enough not to crowd her.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just work.”

The lie felt brittle, paper-thin.

He studied her face quietly – eyes searching, not prying, but recognising the shifts in her he had seen too many times before.

“You’re doing that thing again,” he said softly.

“What thing?” She blinked.

“You know that thing where you said you’re fine, but your shoulders say otherwise.”

Her breath faltered.

She hated how easily it was for him to see through her.

How he had always been able to read her silences better than most people could read her words.

“I’m just tired,” she insisted.

“Being tired doesn’t make voices shake,” he replied gently.

Her throat tightened.

He didn’t step closer.

Didn’t push.

He simply stayed where he was – present, careful, patient.

“Did something happen?” He asked, lowering his voice.

“No,” she whispered, too quickly, too defensively.

Xerius’ expression softened with quiet understanding.

“Nini... you don’t have to call it okay just because you’re scared of admitting otherwise.”

The words hit her like a soft blow – not painful, but disarming.

Pretend.

She had been pretending all day.

Pretending during dinner.

Pretending with their parents.

Pretending with Kieran.

Pretending with herself.

But with Xerius, she hated that she wanted to stop pretending.

“I’m fine,” she repeated, but her voice was barely more than a breath.

He didn’t argue.

He just nodded, the kind of nod that said, *‘I hear what you’re saying, and I hear what you’re not saying too’*.

“Alright,” he said softly. “But... if something feels wrong again, don’t just swallow it this time. I’m always here for you, okay?”

Something inside her trembled.

She nodded – small, fragile.

He lingered only a moment longer, then offered her a faint, reassuring half-smile before turning back towards his own house door.

“Goodnight, Nini.”

“Goodnight,” she murmured.

The moment she stepped into his home, her shoulders sagged as though his presence had been the only thing holding her upright.

He noticed.

He saw through her.

And that realisation shook her more than anything else that happened that day.

Chapter 4 – The Signs She Could No Longer Ignore

Xenia woke up before her alarm.

For a moment, she lay still, unsure whether the heaviness in her chest came from another night of restless sleep or from the truth settling deeper into her bones.

The world outside was quiet – the soft rustle of leaves, distant chatter of early risers, the low hum of morning traffic.

It should have grounded her.

It didn't.

Her phone buzzed beside her with a message from Kieran.

'Morning.'

Just that.

No warmth.

No check-in.

No acknowledgement of the distance that had grown between them overnight.

She stared at the word until it stopped meaning anything.

Then she typed, *'Morning.'*

Her reply felt thin, like writing on fragile paper. She closed her eyes for a moment.

Something was shifting.

Something was rising.

Something inside her whispered that today would not be the same as others – and she wasn't sure if she was ready.



When Xenia walked downstairs, her parents were already at the dining table.

Her mother looked up immediately.

“Nini, you're up early.”

Xenia forced a smile, “Couldn't sleep.”

Her father frowned slightly, “Again...?”

She sat down, fingers curling around the warm cup of soy milk her mother placed in front of her.

“Nini, I've noticed that you've been off lately,” her mother said gently. “Is it work? You know you don't have to push yourself this hard.”

“I suppose it's not work,” her father added quietly. “At least...not just work.”

Xenia's breath caught – barely, but enough.

Her parents exchanged a look she didn't miss.

A look of quiet worry.

A look of *we know something is hurting you*.

Xenia forced a steady voice, “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” her mother said softly. “And that’s completely okay.”

The honesty made something tremble inside her.

She didn’t cry. Didn’t break.

But she felt her chest tighten as though her ribs were struggling to hold her heart in place.

She changed the subject after that, asking about errands and groceries and weekend plans – anything to pull their attention away from the growing storm in her eyes.

But the shift had already happened.

Her parents knew.

Something about that terrified her more than anything Kieran might have been hiding from her.



Xenia arrived at NovaPulse Creative later that morning, trying to quiet the thoughts clawing at her.

Her phone buzzed with a message from Kieran again.

‘Last night was rough. Crashed early.’

Her grip on her phone tightened.

Last night... was rough?

But his *'goodnight'* message had come early. Too quickly, and he didn't sound tired. He didn't sound stressed. He sounded normal.

A lie so small it would've gone unnoticed before.

Now it cut deeper.

She typed, *'Are you okay?'*

His reply came almost instantly.

'Yeah. Just overslept. Heading out with the guys later.'

The guys.

It's always the guys.

But lately, nothing about his stories matched.

Not the timing.

Not the location.

Not the tone.

Not even the way he said their names.

The pieces she had been avoiding were starting to align – whether she wanted them to or not.



At lunchtime, Xenia went to the bathroom, splashed water on her face and stared at her reflection.

Her eyes looked tired.

Not from a lack of sleep but from the way she carried something she couldn't speak aloud.

She pressed her palms against the sink, exhaling shakily.

She didn't want to lose him.

She didn't want to accuse him.

She didn't want to become the insecure girlfriend she had always feared being.

But her intuition wasn't quiet anymore.

It was screaming.

Something was off.

Deeply off.

And the girl in the mirror – the girl who had always been so patient, so understanding, so willing to shrink herself just to keep others close – looked like someone who was finally reaching the end of her limits.

She whispered to her reflection, "I don't know if I can pretend anymore."

The words echoed in the small bathroom, soft but powerful.

In that moment, she felt something she hadn't felt in a long time.

An ache that wasn't fear.

It was awakening.



Xenia stepped out for lunch, sitting alone on a bench facing the courtyard near NovaPulse Creative. Her body ached from exhaustion, but her mind ached more.

Just as she lifted her sandwich, her phone buzzed.

Lilith:

'Dinner at The Social tonight? Everyone's going. Kieran too.'

Her chest tightened.

A week ago, she would have agreed instantly.

Not because she wanted to go – but because missing out made her feel easily replaceable.

Today, something felt different.

She typed slowly, *'Might be too tired.'*

Lilith replied immediately.

'Xenia, don't be dramatic. We barely see you anymore. Just come.'

Xenia's breath hitched.

It wasn't supportive.

It wasn't even neutral.

It was dismissive. As always.

But for the first time, Xenia saw it.

Fully.

Clearly.

Lilith wasn't checking on her. She just wanted Xenia to be present because chaos was more fun with her around.

Xenia typed, *'Maybe. I'll see.'*

For the first time, Lilith's pressure felt transparent.

And instead of guilt, Xenia felt something unfamiliar bloom in her chest.

Resistance.



As Xenia returned to the office, her phone buzzed again.

Zyon:

'Hey, just checking in. Are you feeling okay these days?'

She blinked, surprised.

Zyon rarely texted first. He never hovered, never intruded.

But he always noticed.

Xenia typed, *'Yeah... I think so.'*

Three dots appeared. Then disappeared. Then reappeared.

'If you have to say you think so, then you're probably not.'

Her teeth pressed lightly against her lips. Another message came.

'I won't tell you what to do but don't let anyone treat you like you're optional.'

Xenia froze.

Optional.

Something inside her cracked at that word – not painfully, but truthfully.

She typed a quiet, *'Thank you.'*

Zyon didn't reply after that.

He didn't have to.

The truth had already landed.



That evening after work, Xenia found Xerius outside watering the small row of plants between their townhouses. He smiled gently when he saw her.

"Nini, long day?"

She nodded, standing beside him.

He didn't pry. He never did.

But today, as he watered the small potted basil plant Christabelle loved, he spoke quietly – almost to himself. “You know... When I was younger, I stayed with a group of people who drained me too. I kept thinking I had to stay because leaving felt like starting over.”

Xenia turned slightly towards him.

He continued, voice soft, reflective.

“I kept trying to be the version of myself they liked. The fun one. The available one. The one who didn't complain.”

He inhaled slowly.

“But the truth? I was dying inside and didn't even notice it. Not until one day I woke up and didn't recognise my own voice.”

Xenia swallowed hard. He wasn't talking about her. But somehow, he was.

“Did...did you leave them?” Xenia asked quietly.

Xerius smiled faintly, eyes warm. “I didn't leave them, Nini. I left the version of myself that needed them.”

He sat the watering can down.

“And suddenly, everything fell into place.”

Xenia lowered her gaze, her heart thudding painfully.

Xerius had been her mirror her whole life – but tonight, for the first time, she realised he was also her future.



Later that night, Xenia sat on her bed, scrolling aimlessly through her phone, Kieran's chat pinned on top.

She typed, *'Are you still out with the guys?'*

He replied quickly.

'Yeah, still out. Long night.'

Her heart tightened.

A second later, he sent a photo.

A glass of Martell VSOP sat on the table – amber and sharp under the warm bar lighting – and beside it, the bottle stood angled just enough to look intentional. The background was dim, blurred, empty.

Everything about the picture felt wrong.

Too curated.

Too clean.

Too staged.

Something tugged at her instinct.

She zoomed in.

The reflection on the glass – faint but unmistakable – wasn't a man.

It was a woman's silhouette.

Soft hair falling over one shoulder.

A curve of jawline.

Close.

Close enough to be sitting right next to him.

Her stomach dropped.

He didn't know how she saw it.

He didn't realise the slip.

He didn't think she would look that closely.

She didn't reply.

Not a question.

Not a reaction.

Not a single word.

For the first time, she let the lie sit there between them – exposed, undeniable, unmasked.

And in the quiet of her room, with her parents' soft voices drifting faintly from downstairs, Xenia felt something cold and sharp settle into her chest.

This wasn't paranoia.

This wasn't overthinking.

This wasn't fear spiralling in the dark.

This was evidence.

Quiet.

Accidental.

Devastating.



She locked her phone and set it aside, her breaths trembling.

Everything she ignored, excused, and convinced herself to stay for – were aligning into a truth she did not want.

Xerius' voice echoed in her mind.

Nini, you don't have to call it okay just because you're scared of admitting otherwise.

For the first time, Xenia whispered into the empty room, "I think I've been lying to myself."

Her voice cracked. She wasn't crying. Not yet. But her heart was.

This time, she couldn't numb it away anymore.

Chapter 5 – The Moment She Stopped Pretending

Xenia didn't sleep.

She lay on her side, staring at the faint glow from her curtains as the hours slipped by. Every time closed her eyes, that image resurfaced.

The glass of Martell VSOP.

The bottle angled beside it, and the reflection of a woman who was not her.

Her breath stuttered every time she saw it.

She kept telling herself it could have been a coincidence – wrong angle, strange lighting, random shadow. But every part of her body reacted as if it wasn't.

By 3 a.m., her chest ached from the way she held her breath without realising. She whispered into the darkness, "Why does it hurt this much?"

But the room remained silent – cold, unmoving, and painfully honest.

Her pillow dampened slightly beneath her cheek, though she hadn't realised she was crying. The tears weren't loud. They weren't dramatic. They were the kind that fell when a truth finally caught up with a heart that had been refusing to see it.

For the first time, she didn't try to stop herself.



Morning came, but nothing felt new. Her parents were in the kitchen when she went downstairs, the smell of kaya toast and milo malt filling the air.

"Nini," her mother said gently, noticing the puffiness around her eyes. "Didn't sleep well?"

A soft shake of her head was all Xenia could manage.

Her father lowered the newspaper slightly. “Nini, you know you don’t have to pretend you’re fine, right?”

The words cracked something inside her again. But she forced a small smile – a habit she couldn’t seem to break.

“I’ll be okay.”

Except, she wasn’t. Not even close.

Her mother touched her arm, “Take it slow today, alright?”

Xenia nodded, swallowing the ache rising in her throat. She wasn’t used to being taken care of. Today, the sharp contrast between her parents’ tenderness and Kieran’s coldness made the truth sting deeper.



At work, she tried to drown herself in tasks – emails, drafts, presentations, literally anything. But every few minutes, her thoughts drifted back.

The perfume in her car.

The giggles behind the voice message.

The contradictions.

The lies.

The photo.

The silhouette.

What she once brushed aside now formed a single sentence she avoided like fire.

He's with someone else.

Her hands trembled as she held her pen. Her heartbeat throbbed behind her ears. She felt sick – not the physical kind, but the kind that comes from realisation sinking in too deep, not fast.

A quiet truth whispered through her bones.

He doesn't love you the way you love him. Not anymore. Maybe not ever.

She gripped the edge of her desk, knuckles pale.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe.



By lunchtime, she sat alone in the stairwell, the cool concrete wall against her back, grounding her more than the entire office could.

She unlocked her phone. Kieran had sent nothing. Not a good morning. Not a check-in. Not a question. Not a single word.

It had been eight hours.

Her thumb hovered over his chat.

She could ask.

She could confront.

She could demand the truth he kept trying to cover.

But her chest tightened violently at the thought of it.

Confronting him meant hearing the answer out loud, and it meant that there was not going back.

A single tear slipped down her cheek. She whispered to no one in particular, “I don’t think I’m ready...”

But avoidance wasn’t safety anymore.

It was suffocation.



As Xenia stepped outside the building that evening, the sky was streaked with pink and gold, but she barely saw it.

Her hands were ice to touch.

Her throat dry.

Her legs unsteady.

She knew she couldn’t keep living in this limbo – half-aware, half-terrified.

She needed to know, even if it shattered her. Or, even if it broke her heart beyond repair.

Her phone buzzed. She froze. Kieran had finally texted her.

‘I might be out late tonight.’

Out late.

Again. Of course.

Xenia stared at the message, her heartbeat slowing to something painfully steady. For the first time, the fear in her chest wasn't about losing him.

It was about losing herself.

She exhaled softly, a fragile tremor living her lips.

“No more lies,” she whispered.

Not to him.

Not to herself.

She locked her phone.

Xenia finally felt something stir beneath all the ache – resolve.

Quiet, but unmistakable.

Tonight, she would stop running from the truth and find out what she'd been trying so hard not to see.

She was done pretending.



Xenia knew it was a matter of time she had to stop pretending and face the confrontation she couldn't run from. She paced the length of her room, the soft glow of her bedside lamp casting long shadows across the walls. She had read Kieran's message at least 20 times.

'I might be out late tonight.'

It was as if every night he wanted to disappear quietly.

Her chest tightened. She didn't want to hear the truth out loud. She didn't want to break apart. But pretending was hurting more than the truth could ever.

Her phone buzzed again.

Kieran:

'Don't wait up.'

Her breath shuddered – a small, painful sound.

She sat on the edge of her bed, staring at his message. Her fingers trembled as she typed.

'Can we talk?'

Three dots appeared. Stopped. Then appeared again.

'About what?'

Xenia's heart dropped.

He knew. The way men always know when a woman stops believing their lies.

Her fingers moved slowly, each word feeling like a cut resurfacing.

'I need to know if there's someone else.'

She held her breath.

Once again, his response came quickly – too quickly.

'Nini, don't start. You're overthinking.'

Her heart thudded painfully.

Her family-given nickname – the one he rarely used – sounded so wrong coming from him.

Manipulative.

Dulling.

A blade hidden in the softness.

Her eyes burned. She typed, *'I saw the reflection in the photo.'*

Silence. A long, heavy silence that said more than denial ever could.

Then suddenly, *'You're imagining things.'*

Xenia closed her eyes, and for the first time, she didn't fold.

Didn't shrink.

Didn't apologise.

Her voice cracked as she whispered into the empty room, "No. I'm finally seeing things clearly."

She typed again.

'Kieran. Tell me the truth.'

Another pause – longer, heavier, damning.

Finally.

'It's complicated.'

Her breath left her body.

Those words weren't denial, reassurance nor love.

They were a confession.

Everything inside her went quiet, still, and numb.

She typed the final sentence with trembling but certainty.

'Then I think we're done.'

He replied seconds later.

'Well, sure. If that's what you want.'

Her vision blurred.

He didn't fight.

He didn't ask.

He didn't care enough to explain.

All of that, they hurt more than anything else.

Xenia set her phone down gently, as though placing a fragile relic on a shelf – something she once cherished but could no longer keep.

When the tears came, they weren't loud nor dramatic.

They were soft – silent, exhausted.

The kind of tears that only fall when she finally faced the truth that she'd been avoiding.

He never chose her.

And she finally chose herself.

Chapter 6 – The First Step Back to Herself

Xenia woke up with swollen eyes and a hollow ache behind her ribs. Her pillow was damp, her throat raw.

Her mother pushed the door open, gently.

“Nini, breakfast is ready.”

Xenia tried to sit up, but the weight in her chest pulled her back down.

Her mother paused, eyes softening instantly.

“Oh, sweetheart...”

Without asking a single question, she crossed the room and pulled Xenia into her arms.

The moment she felt warmth, Xenia broke down again – quietly, the way someone breaks when they have no strength left to hide.

Her mother stroked her hair. “You don’t have to tell me anything now.” She whispered. “Just breathe.”

For the first time in weeks, Xenia let herself be held.

Not judged.

Not dismissed.

Not gaslighted.

Just held.

And something inside her – something small, wounded, and tired – began to thaw.

Just a little.



The entire day felt like walking underwater. She ate because her mother insisted. She drank water because her father kept giving her glasses. She showered because she needed to feel clean.

But everything felt heavy.

When her phone buzzed, her pulse spiked – until she saw the name, Xerius.

‘Saw the dim light on in your room all night. Are you feeling alright?’

A lump formed in her throat.

She typed, *‘Nope.’*

A few seconds later, Xerius replied.

‘I’m outside. Just in case you need company.’

She walked to the front porch.

Xerius stood by the shared wall between their townhouses, hands in his pockets, expression gentle – something in between worry and patience.

When he saw her face, the concern deepened.

“Oh, Nini...”

His voice cracked just enough for her to crumble again. He didn’t ask what happened. He didn’t push for an answer.

He just stepped closer, stopping right beside her.

“I’m here,” he said softly. “As long as you need.”

Finally, Xenia didn’t feel like she was drowning alone.



Later that evening, as Xenia lay under her blankets, staring at the ceiling, she whispered a truth she had never dared to say aloud. “I deserve better, don’t I?”

Her voice shook.

But for the first time, she believed it.

Not fully.

Not strongly.

Not consistently.

But enough for a flicker of hope to appear.

A small flame – a fragile, but alive one.

Tomorrow would hurt. The days after might hurt even more.

But tonight, for the first time, she chose herself over a man who never chose her.

And recovery began quietly. Not with strength, confidence, nor clarity, but with one trembling fragile truth.

Xenia won’t go back to where she came from.



Days passed, and Xenia pushed through the final stretch of her internship at NovaPulse Creative. The deadlines grew sharper. Her energy grew thinner – her emotions lived somewhere between numbness and ache.

She told no one at work what had happened with Kieran. It wasn't shame – it was exhaustion. She didn't have the strength to explain a heartbreak she barely had words for.

But the news didn't stay quiet for long.

Lilith found out, and she didn't keep things to herself.

It spread through their friend group with a speed Xenia didn't expect – and a cruelty she didn't deserve.



It all happened on a Thursday.

Xenia stayed late in the office, finishing her last project for NovaPulse. She unlocked her phone while waiting for a render to export – and froze.

The group chat with her friends was exploding.

She tapped into the notifications, and the world fell silent around her. Lines of messages flew upwards, but none of them were about her. They were all circling him.

Caleb:

'@Kieran, if you need company to drink tonight, let me know.'

Maya:

'@Kieran, dude you're handling it all so well, proud of you!'

Lucas:

'@Kieran, forget about her, she's too sensitive anyway.'

Lilith:

'Ya @Kieran, just chill with us tonight, don't think too much.'

Not a single message checking on Xenia.

Not one person asked how she was coping.

Not one of them reached out privately.

Everyone had already chosen who to comfort, to side, to protect, and to believe.

Then, she saw the one message that cracked something deep inside her chest.

Kieran:

'I don't even know anymore LOL. She was acting weird the past few months. From what y'all said about her to me, and from what I could see, I don't even know what to say anymore hahaha.'

Her breath left her like someone who had punched her in the chest.

He laughed.

At her pain.

At their breakup.

At the lies his friends had fed him.

She scrolled up and reread it – over and over – hoping she misread something.

But no.

He confirmed it himself.

He chose their version of her over the truth she gave him. He believed rumours they had whispered behind her back – rumours she never knew existed; spoken by people she once called friends.

He let them paint her as *weird, emotional, problematic*.

And he agreed – publicly, casually, carelessly.

Not defending her, not correcting them, and not even hesitating.

Something inside her chest tore painfully, quietly.

She placed her phone down on the glossy office desk, suddenly aware of how empty the room felt. How loud the silence was. How deeply alone she truly was in that group.

Her fingers shook; she didn't cry, not this time.

There was something beyond just sadness now – something colder, clearer.

A finality.

A truth she could no longer pretend she didn't know.

They were never her friends, and he was never her safe place.

She didn't reply to the group chat – she just exited the application.

Locked the screen.

Closed the chapter.

This time, she felt done with them.



That night, she reached out to the only friend whom she could still trust – Zion.

Xenia:

‘Everything’s over.’

Zyon replied instantly.

‘I’m picking you up. Don’t leave the office yet.’

When he arrived, he didn’t hug her or ask her to explain. He simply held out a familiar cup of bubble tea – her usual – and nodded towards the elevator.

“Come. Let’s go distract your brain.”

He brought her to Xerius’ home, where Xerius was already setting up Mario Kart on the TV. He looked up the moment she entered.

“Nini...come here.”

His voice wasn’t loud or dramatic. It was steady – warm, home.

The three of them leaned back on the couch, controllers in hand.

For the first time in a long time, Xenia wasn't overthinking.

She was laughing – small, tired, but real – each time Zyon missed a drift or Xerius crashed into a banana peel.

For a moment, she felt something like relief.

Something like belonging.

Something like breathing.

And for once – just once – she wasn't a burden.

She wasn't an afterthought.

She wasn't someone to gossip about.

She was simply Nini – and she was safe.



Xenia woke up on the next morning with a dull ache pulsing beneath her ribs – the kind of heaviness that didn't come from crying, but from realising something that could never be reversed.

She didn't pick up her phone for a long time.

But when she finally did, the group chat had exploded again – with more noise that revolved around him.

Caleb:

'@Kieran!! Still alive?'

Maya:

'@Kieran, come join us for brunch later.'

Lucas:

'@Kieran, you feeling okay? Want me to pick you up?'

Lilith:

'@Kieran, just ignore her, you deserve better!'

And then – the message that finally shattered her remaining illusions.

Kieran:

'I'm okay LOL. Just tired. Going for drinks later again. Thanks guys.'

Thanks guys.

He didn't mention her – didn't check on her, didn't care. Not even an attempt to hide how much he preferred their comfort over hers.

When she scrolled further, another message from Lilith blinked on the screen.

Lilith:

'To be honest, she's always like that. Too emotional. Don't think so much about it @Kieran.'

Xenia exhaled shakily, so that was what they thought of her – emotional, problematic, overreacting.

And the worst part?

None of them said it privately. They said it openly – in a group chat she was still in – almost as if she didn't exist. Almost as if her pain was their entertainment. A small, sharp breath escaped her.

She didn't reply.

Instead, she tapped the top right corner of the screen:

Leave Group.

Confirm.

The screen blinked, and suddenly, the noise was gone.

Just silence – a deep, clean silence.

She expected guilt, regret, and fear. But what washed over her instead was relief – soft, immediate, startling relief.

For the first time, she could breathe without feeling someone else's judgement on her neck.

Her friend group hadn't abandoned her.

They simply revealed they were never her friends to begin with.



Later that afternoon, as she sat on her bed scrolling through Pinterest boards and half-finished drafts, her phone buzzed.

Zyon:

'Just checking – reached home yet? Eaten lunch?'

Zenia stared at the message for a moment.

So simple.

So human.

So unlike anything she had received from Kieran in months.

She typed, *'Yeah. I'm okay.'*

A lie – but a softer one.

The dots appeared.

Zyon:

'Liar. Come outside.'

She blinked. Before she could ask, another message came.

'I brough chocolate bread. And games.'

She snorted under her breath – a sound she didn't expect to make today – and slipped into her slides.

When she opened her front door, Zyon was already sitting on the porch steps, holding a small bakery bag in one hand and a Nintendo Switch in the other.

He patted the step beside him, "Sit. Eat. Brain off."

She sat.

Not because she felt obligated.

Not because she didn't know where else to go.

But because her body finally chose what her heart needed.

As she unwrapped the bread, he nudged her shoulder lightly.

"You don't have to pretend around me, you know?"

Her throat tightened. "I'm not pretending." She whispered.

Her gave her a look – gentle, knowing.

"Xenia, you're allowed to break. It doesn't make you weak."

Her vision blurred.

She blinked hard, swallowing the lump forming in her throat.

Zyon didn't push.

He didn't hug her.

He didn't offer empty encouragement.

He just sat there – steady, warm, quietly present.

And for once, she didn't feel like she had to be small to be accepted.



That evening, she drifted next door to Xerius' townhouse almost instinctively. He opened the door before she even knocked.

“Nini.”

Her name – soft, grounding, familiar.

She stepped inside, and he didn't ask a single question. Instead, he handed her a blanket and turned on a movie she had mentioned once a few months ago.

“You don't have to talk,” he said, settling beside her. “Just rest.”

Her eyes stung.

This gentle presence and unspoken care were something she didn't know how to accept yet.

And for the first time in a long time, she didn't feel guilty for needing someone. She just allowed herself to exist – quietly, softly, safely – between the two people who didn't need her to perform. Only to breathe.



The first sign that the past wasn't done with her came on a night that was supposed to feel ordinary.

Xenia had finally found a rhythm again – soft, quiet evenings spent folding laundry, journaling half-thoughts she never finished, and letting the background hum of her neighbourhood settle her heart.

For once, her chest didn't feel tight – the silence wasn't painful, healing didn't feel impossible.

She thought the worst was finally left behind her.

Until her phone lit up beside her laundry basket, with a name she no longer wanted to remember.

Kieran.

The glow of the screen felt unnaturally bright in the dimness of her room.

It wasn't shocking, but it wasn't neutral either.

It was the kind of message that arrives only when someone realised the world doesn't orbit them like they thought. The kind of message sent by a man who lost the comfort he once took for granted.

Xenia's hands stilled in her lap – not from fear, but from a quiet, unmistakable certainty.

Of course he would come back. Men like him always do.

She unlocked her phone.

Kieran:

'Can we talk?'

Xenia exhaled through her nose, more tired than anything.

She typed:

'Talk about what?'

He replied instantly, as if waiting by his phone.

Kieran:

'I've been thinking a lot lately. Things haven't felt the same without you.'

A humourless breath escaped her. Of course – loneliness always made men nostalgic, not love, accountability, nor remorse.

Before she could reply, another message came.

Kieran:

'I tried going out with the guys but it's just not the same. I thought maybe we could... try again? Talk it out?'

Those words coming from him felt hollow.

The same man who laughed at her in the group chat, when her world was cracking.

The same man who believed rumours before believing her.

Xenia typed slowly, deliberately.

'Lol. Why now?'

His reply came back too quickly – too eager, too nervous, too lonely.

Kieran:

'I don't know. I think I've realised that no one understands me like you do.'

Her jaw tightened.

There it was.

The truth behind every returning ex.

It wasn't about her – it was about what she gave – the comfort, the softness, the emotional labour, the version of home she created around him.

She swallowed once, then typed. *'I'm obviously not coming back.'*

A pause.

Then a flood of messages.

Kieran:

'Wait what? Why?'

'You said you loved me.'

'What do you mean by you're obviously not coming back?'

'Don't be dramatic babe...'

'We can fix this!'

'Else your friends would think you're being emotional again.'

The last message killed any remaining softness she still had.

Her fingers were steady as she typed the final message, she would ever send him.

'You let your friends define me. Laughed about me in front of them. Believed rumours they said over the truth. I've got nothing left to say to you.'

She blocked him – no shaking hands, no racing heart – just a quiet, steady finality.

And for the first time since their breakup, she felt something close to peace.

A soft breath.

A returning heartbeat.

A sense of space inside her chest.

Kieran had come back, but she did not.

And that was the difference between the girl she was and the woman she was becoming.

Chapter 7 – A Softer Kind of Beginning

The final week of Xenia’s internship passed in a strange blend of numbness and clarity.

NovaPulse Creative buzzed with its usual chaotic rhythm – keyboards clicking, Mira calling out instructions across the office, designers rushing to finish last-minute revisions – but Xenia moved through it all quietly, like someone standing behind a glass wall.

She did her tasks.

She attended meetings.

She delivered her final deck on time.

But she didn’t overexert herself anymore.

She didn’t volunteer for extra work to prove her worth, nor apologise for things that weren’t her fault.

Something inside her had shifted – subtly, firmly, irreversible.

And people noticed.

Mira paused by her desk during her final evaluation, flipping through Xenia’s project log. “You’ve grown a lot these three months,” she said, not unkindly. “You still overwork yourself, but your instincts are stronger. You’ll be fine out there.”

It was the first time, feedback from a superior didn’t send Xenia spiralling.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

She meant it.

When she walked out of NovaPulse Creative for the last time, badge returned and laptop surrendered, she expected to feel lost.

But instead, she felt free.

A little tired.

A little fragile.

But free.

Like she could finally breathe in a way she hadn't realised she'd forgotten.



That evening, she sat at the dining table with her parents, idly tearing a piece of rot canai while her mother chatted about weekend errands.

“Nini,” her father said suddenly, lowering his newspaper. “Now that your internship is over, what’s next for you?”

Xenia hesitated. She didn't have an answer ready – no rehearsed plan, no automatic explanation, no pressure to perform.

“I think...” She said slowly, “I want a little break before finding a full-time job.”

Her mother immediately nodded. “Good, you should rest. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard through this internship.”

Her father hummed in agreement. “Work can wait, but not your health.”

The relief that washed through her was warm and overwhelming.

She wasn't disappointing anyone.

She wasn't falling behind others.

She was simply choosing herself.



Later that night, she stood outside the townhouse to throw away some trash, only to see Xerius locking his car after coming home from work.

He waved at her immediately.

“Nini! Perfect timing!” He said, leaning against the porch pillar between their units. “Christabelle and I were just talking about you.”

Xenia blinked. “About me?”

“Yeah.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, his smile soft. “You’re done with your internship now, right?”

She nodded.

“Well,” he continued. “The twins just started their preschool break. Christabelle and I were thinking... if you’re taking some time off work anyways, would you want to help us look after them during the break?”

Xenia stared at him, stunned.

“We’ll pay you, obviously,” he added quickly, lifting both palms. “Don’t worry about that. We just – well, the boys adore you, and it’s been hard finding someone we trust.”

Her chest warmed despite the exhaustion she’d been carrying for weeks.

“You... want me to babysit Valerius and Kyrius?” She asked.

Xerius beamed. “Yup, exactly! They’d lose their minds from happiness.”

A small laugh escaped her before she could even hold it back. It felt good – light, unforced, real.

“Sure,” she said. “I’d love to!”

Xerius sighed in dramatic relief. “Thank God. For a second I thought you were going to say no and break their little hearts.”

She rolled her eyes gently. “You mean *your* heart?”

He grinned. “Okay, maybe mine too.”

For the first time in weeks, the night didn’t feel heavy.

It felt like a beginning.

A quiet one – gentle, hopeful, and finally hers.



Xenia woke earlier than usual, sunlight spilling softly through her bedroom curtains. It was the first day she'd woke up without rushing to her car, without worrying about deadlines, without mentally preparing herself for Mira's clipped instructions.

Instead, she let herself ease into a warm bubble bath, the steam softening the lingering ache in her muscles. The heat washed over her slowly, untying knots she didn't realise she'd been carrying for months – in her shoulders, in her back, in the quiet places of her heart.

When she stepped out, she wrapped herself in her bathrobe and took her time drying her hair with a hair dryer, moving the warm air through each section gently. No rushing. No frantic tugging. No reason to hurry.

It felt strangely comforting – deliberate, soft, almost like reclaiming pieces of herself she forgot existed.

She dressed herself in an oversized black Essentials T-shirt that draped loosely over her frame, paired with a pair of black soft jogger shorts that felt more like clouds than clothing. A perfect outfit combination which made her feel both comfortable and light. She tied her hair into a messy bun, a few strands falling loose to frame her face naturally.

It felt unfamiliar, moving at a human pace instead of the robotic repetition she had lived in for months – wake up, rush, overthink, survive.

This morning, she didn't have to survive anything, like someone learning how to live again.

When she stepped outside, the cool Sri Hartamas morning breeze met her, carrying the faint smell of someone cooking nasi lemak down the street. The neighbourhood was quiet, unhurried. For the first time in months, she matched its rhythm.

She knocked lightly on Xerius' door.

It swung open almost instantly.

Xerius stood there with a hopelessly exhausted expression, hair messy, shirt slightly crumpled. “Nini...” he breathed dramatically. “Save us, please...”

Xenia blinked. “You okay?”

“No...” he whispered. “They woke up with *energy*.”

As if on cue, a shriek erupted inside the house.

“DADDY!!! VALERIUS TOOK MY CAR!!!”

“IT’S MY CAR!!”

“IT’S NOT YOUR CAR-”

Xerius closed his eyes like a man praying for divine intervention.

Xenia tried not to laugh. “Where’s Christabelle?”

“She’s hiding upstairs,” he said flatly. “And honestly? I don’t blame her.”

Xenia stepped inside.

Two small boys – Valerius and Kyrius – were engaged in what could only be described as a fast and furious level, turf war over a tiny red Hot Wheels car. The moment they spotted her, everything stopped.

“AUNTY NINI!!!”

The twins launched themselves at her with absolutely zero hesitation.

Xenia stumbled a little under the impact but laughed – genuinely, freely, without force – as they wrapped their tiny arms around her thighs.

“You grew stronger,” she teased.

Kyrius puffed up proudly. “We drink milk!”

Valerius nodded solemnly. “A lot of milk!”

Xerius sighed. “This level of chaos? They didn’t drink milk. They probably drank espresso behind our backs.”

Xenia crouched down to their height. “Okay, what happened here?”

Both twins began explaining at the same time, dramatically, loudly, passionately – complete with huge, exaggerated gestures and sound effects.

She couldn’t understand a single word, but something warm bloomed in her chest anyway. She missed feeling like this – these innocent noises, this uncomplicated affection, this reminder that life still had softness in it.

“Okay,” she said, raising her right hand like a football referee. “New rule. We take turns. Ky Ky gets it for five minutes, then Vale Vale. Deal?”

They paused, each pressing a tiny finger to their chin like two miniature philosophers – a gesture they had clearly picked up from watching whenever Xerius was deep in thought. Then they leaned towards each other, whispering nonsense only they understood, giggling halfway through.

After their very serious twin meeting, they turned back to Xenia and nodded so enthusiastically that their fluffy dark brown hair bounced with every movement, eyes sparkling with excitement.

“DEAL!!!” They shouted in perfect, delighted unison.

Xerius stared at her like she had just negotiated world peace. “I’ve been trying to do that for *days*, Nini.”

She shrugged lightly. “They listen to gentle voices.”

“Oh,” he said dryly. “So, because I yell at times doesn’t mean I’m gentle?”

She smiled. “Yeah. *Exactly.*”

Christabelle appeared at the stairs then – her long blonde balayage hair loose and messily pushed over one shoulder, strands sticking out like she’d fought a small war in her sleep. She wore an oversized T-shirt that nearly swallowed her frame, the hem uneven from where she’d yanked it down while stumbling out of bed. Her eyes were half-lidded behind a pair of clear transparent-frame glasses, dark circles visible even from a distance, and she clutched the stair railing like it was the only thing keeping her upright.

She looked barely alive, but in the affectionate, slightly comedic way only parents of toddler-age twins could manage – equal parts exhausted, resigned, and deeply grateful that someone else was finally in the house to save them.

“Nini!” She said with heartfelt relief. “Bless you. I slept for 15 minutes max, uninterrupted. At 30, I genuinely cannot survive on this kind of nonsense anymore. When I was your age, maybe. But now?” She sighed, waving a limp hand. “My body is filing a complaint to HR.”

Xenia couldn’t help it – a soft laugh slipped out, the kind that warmed her chest more than she expected. “You still look better than I do on eight hours,” she said gently. “But... please go back to sleep before you collapse on the stairs.”

Christabelle gave her a flat, unamused stare – the exact expression of a woman who had accepted defeat long ago.

Xenia raised both hands in surrender, smiling. “Okay, okay. I get it. Motherhood in a battlefield. I’m just the reinforcement.”

As if summoned by the commotion – or by Christabelle’s dramatic suffering – Bibi, their 3-year-old cream and brown Shih-Malt, trotted out from the kitchen after finishing her breakfast. Her tiny paws pattered against the tiles as she surveyed the room like a tired supervisor checking on her chaotic employees.

Upon spotting Xenia, Bibi immediately perked up and bounded towards her, tail wagging furiously.

Christabelle gestured weakly. “See? Even this fella knows salvation has arrived.”

The twins, recharged by Xenia’s arrival, immediately darted back towards their playroom – a small, colourful space on the ground floor just beside the living room, separated by a sliding frosted door covered in stickers they had stuck on themselves.

“Ky Ky! Vale Vale! No running in the house!” Christabelle called out half-heartedly.

The boys ignored her entirely.

Xenia laughed under her breath, hands settling on her hips as she watched them disappear into the playroom, their shrieks of delight echoing off the walls. She followed them with her gaze through the partially open door.

Inside, the twins had already flung themselves onto the padded playmat, giggling as they resumed their negotiations over the toy car. Bibi, now full awake from all the commotion, trotted after them with her fluffy cream-coloured tail raised high.

She barked once – a tiny, excited sound – then pounced gently onto a plush dinosaur, earning matching delighted squeals from both boys.

“Bibi! No biting Rexy!” Valerius scolded dramatically.

Kyrius immediately defended her. “Bibi is *hungry*, okay! She needs snack! You look at her face!”

Bibi, who was absolutely not hungry after just finishing breakfast, tilted her head with the most innocent expression Xenia had ever seen.

Xenia felt something warm tug at her chest – a small, gentle motion she hadn’t felt in weeks.

She stood outside the playroom doorway, arms loosely crossed now instead of braced around herself, watching the three of them tumble around on the floor. For the first time in what felt like forever, the tightness in her ribs loosened a little.

The sight was ordinary, chaotic, tender. It felt like a kind of peace she had forgotten how to recognise.

A soft presence shifted beside her.

Xerius had wandered over from the kitchen, one hand still holding a half-washed bowl, the other braced casually against the doorway. He followed her gaze into the playroom, a small, tired smile forming on his lips.

He didn’t look at her first. He looked at the twins – his boys – shrieking while Bibi flopped dramatically onto her side like she was overwhelmed by toddler energy.

Then he looked at Xenia. His expression softened. “You okay?” He asked quietly, voice low enough so that only she could hear.

Xenia kept her eyes on the playroom, afraid that meeting his gaze might undo her.

“Yeah,” she murmured. “They’re... sweet.”

“They adore you.” Xerius said simply.

She swallowed, the warmth in her chest flickering again.

“They make things feel lighter.” She whispered.

Xerius exhaled a soft breath – almost a relief, almost a confirmation of something he’d suspected.

He leaned his shoulder gently against the doorframe, just near enough to be grounding but not close enough to overwhelm her.

“That’s good,” he said softly. “You deserve things that feels light Nini.”

She finally turned her head slightly in his direction.

His eyes were warm – steady, quietly protective.

And for a moment, in the doorway of the playroom with toddlers’ laughter swirling around them, Xenia felt the faintest spark of safety.

Safety she didn’t need to earn.

Safety she didn’t need to chase.

Safety that stayed.



About an hour later, the house felt noticeably calmer.

The twins were still in the playroom, their laughter drifting softly from behind the frosted sliding door. Even Bibi had settled into a nap somewhere near the boys' scattered plush toys, her fluffy tail twitching every time one of them squealed too loudly.

Christabelle emerged from upstairs looking significantly more alive than she had earlier – hair tied up properly now, glasses straightened, and wearing a slightly fresher oversized T-shirt. A short rest had softened the exhaustion in her eyes.

She spotted Xenia arranging the cushions on the couch and called out gently, “Nini, come to the kitchen. I just made tea.”

Xenia followed her into the warm, familiar space. The kitchen smelled like Malaysian-style milk tea – rich, creamy, made the way mamaks did, but perfected in Christabelle's own pot. Two mugs sat on the table, steam curling upwards like soft ribbons.

“It's Saturday,” Christabelle sighed as she sat down. “Everyone's off. Which means... I can finally sit for five minutes without someone crying, screaming, or throwing a dinosaur at my head.”

Xenia let out a soft laugh, lifting her mug. The first sip tasted like comfort – warm, sweet, soothing.

Christabelle leaned back, stretching her neck. “At this age, everything creaks. I swear I woke up this morning from the sound of my own spine.”

Xenia laughed. “You look completely fine.”

“Fine?” Christabelle scoffed. “Nini, I look like I've been negotiating peace treaties with my two tiny dictators.”

Before Xenia could respond, a small patter of paws interrupted them.

Bibi trotted into the kitchen with the confidence of a creature who fully believed she was second-in-command of the household. She paused at Christabelle's feet, then at Xenia's, before directing her full attention to the plate of tea biscuits on the table.

Her eyes widened, and her tail wagged once. Then she tapped Xenia's knee with a delicate paw.

Xenia snorted. "She's begging."

"She already ate," Christabelle groaned. "But she's a professional actress, so be careful."

Bibi intensified her gaze – big round black eyes, soft whine, head tilt, the full performance.

Xenia gave in and offered half a biscuit.

Christabelle pointed an accusing finger. "Traitor."

They both laughed.

For a moment, the kitchen felt like a warm little bubble – safe, gentle, familiar.

After a few sips of tea, Christabelle leaned back, studying Xenia more closely.

"You're doing better," she said softly. "I can see it."

Xenia lowered her gaze to her mug.

"I'm trying..."

"That's all you need to do," Christabelle murmured. "Trying is enough. You don't have to rush yourself back to normal."

A small ache bloomed in Xenia's chest – not painful, but tender.

“Hey,” she said after a moment. “Why don't we all go out for lunch later? It's been a long while since we had a big meal together.”

Christabelle lit up immediately. “Oh my God, yes please. Let me grab Xerius and the boys. Then we can go over to get mum and dad. I refuse to cook today.”

Xenia laughed. “Deal!”



A short while later, after everyone was ready, Xerius pulled the black Vellfire out of the porch and drove them to The Brew House.

The families gathered around a long wooden table, the twins bouncing excitedly in their seats as menus were passed around, showing their grandparents every new skill they learned today. Christabelle looked brighter, Xerius relaxed, and the siblings' parents were delighted to be included.

Between shared dishes, soft conversations, and the twins' endless commentary, the table felt full in the warmest way possible.

After dessert, Xenia looked at the boys vibrating in their seats. “You know,” she said. “We could bring them to Kiddomo Universe at Starling Mall. Let them burn all that energy.”

Christabelle gasped dramatically. “Yes. YES. Please, take the boys to a contained environment.”

Even Xerius nodded so fast it looked rehearsed.

Before leaving, Christabelle filled Bibi's automatic feeder and water fountain and then left her favourite toys out.

"She'll be fine," she assured Xenia, as Xenia watched with slightly furrowed brows. "She usually naps half the day at Doggy School Bus Hartamas anyway."



The moment they arrived, the twins bolted into the colourful play zone, squealing like wind-up toys finally released. Bright lights, interactive games, soft play structures – everything overwhelmed them in the best way.

Christabelle and the siblings' parents settled into the café area, finally relaxing. Xerius spent 10 minutes chasing the twins before returning breathless and defeated.

"They're... superhumans..." He panted.

Xenia set down her drink, watching the boys from the glass window with a small smile. She realised quietly, she hadn't thought about Kieran at all for a while – it didn't feel like an achievement, it felt natural.



By late afternoon, the boys were fully drained.

Xerius carried Kyrius back to the car, while Valerius shuffled sleepily beside him. The moment the car doors closed, and the engine hummed to life, the twins' eyes fluttered shut almost instantly.

They slumped towards each other in their seat next to Xenia, tiny hands brushing, their breathing deep and even.

Sunlight filtered through the windows, turning everything gold – the sleeping boys, Christabelle’s soft smile, Xerius’ steady profile, their parents watching over the scene with tender pride, and Xenia’s quiet reflection in the window.

As the black Vellfire glided down the expressway, the world outside blurred into warm hues.

Xenia rested her head lightly against the window, she felt safe, held, and most importantly, home.



Back at the townhouses, the evening air was cool, carrying the faint smell of someone’s dinner cooking down the street. The sky had dimmed into a soft lavender, the kind of dusky colour that always made everything feel slower, quieter, and gentler.

Xenia gathered the twins from the shared backseat beside her, one on each side. Their warm little bodies collapsing naturally into her arms. Kyrius was the first to stir, rubbing his eyes with a tiny fist, while Valerius nestled closer into her shoulder, still half-asleep.

“Aunty Nini...?” Kyrius mumbled, voice thick with sleep.

“I’m here,” she whispered softly.

The boys were groggy and pliant – the way children get after a day of running and laughing. Their hair was messy, cheeks flushed from play, and steps slow and clumsy as they stumbled into the house.

Inside, the soft glow of the living room lights wrapped the space with warmth.

Xenia crouched down, loosening Valerius’ Velcro shoes while Christabelle helped Kyrius with his.

Kyrius swayed a little as Christabelle finished with his shoes, his tiny hand reaching instinctively for Xenia's sleeve. Valerius blinked up at her, still dazed from sleep, his fingers curling into the fabric of her shirt as though anchoring himself.

Christabelle brushed a hand gently over Kyrius' head and then Valerius'.

"Come on Ky Ky, Vale Vale... Let's get you both into a warm bubble bath before you fall asleep on the floor."

But Kyrius shook his head weakly and turned back towards Xenia, eyes half-lidded and glassy from exhaustion.

"Aunty Nini..." He whispered, stepping into her arms again.

Valerius followed suit, pressing himself against her side with a soft, sleepy whine. It was as if the entire day's excitement – the indoor playground, the laughter, the running – had drained them completely, leaving behind only the instinct to seek comfort.

Xenia softened, placing a steadying hand on each of their backs. Their small frames relaxed instantly.

Behind her, the house felt quietly alive – the hum of the air-conditioning, the gentle clatter of Christabelle clearing toys from the floor, the muffled footsteps of their parents' upstairs to get a change of clothes for the boys. Even Bibi padded over, stretching lazily before curling up near the boys' feet like a tiny guardian.

The moment was simple.

Domestic.

Warm.

And it filled something inside Xenia she didn't realise had been hollow for so long.

She gently guided the twins towards the couch, letting them sit on either side of her as they fought to keep their heavy eyelids open.

Kyrius tilted his head up first.

“Aunty Nini... are you... coming back tomorrow?” He murmured, the words slurred with sleep.

Valerius nodded against her arm, barely awake. “Yeah... tomorrow... you come again?”

Xenia’s heart tightened – not painfully, but with that tender ache that comes from being truly wanted.

She brushed their hair back from their foreheads, her voice soft and certain. “Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll be here with you both.”

The boys smiled – tiny, drowsy smiles – and leaned into her again, trusting her completely.

And in that quiet, glowing moment, with the warm lights softening every shadow around them, Xenia realised something she hadn’t dared to believe in weeks.

She wasn’t just healing. She was beginning to feel at home again.

Chapter 8 – When the Year Turned Soft

By the time December settled into Sri Hartamas, the weather had taken on its usual rhythm – warm mornings, humid afternoons, and evenings washed gently in the scent of rain that never quite decided whether to fall. The air felt heavy yet familiar, like the kind of heat wrapped itself around the neighbourhood quietly.

Inside the townhouse, Xenia had already adjusted to her new routine.

Every weekday, right before Xerius and Christabelle left for work, she stepped into their unit and took over the morning shift – preparing simple breakfasts, helping the twins into their little T-shirts and shorts, and entertaining them through their endless bursts of energy. What began as a temporary favour had slipped so naturally into her days that she sometimes forgot there was ever a time she didn't wake up to the sound of small feet running towards her.

The last week of December was no different.

That morning, she found Kyrius and Valerius sitting crosse-legged on the playmat, whispering loudly about whether dinosaurs ate rice. The sun steamed through the sliding doors, warming the tiles, while Bibi lazed upside down under the dining table as though she owned the place.

When the boys noticed her, their faces lit up instantly.

“Aunty Nini!!! You're here!!!”

She smiled, kneeling to smooth down their messy morning hair. “I've been here every day, silly.”

The twins giggled, tackling her in a hug that smelled faintly of baby shampoo and milk powder.

It was a small thing – the morning light, the gummy smiles, the warmth of tiny hands clinging to her – but it made her chest feel strangely full.

Safe.

Settled.

Whole.

She didn't realise how much she needed this quiet kind of life until she lived it.



By evening, the sky over Sri Hartamas had shifted into the gentle gold of a tropical dusk. The streets glowed under warm lights, neighbours setting up small gatherings or hauling groceries for last-minute parties. A breeze carried the faint smell of thunder – the promise of rain without the storm.

Inside Xerius and Christabelle's home, preparations for New Year's Eve flowed with soft, familiar chaos.

Their parents had come over early to help; their mother was slicing fruits while their father arranged drinks on the table. Christabelle moved between the kitchen and dining area, her hair tied up, her steps lighter than they had been in months. Xerius hung fairy lights along the window frame while pretending not to cry, from being poked repeatedly by plastic branches.

And Xenia?

She was sitting on the floor with the twins, helping them assemble paper crowns they insisted everyone to wear before the countdown.

Valerius looked up at her suddenly.

“Aunty Nini... is this the last day of the year?”

She nodded. “Yes, Vale Vale. When the time goes past 12 a.m., it will be 2026 – a new year.”

Kyrius leaned against her shoulder. “Aunty Nini, you stay next year too?”

The question settled inside her – soft, warm, grounding.

Before she could answer, her mother called her from the kitchen, smiling gently in the way only mothers do when they see their child healing.

Xenia looked around the living room – at the lights, the laughter, the twins clinging to her as though she’d always belonged there with them.

She inhaled slowly.

This year didn’t end with heartbreak.

It ended with home.



The night deepened into that familiar Malaysian New Year’s hush – the brief stillness before the entire neighbourhood erupted into colour. The air felt heavy with heat, but the breeze carried enough coolness to make it comfortable as everyone stepped outside to the front porches of their adjoining townhouses.

Children from up and down the lane were already waving sparkles, their excited shrieks echoing off the walls. Someone down the street lit a fountain firework, sending glittering sparks into the sky. Bibi stayed close to Xenia’s ankles, curious but cautious, her tail tucked in slightly.

Xerius and their father set up a small assortment of fireworks at the edge of the road – nothing too big, just the kind families usually shared on festive nights. Christabelle handed out sparkles to the twins, hovering protectively as they waved them in wide, chaotic circles.

“Five minutes left!” She called out, adjusting Kyrius’ paper crown.

Xenia stood beside them, watching the warm chaos unfold. The glow of streetlights softened the edges of everything – of the families gathered outside, of their parents chatting quietly, of Xerius laughing at something Valerius said, of the whole neighbourhood humming with anticipation.

For the first time, she wasn’t standing on the sidelines of her own life. She was right here, in the centre of it.

“ONE MINUTE!” Someone shouted down the road.

The excitement rippled instantly.

Xerius handed her a sparkler and nudged her shoulder. “Make a wish for the new year, Nini.”

Xenia took the sparkler, watching it flickering to life. The flame reflected in her eyes, bright and gold.

The countdown began – the entire neighbourhood joining in.

“TEN!”

“NINE!”

“EIGHT!”

The twins held onto Xenia, bouncing lightly in place, their paper crowns slipping crookedly. Christabelle laughed softly beside her, their mother slipping an arm around their father. The warmth of family pressed around her like a shield.

“SEVEN!”

“SIX!”

“FIVE!”

Xenia inhaled – deeply, steadily. Her heart didn’t ache the way it used to, her breath didn’t tremble. She felt free.

“FOUR!”

“THREE!”

“TWO!”

And as the final second dropped –

“ONE!”

Fireworks burst across the sky, exploding in shimmering violet, gold, and silver.

The twins screamed in delight. Neighbours cheered. Somewhere, someone blew a whistle. Someone else lit a giant sparkler wheel.

And Xenia –

Xenia threw her head back and shouted over the crackling fireworks, voice bright, raw, and full of release. “GOODBYE 2025! I’m done with the past – I’m leaving everything behind! 2026, please be kind to me!”

Her voice echoed down the row of townhouses, swallowed by laughter and fireworks, and the warm Malaysian night.

Christabelle laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Yes, Nini! Manifest it!”

Xerius grinned. “That’s my sister!”

Their mother wiped her eyes discreetly. Their father nodding proudly.

Valerius tugged her sleeve. “Aunty Nini... did you shout because you are happy?”

Xenia knelt, cupping his small cheeks gently. “Yes, Vale Vale. Aunty Nini is happy. Really, really, happy.

Kyrius pressed his forehead to hers. “Then we are happy too, Aunty Nini!”

And under the golden rain of fireworks, with her family around her and the twins clinging to her like she was their most favourite person in the world, Xenia felt something settle inside her – the past was no longer a wound. It was simply a chapter – and she was finally strong enough to write the next one.



Hours later, when the fireworks had faded and the neighbourhood had slipped back into its usual nighttime stillness, the twins tugged insistently at Xenia’s hands.

“Aunty Nini... stayover with us, please?”

“Aunty Nini, sleep in our room tonight?”

Their paper crowns had long since fallen off, their sparklers extinguished, but their excitement hadn’t dimmed at all. They clung to her like two sleepy koalas, blinking up at her with wide, hopeful, puppy eyes.

Xenia glanced towards Christabelle and Xerius for permission. Christabelle smiled, warm and tired. “Of course. They won’t sleep unless you’re here anyway.”

Xerius chuckled. “They’ve claimed you Nini.”

So, Xenia stayed.

The twins' room was softly lit by the faint glow of a nightlight shaped like a crescent moon. Their tiny beds sat side by side, but tonight, they piled into one, insisting she sleep right next to them. Valerius pressed himself against her left arm; Kyrius curled into her, already half-asleep.

The air smelled faintly of baby lotion, clean sheets, and the lingering sweetness of the bubble bath earlier.

As she lay there, the ceiling quiet above her, and two small steady breaths warming her sides, Xenia felt a peace she hadn't touched in years – a peace that didn't shout, didn't demand, but simply existed.

Her phone buzzed suddenly.

Zyon:

'You did it Xenia. You've made it to a new year. I'm really proud of you.'

'Good night, sleep well. Tomorrow will be gentler.'

Her lips curved into a small, soft smile in the dim room. She typed a reply – short but full of gratitude – and set her phone facedown on the bedside table.

Kyrius' fingers curled around her pyjama's shirt. Valerius shifted closer, sighing contentedly.

And with the quiet hum of the air-conditioning, the warmth of the boys pressed against her, and Zyon's words lingering like a gentle hand on her heart, Xenia fell asleep smiling.

For the first time in a long time, the future didn't scare her.

It felt like a beginning she wasn't afraid of anymore, something she could step forward to.

Epilogue – Six Months Later

Months passed quietly, the way healing often does – not in dramatic waves, but in small, steady steps that stitched her life back together.

By mid-year, Xenia had settled into her new full-time role as a Social Media Marketing Assistant, discovering a version of work that didn't drain her, but challenged her in all the right ways. Her days were filled with planning content, attending brainstorming sessions, editing visuals, scheduling posts – the kind of creative routine that made her feel capable and grounded.

On the side, she nurtured a new passion she never expected – content creation.

What began as a hobby – posting soft-aesthetic vlogs, routines, and journaling clips on RedNote and TikTok – grew into something more meaningful.

Her videos gained attention slowly but steadily, drawing in people who resonated with her gentle style and honest storytelling. She wasn't chasing fame; she was simply expressing herself. And somehow, people found comfort in that.

Through that space, she found new friends, people who understood balance, who didn't rely on alcohol to have fun, who weren't interested in the kind of nightlife that drowned problems instead of solving them.

They hung out at cafés, explored bookstores, took late-evening walks in Desa ParkCity, and sometimes, yes, they celebrated birthdays at pubs – but she didn't drink recklessly anymore. She didn't need to. One or two drinks, if any, was enough. She knew her limits now.

And somewhere between all of that, Xenia found herself again.

She started going to the gym – nothing intense, just consistent.

She cooked healthier meals, drank water regularly, slept better.

She treated her body like it belonged to someone she was finally learning to love.

She no longer woke up with a pit in her stomach.

She no longer checked her phone for messages that would never come.

She no longer carried the weight of someone else's mistakes on her shoulders.

She was whole – not perfect, not finished, but whole – and she didn't rush into another relationship.

For the first time, she understood that being single didn't mean being lonely. She had family. She had friends. She had passions blooming in her hands. She had a future unfolding slowly in front of her.

Most importantly, she had herself. And that was more than enough.

Xenia saved her pay checks carefully, building a small fund for the future – not for anyone else, but for her own stability and independence. She wasn't waiting for a man to complete her life. She was building a life she'd be proud to welcome someone into one day.

And when that time came – when she finally met someone who matched her softness, her strength, her growth – she knew she would recognise him.

A partner.

A companion.

Her future husband.

Someone she wouldn't have to shrink herself for.

But until then?

She was content, thriving, growing.

Living a life that felt like her own again.

And for the first time, that was more than enough.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I first began writing Xenia's journey, I didn't know exactly where it would take her. I only knew one thing – that this would be a story about choosing yourself, especially when it feels like the hardest thing to do.

Xenia's path is not perfect. It's messy, painful, tender, and real.

It is the kind of journey many of us take quietly, without telling anyone.

The kind that doesn't involve grand gestures or dramatic confrontations, but small decisions – to leave, to stay, to breathe, to heal.

I wrote her story as a reminder:

That walking away is not failure.

That healing is not linear.

That love should never demand the pieces of you, you cannot afford to give.

That sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is simply begin again.

If you found even one moment in these pages that made you feel seen, understood, or a little less alone, then this story has done what it needed to do.

Thank you for walking with Xenia through her heartbreak, her quiet mornings, her late-night thoughts, her family's warmth, and her rediscovery of peace.

This book ends here, but healing continues – softly, gently, endlessly.

And if you ever find yourself standing where she once stood, I hope you remember:

You deserve a life that feels like home.

You deserve a love that chooses you in the daylight.

You deserve to choose yourself – again, and again, without apology.

Thank you for reading.

- **Melody Neo**

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This story would not exist without the people who reminded me, in their own gentle ways, that healing is possible, even when it feels distant.

To my family – thank you for being my constant, my foundation, and my safe place. Your warmth and support shaped more of this book than you know.

To my friends – the ones who stayed, who listened, who laughed with me during the quiet moments and held space during the heavy ones – you helped me write a story about choosing oneself because you reminded me how it feels to be understood.

To every reader who picked up this book – thank you for giving Xenia’s journey a home. Thank you for feeling her emotions, her fears, her growth. If her story resonated with you, I hope you carry a piece of her strength into your own life.

And lastly, to anyone still learning to heal, you are not behind, you are not broken, you are simply becoming.

Thank you, from the deepest part of my heart.

- **Melody Neo**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melody Neo is an aspiring writer, designer, and storyteller who finds inspiration in the quiet spaces of everyday life – soft moments, unspoken emotions, and the resilience hidden in ordinary people. With a background in Design and Media (Digital Entertainment and Events), she blends her understanding of visual communication with her love for narrative, creating stories that feel intimate, cinematic, and deeply human.

Her written work often explores themes of healing, self-discovery, and emotional honesty. She believes in writing characters who break, rebuild, and rediscover themselves – not through grand gestures, but through the slow, gentle act of choosing themselves again.

When she's not writing, Melody enjoys creating visual content, exploring new creative hobbies, and capturing snippets of life through photography, videography and storytelling on social media. She has a soft spot for night drives, quiet conversations, and the kind of people who love with sincerity.

The Moment Xenia Chooses Herself is her first novel – a book born from reflection, vulnerability, and the belief that healing is not just possible, but beautifully transformative.

She hopes that readers will carry a piece of Xenia's courage into their own journeys.