

angel
erediauwa

What
Love
Sees

a novella

*it is so much more than
what the eyes can see*

WHAT LOVE SEES

A novella

By Angel I. Erediauwa

ONE

The Stirling residence was every bit as elegant as they were, with an expensively decorated dining room that spoke to their taste and of course luxury and wealth.

Robert Stirling, his wife, Maybelline and daughter sat at the table, Robert Stirling was a man in his sixties but looked anything but, he was tall and well-built and took good care of himself, Elizabeth Stirling was a lady in all sense, any man would be proud to have her on his arm and of course in his home. Elizabeth was a beautiful lady in her mid-twenties, in fact, the Stirlings were the picture of the perfect family as they sat to dine.

They ate in silence for a while, then Elizabeth cleared her throat and asked, “Dad, I heard you had a meeting with the editors this morning”

‘Yes I did’ replied her father and he continued eating, Elizabeth waited for Robert to say more and frowned when he did not pay her any attention,

“Well? Why wasn’t I invited for the meeting?” she asked

Robert sighed and looked at his daughter, “I needed to see the editors only, there were some issues to be discussed with them, which didn’t have anything to do with you”, he said

“Does this have to do with the story I ran a few days ago?” continued Elizabeth but Maybelline interrupted them

“Look you two, can we please have a decent meal without your arguing or talking about work, there are more pleasant things we can always talk about”

Elizabeth sighed and looked apologetically at her mother,

“I am sorry mother; it is just that it makes me look incompetent if dad calls a meeting without my knowledge”, Maybelline smiled at her

“I trust your father has a reason for doing what he did” she said and looked at her husband,

“And I believe he will explain to you later why he did what he did, but right now, can we have a peaceful time of dinner?”

Voices at the door interrupted what Robert was going to say, they all look up as Natalie came in, Natalie was the older daughter of the Stirlings, she was in her late twenties, she had lost her sight when she was younger but this had never stopped Natalie from doing what she wanted to do. In the beginning, it had been very difficult for her, she had gone through various phases, anger, rebellion, pity, regret, however, it had taken years for her to find herself and begin to become independent and eventually, learn to live with her sight loss and now, she was learning to forge a path for herself in life.

Natalie found her way to her seat and smiled as she took her seat, apologising for being late for dinner

Maybelline frowned and asked “Where have you been, it’s been hours, I hope Vincent was with you all the time”, Natalie smiled as she served her meal

“Didn’t mean to make you worry mum, I am fine” she said and turned to her father, “How was work today dad? I heard the news of the two little girls that were kidnapped; did you report that in your paper?”

“Yes we did, in fact, we are following the investigations, and the public is quite interested in the news”

Natalie nodded

“I know what you mean; it is indeed tragic and upsetting”

Elizabeth shrugged “Well, we deal with such news every time in the Paper, it is quite rampant, it doesn’t come as a shock to us any more”

Natalie turned toward the direction of her sister’s voice and reminded her that these were human lives they were talking about and every time one was lost, it still came as a shock.

Maybelline interrupted the conversation, “Enough of the sad talk at my table please, we should actually be planning for the Authurs’ dinner party; we’ve got lots of shopping to do” she announced, Elizabeth smiled with glee

“Oh Yes, it’s this weekend, oh my God, how could I have forgotten, and I haven’t even got a decent outfit for it”

Maybelline smiled at her daughter and said they had to definitely do some shopping, then she turned to Natalie

“You don’t have to come Natalie dear, I know how the heat and the crowd in the mall disturbs you, you should stay home”, Natalie smiled and nodded

"I actually do have some music projects to complete any way. The other day I began writing a new song but I've got to..."

"That's great dear", Robert interrupted her and then turned to Elizabeth

"I need you to check the story to be run on the front page of the newspaper Elizabeth, there are three stories we have chosen but we haven't decided on the one to run"

"Yes dad, I'll do that when I get to work tomorrow"

"And don't forget that we still have to do our shopping", Maybelline replied but Elizabeth laughed

"As if I could forget"

TWO

Natalie played the piano softly as she launched into a beautiful ballad, the music resonated beautifully throughout the house and filled the evening, everyone knew about Natalie's music and how beautifully she sounded. Natalie had been doing music for years and many always loved to hear her sing.

When she started therapy, Natalie discovered her love for music and that had started her journey to following her passion for music, she had always loved singing from when she was young and had learned to play the piano, now she worked on perfecting both and her dream was to pursue a career in her music.

Natalie smiled now as she sang, this was one of the things that brought her so much joy and peace, this was where she could lose herself completely and communicate what was in her heart and soul.

The door opened and Elizabeth came in and fell into the chair beside the piano, Natalie continued playing but stopped singing as she turned towards her sister

"What's the matter? You sound awful" she asked, Elizabeth sighed and looked out of the window

"I didn't say a word"

"Your silence speaks louder than your voice could ever do" said Natalie and she laughed Elizabeth frowned as she looked at her sister

"I always wondered how you could tell, you are blind"

Natalie laughed, she stopped playing and turned fully to Elizabeth, "Thanks, I've only lost my sight, not my other senses as well, and don't forget I know you better than anyone. Now tell me, what's bothering you?"

“Well, it’s something at work, don’t want to bore you with work stuff, look, could I wear your red suit? I need to make an impression on someone tomorrow”, Natalie laughed
“I see, someone new I presume”

Elizabeth smiled as she went through Natalie’s closet

“You can say that again, you should see him, he is so cute, I’ve been trying to get his attention for days now and he’s got to notice me this time, I would ensure he does, what Elizabeth wants, Elizabeth gets” said Elizabeth as she looked at the red suit in the mirror

“Perfect, this will do. All I need is a good night sleep and some time to think of my action plan, good night”

Natalie shakes her head “you’re welcome” she said but Elizabeth was already out of the door, Natalie loved her sister, but she often wondered at how selfish Elizabeth could be. Her sister was amazing at getting what she wanted, not caring how she got it and who it hurt, if she wanted it, she got it. Natalie always tried to talk her out of some of her schemes, but Elizabeth never listened. Sometimes, it got Elizabeth into trouble, but she never learned from her mistakes.

However, a few days later, it was Natalie who was kicking herself for not learning from her past mistakes. Natalie shook her head as if by shaking it hard enough, she could get rid of the memory of the disastrous dinner they just had with her father’s friends. She sighed

“I am sorry; I didn’t mean to ruin dinner” she began softly but calmly

“Well you did any way” her mother replied and Natalie cringed at the biting tone

“Can we just drop it; I don’t want to hear another word about what happened”, although Robert sounded calm, Natalie knew he was mad, if there was anything her family despised the most, it was being embarrassed, they hated pity even more and having a child like her, meant they were often subjected to both. This had always had an impact on Natalie, she knew her parents loved her so much, but they also hated being put in an embarrassing situation and they always tried to avoid this by not including her in the family plans. Over the years, Natalie had made her peace with this, she understood that her parents were held in high esteem, the Stirling name was known for perfection, luxury and elegance and they could not help themselves.

Natalie had also learned to defend herself and to put her foot down when it was absolutely necessary, she refused to let her family bully her because she was not 'perfect' or the golden child.

Natalie sighed now just remembering the dinner, it all started perfectly well, everyone in her family's circle acted differently when she was around and sometimes it amused Natalie and she had even turned it into a game, trying to guess how guests would react when she was introduced to them, some acted as if she was invisible, some were embarrassed, some pitied, and a few were very nice and went out their way to help or include her in the conversation.

One of the nice ones were David Pierce and that was why Natalie had agreed to go with her family to dinner with the Pierces, the conversation always went the same way, business and gossip amongst the women

When Kelly Pierce asked Natalie if she was going to join her father in his business, Natalie was surprised but before she could reply, her father cut in

"Not really, she is quite limited by her disability", Natalie cringed, she hated it when her father always referred to her like that

"We are considering getting her into a special school to learn something very useful, but she has refused" continued Maybelline,

"Oh my dear, there's nothing to be ashamed of, lots of people with disability have made something of their lives" said Kelly and Natalie didn't miss the pity in her voice

"It's not that..." Natalie started to say but Kelly cut her off

"In fact, I know a very good school, you could learn various special skills..."

Natalie stood up abruptly and excused herself to go to the ladies but as she turned to leave, she accidentally pulled the tablecloth and the glasses of wine spilled on Kelly

Her mother was mortified

Her father was furious

It was only David Pierce who had told her not to worry that it was a mistake and could have happened to anyone but even that didn't make Natalie feel any better and that was the end of dinner

THREE

Robert Stirling proudly announced to his wife and daughter when he came back from the office that there was a new and exciting development at the Paper

“Well don’t keep us in suspense, out with it” Maybelline laughed

“Garry called me a few days ago saying he had a proposal for me, we had a meeting today where he told me of his proposal, he wants one of his magazines to be distributed with our paper”

“Oh my God, that is great news indeed, which one of his magazines?” asked Elizabeth

“‘Empire’, can you just imagine such luck?”

Elizabeth was excited

“That’s wonderful, ‘Empire’ is becoming one of the fastest growing lifestyle magazines, and this is really going to boost our sales dad. And what about Richard, does he know what his father’s up to? I believe he is the Director of Empire”

“Of course, my dear, he is personally handling this contract and that means we will be seeing a lot more of him” said Robert and he smiled at Elizabeth

“He is still single and very successful”, Elizabeth blushed

Maybelline clapped her hands joyfully

“That is absolutely great, you know how Emily and I have always wished you and Richard would be more than just friends”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes

“Mum! We are talking about the newspaper right now...”

“Well it wouldn’t hurt to have a son in law in the process; you always had a crush on Richard if I remember correctly”

Embarrassed, Elizabeth looked at her father

“Could we please talk about the contract? Have you called a meeting yet?”

“No, I’m calling one for Monday morning; there is a lot of work to do.”

Elizabeth could hardly contain her excitement when she went to her sister's room, she was practically beaming, Natalie finished from her call and turned to her sister,

"What are you doing home, thought you'd gone off to work" she asked

"Nah, took the day off, got to do some shopping, my hair, nails and spent the day in the spa"

Natalie shook her head at her sister,

"What are you up to now? Who is the poor man this time?" she asked

"Oh don't give me you sanctimonious speech now okay? Richard Waters is finally becoming mine" Elizabeth laughed

"First of all, I'm going to pay him for humiliating me and then, I'm going to make him want me so bad, but he's going to have to grovel before he can have me"

"I don't believe you still carry a grudge after all these years; besides, it wasn't any one's fault, and you insulted him"

Elizabeth flared up, "Well, what do you know? You didn't see what happened did you?"

Natalie smiled "I may not see you but I know you Elizabeth Stirling, even now, I can tell you are still attracted to Richard Waters"

Elizabeth sighed dreamily

"Of course, who can lay eyes on him and not become all jumbled up inside. But not this time, he's going to be the one who can't take his eyes off me, just wait till he sees me"

Natalie shook her head and stated that they had not seen Richard in years and asked what was going on,

"Oh, Garry's magazine company and ours are going into partnership in business and they have suggested that Richard and I head the contract, naturally, funny how fate does have a way of turning things around

She sighed dramatically

"Any way, better start my day. See you later"

"Yes, we cannot control fate, but we can control our lives"

Natalie sighed but shrugged away the feeling that was creeping in. She had stopped feeling sorry for herself a long time ago, she believed when it was her time, she would find love.

She often told Elizabeth not to take things and people for granted, you didn't know what you had till you lost it. Natalie always laughed at how easy it was for Elizabeth to fuss over the smallest things in a man, and she moved on to the next relationship as easily and just as quickly as the other was over.

Of course, Natalie had her share of relationships, a handful but still they had taught her some lessons and none of those relationship had discouraged her from finding love. Natalie had stopped dating anyone from her family's circle a long time ago, her mom had introduced her friends' sons but they were just as shallow as they came

"You can't be choosy my dear Natalie," her mother would tell her often but Natalie just mentally rolled her eyes, if she had a penny every time her mother said that,

"I don't know why you keep insisting on hooking me up with these guys"

"Well, I haven't got a problem with your sister, but I can't stand the look and talk of pity from my friends about you not being able to find someone"

"And here I was thinking this was about me"

"Mind your tone young lady", Natalie sighed and apologised

Natalie smiled when she walked into the dining room, she could hear her mother giving orders, Maybelline Stirling was renowned for her hosting skills, if there was a competition, her mother would take the cup every time

"Hello mother, uhm, you look nice,

Natalie sniffed the air

"You smell nice too, new perfume?"

Maybelline impatiently waved her hands

"Can I help with anything?" asked Natalie

"No my dear, I have precious glasses and Chinas all around, I want them safe, go get your sister, Richard, Garry and Emily will be here any moment"

Natalie chuckled "Guess she wants to make a grand entrance when Richard's already arrived. She's been on the phone telling her friends about her grand plan and scheme"

"That might be a good idea, but for a hostess, it is rude, now go get her" her mother replied

Garry and Emily Waters were chatting with Robert in the sitting room when Maybelline sauntered in, she hugged her friends warmly,

“Oh my God, Mabel, you look splendid, as always” Emily smiled broadly at Maybelline

“And look at you Emily Waters, you haven’t grown older in the last five years, and you Garry, you look wonderful”

“I know that’s not totally true but thank you”, replied Garry and they all laughed

Garry looked up as Natalie and Elizabeth came in, he shook his head in disbelief and walked towards them

“My goodness, are these my little girls? They are no more girls. Natalie, I never thought you could get any more beautiful, but you have proved me wrong” he said and hugged Natalie, she smiled warmly at him

“Hello Garry, nice to hear your voice”, She touched his face and smiled

“You’ve shaved your beards”

Garry laughed and said some people did not even notice he had shaved his beards till months after, he turned to Elizabeth

“And look at you my dear Elizabeth; almost as tall as I am, you look great”

“Thank you, Garry, hello Emily, good to see you again”

During dinner, Garry apologised for Richard’s absence and explained that his son had to go out of town for a business meeting, Robert nodded

“It’s good to know you’ve got someone to count on when you are not there. Just like Elizabeth, you should see her handling the newspaper”

“I am sure, she does take after you Robert, I wish Richard could come with us tonight, he was looking forward to seeing you, he wouldn’t believe what a beautiful lady you’ve become Elizabeth” replied Emily and she smiled warmly at Elizabeth

Elizabeth laughed, “I’m sure he wouldn’t, anyway, we’ll be working close together, so he will have enough time to see it and believe it”

Garry turned to Natalie

“So tell me Natalie, how is your music going? You still play and sing I hope?”

Natalie laughed and replied enthusiastically “Oh yes, I’ve written lots of songs, I’m having music lessons and it has really improved my skills”

Robert frowned and asked Maybelline if she knew of any music lessons but she shook her head and replied she knew nothing about it,

“I have told you and dad several times, but I guess you weren’t just interested or not listening”, replied Natalie

“Well, I hope to hear one of your songs one of these days”, continued Garry and Natalie beamed, “Will you really? That will be nice”

“I may be old but be warned, I’ve got good ears for music”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a big surprise in store for you, just name the time and place”

Replied Natalie and she laughed, she was actually having fun, she had never been the centre of attention before but Garry made sure to include her in the conversations, he discussed music with her and forced everyone to listen as she spoke about her music lessons, her songs and her writing. What impressed Natalie even more was knowing that Garry was genuinely interested in music and even more so in what she had to say, he asked her questions and they discussed their favourite artists, they both discovered they loved jazz and couldn’t talk enough about it.

Somehow, Garry always steered the conversation back to Natalie, and when Elizabeth interrupted a few times to discuss the Magazine, Garry just waved it away and smiled warmly at Elizabeth

“I talk business all day long my dear, I would love to relax and have fun at dinner” he explained.

FOUR

At the end of dinner, Elizabeth was livid, she paced around the sitting room, Natalie looked at her sister, amused

“Can you believe his nerve; he sends his parents over instead, that guy’s pride and arrogance is unbelievable! How rude can he be?” she burst out, but Natalie reminded her that his parents said he got called out of town for business,

“Oh don’t be naïve Natalie, if Richard wanted to be here tonight, he would have”, she frowned “I wonder what game he is playing, I haven’t seen him in a few years, if he could blow off dinner, then he is definitely playing at something”,

“At least, he could have called to make his excuses, after all, what could be more important than having dinner with us?” Maybelline agreed with her daughter

“Will you two just calm down? Richard is a man of respect and integrity; I believe if this business were not of utmost importance, he would be here tonight” said Natalie, she was surprised at her mother, they had known the Waters for years, of course, they hadn’t seen them in a few years but Natalie knew the kind of people they were. They were one of the nice ones amongst her father’s friends.

Elizabeth however was beyond reasoning now, she glared at Natalie and asked her how she would know what kind of man Richard was

“Remember we haven’t seen him in 5 years, things happen, and people change in five years”

“Well, I don’t think casting aspersions on his character is the best way to start a relationship with him now is it? And besides, you only need to know Garry to know the kind of son he’s raised” replied Natalie but Elizabeth only rolled her eyes,

“Oh please”

“Come on Elizabeth, cheer up, you two are going to be seeing an awful lot of each, this shouldn’t make a difference” replied Natalie

“There’s no doubt Emily will send him over as soon as he returns honey” Maybelline placated Elizabeth

Natalie stood up and smiled, she recalled her arrangement with Garry, he wanted her to play her music for him and Natalie couldn’t be more pleased

“I’m off to bed, cheer up Elizabeth, it’s too beautiful a night to put on such an awful face. Good night mother”

Natalie tapped her foot to the music playing on the television as she sang along, she had a performance in a few days and she was writing a new song, she went to get a sandwich from the kitchen and was going to her room when the music came up on the television, and before long, Natalie was singing out loud and dancing, this was just the break and inspiration she needed. It was a few minutes before Natalie sensed that she was no longer alone in the sitting room, she switched off the television and turned towards the door “Who’s there?” she asked

Richard smiled, he was lounging by the door and watching Natalie. Richard Waters was someone who commanded attention when he walked into a room, he was over six feet and very well built and his appearance was always impeccable, he had an air of authority around him and a look in his eyes that made people relax around him.

With his shoulder against the wall and arms folded, Richard smiled warmly as he watched Natalie dance to the music and sing, this was not the sight he expected to see when he walked in, but he was liking this much better.

The first time Richard had come to say hello to the Stirlings, Natalie had not been home, and now he was pleased to see her. He cleared his throat

“Hello Natalie, it’s been ages”

Natalie laughed, “Hello Richard, my God, you sound so much like your father, ah, no, I believe your voice is deeper than Garry’s, but I would recognise it anyway”, she said, and Richard laughed

“No one’s told me that in a really long time, how are you doing Natalie? You look great”

Natalie stretched out her hands and Richard took them and kissed her cheeks “And you look good” replied Natalie and Richard laughed.

Richard led her to the couch as they chatted and caught up, Richard mentioned he was in charge of his father's production company in Paris and that explained his absence all these years.

"That's wonderful, did Elizabeth know you were coming? She went out with some friends"

"I was in the area; thought I'd drop by, I could stay a while, it's so good to see you", Richard said. Natalie smiled and said she would fix him a drink, she stood up and Richard started to rise with her

"It's all right. I don't need a drink", he said but Natalie laughed

"I'm not going to bump into the wall or fall down the stairs Richard; I'm just going to get you a drink"

Richard laughed self-consciously,

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to be that obvious", Natalie lay a hand on his arm and smiled,

"It's okay, some others do go ahead to tell me not to hurt myself, I know they mean well, but it's hard to convince them that I will be okay, I'll be right back"

Richard laughed and sat down, his eyes never leaving Natalie till she was out of his sight. He noticed some music CDs by the couch and picked them up. Natalie soon returned with a drink and some cakes, Richard stood up to assist but Natalie asked him to sit and relax, she was his hostess today.

"Producing a magazine, though fun, it's also very tasking and challenging, you have a lot of decisions to make, what to include, what to edit and hundred others"

Natalie smiled excitedly

"But that is the beautiful part of it all, every decision you make will influence a person's life, as an editor, you have the power to influence and alter people's opinions and I think that is a great privilege, especially if you decide to have the right influence"

Richard frowned and looked at Natalie intently

"You know, I have never really thought about it that way before, to me, it was just business"

"I believe it is also a way of expressing yourself, every article, every story, every image you put into the magazine, says something about the company and the people in there. It is also a wonderful opportunity to express yourself; just one paragraph read in your magazine can

influence a person's next decision or make their day. It could be a task, but it is also exciting right?" explained Natalie, Richard looked at her for a long time and Natalie frowned

"I feel you staring at me"

"You know, you are one of the most perceptive and insightful person I have ever met, I was just thinking, I might have to bring you in for our next board meeting, the guys at work sure need to hear these, it will give them a new perspective", said Richard warmly but Natalie laughed,

"I believe you already know this otherwise; you wouldn't have been able to make the magazine the success it is today, I hear it is really a popular one"

Maybelline's entrance interrupted what Richard was going to say, she was surprised to see Richard and said so, Richard kissed her cheeks and said he just dropped by to say hello

"Where's Elizabeth?" Maybelline asked him

"Oh she's not home, I guess I missed her, good thing Natalie was home"

"What a shame, you haven't been waiting long I hope"

Richard looked at his watch and laughed, "Oh not long, about two hours" he said and Maybelline gasped

"I am so sorry, Elizabeth wasn't expecting you but you should have called or dropped a note"

"It's all right, Natalie kept me company and I had a great time. But I guess I have to be on my way now, it is late" said Richard and he turned to Natalie and said he had a great time and hoped they could catch up again soon

"I'd like that"

"And don't forget what I said about the board meeting" said Richard and they both laughed

Natalie tried some keys on the piano, Karen accompanied her with her saxophone but Elizabeth storming into the room interrupted them

"Hello Elizabeth, you could try knocking once in a while you know" said Karen sweetly and Elizabeth looked like she was going to throw something at her.

Natalie and Karen had been friends since college, where Natalie was calm and cool headed, Karen was feisty and rash but the two were the closest of friends and Karen was largely protective of Natalie and their love for music was unmatched and even brought them closer.

“I don’t believe Richard was here yesterday and you didn’t tell me, how could you Natalie?”

“Hey calm down okay, I forgot to mention it and besides, didn’t mum tell you?”

“Well no one mentioned anything, I called Richard today and he just casually threw it into the conversation that he dropped by and mum said he was here for over two hours! Two hours! what the hell were you two talking about? He can hardly talk to me for thirty minutes without bringing up business and I seriously doubt you were talking business” snapped Elizabeth, Natalie laughed but this only infuriated Elizabeth more

“Come on Elizabeth, we were just catching up”

“This is unbelievable and damn right irritating and it’s not funny!” she stormed out of the room.

“Seriously, Your sister never grows up does she? I wonder how you put up with her”

Natalie laughed, “She’s my sister, Elizabeth is really a good person, she is just...Elizabeth”

Karen rolled her eyes

“Come on, we all have our shortcomings, we just have to learn to tolerate everyone else’s, once you can look beyond Elizabeth’s, you will really love her”

Karen scoffed,

“You know Natalie Stirling; I believe you are a saint with a soul for music”

Natalie laughed and began to play, “all right, let’s take it from the refrain”,

FIVE

The Stirlings were having lunch with the Waters one Sunday afternoon when Garry asked Natalie to play, Natalie couldn't be more pleased, she beamed as she sat at the piano. Everyone sat in silence listening, even her parents and it hit Natalie that this was really the first time her parents had been forced to pay attention to her while she played. She always played her music at home, but her parents never sat down to listen or even pay attention, they were always busy doing one thing or the other. Even Elizabeth was forced to sit in silence to listen, she had tried several times to engage Richard in conversation, but he told her to listen to her sister and didn't Natalie sound really nice, Elizabeth huffed and folded her arms but she was silent as she listened.

"Oh my dear, that was really beautiful" said Emily when Natalie finished her song, Emily turned to Maybelline and asked her didn't she think so, Maybelline was genuinely surprised "Yes, I have to admit it was nice, I have never heard you play", Natalie laughed and mentioned that she always played at home

After lunch, Natalie thanked Garry and Emily for having her for lunch, but she had to leave as she had music rehearsals

"It's been lovely spending time with you as always and thank you Garry for letting me play", she said as she kissed his cheek

"Of course, my dear, I look forward to having you play some more"

"I'll drop you off Natalie, I was just leaving to pick up some files from work", it was Richard, Elizabeth's head snapped up and she frowned at him but before she could say anything, Natalie thanked Richard and said he did not have to as she was going to call a taxi

"Yes Richard, you really don't have to" said Elizabeth

"It's all right; I was on my way to the office any way" replied Richard and he made his excuses, he kissed Emily on the cheek

“Sorry I have to leave now mother, but I do have some work to do, it’s always great spending time with you Robert and Maybelline”

Elizabeth was having a hard time controlling herself, she was glaring at Richard now

“What about me? Are you just going to leave me here?”

Richard smiled and kissed her on the cheek,

“I’m sorry Elizabeth but I really need to get to the office and there’s no reason for Natalie to get a cab when I can drop her off” he said and turned to Natalie and asked her if she was ready, Natalie nodded

Richard and Natalie rode in silence for a while, Natalie touched the window and smiled

“It’s a beautiful day isn’t it? Tell me, what does it look like?” she asked but Richard frowned

“It’s bleary, dark and annoying”

“That’s the way you look. I was asking about the weather”

Richard smiled

“That’s better, so what’s been eating at you all day, you’ve got something on your mind, you hardly said a word during lunch and you’ve been scowling since we got into the car”

Richard glanced at Natalie in surprise, “You know, you do surprise me a lot Natalie, how do you do it?”

“And you do have a way of avoiding a question”

Richard laughed, “Seriously, it’s like you are in a person’s head, you see a lot more than most folks and you are very perceptive”

“Well, I’ve spent a long time relying on my other senses, I guess it’s just become really perceptive and sensitive, every sigh or body movement tells me something, so go on, describe the day to me, it’ll make you feel better too,”

Richard laughed and said it was sunny and spring, a fine Sunday afternoon

“It smells so good too, fresh, God, I love spring”

“You love spring, why in the world do you love spring? It’s always raining and wet”

Natalie shook her head

“Because it means that summer will be here soon, with the flowers blooming, everyone nice and cheerful, though I don’t know why they have to wait till summer, the day is always bright and it beckons to you,

Richard glanced at her as she continued dreamily

“The trees and grasses are green, God! It’s beautiful”

“You know, most times, we fail to appreciate what we see around us, I guess we take it for granted”, said Richard and he sighed

“Life is wonderful, God is beautiful and creation is beautiful, it all depends on where you stand to view it”

“I must be standing in the dump, sometimes, I swear, I wonder about my life”

Richard stopped the car and faced Natalie, looking at her intently

“How do you do it? How is it that you are so positive, so bright, so...full of life, insight and perception”

Natalie laughed

“You should have been here a few years ago; I was resentful, angry and felt all negative emotions you could ever think of. I was full of hatred and envy for everyone else because I lost my sight. But then, a friend helped change my life, she talked about maximising your life no matter what, many great people in history had one flaw or disability or the other but they never let it define them. Then I made the decision to make something of my life and not let anyone or anything deter me, it’s definitely not been an easy journey but here I am, it’s still a work in progress mind you”

Natalie smiled when Richard held her hand

“Life has taught me that to take control of my life, I need to change my attitude towards it”

Natalie’s voice trailed off as she was lost in thoughts, Richard looked at her tenderly and smiled.

“Oh, the car’s stopped, are we there yet?” asked Natalie and Richard replied yes,

“I’m glad you are doing your music, you play and sing so beautifully, I hope you pursue a career in it” said Richard

“Thank you, I do actually love my music, it’s one of the best ways to communicate, when I am playing or singing is the time I really do let go of myself and be who I am and I don’t want that to change. Music means so much to me and I couldn’t bear it if someone starts dictating to me what I can do and can’t do because I am getting paid for it”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but you could consider going independent, with technology and everything going on, you can self-publish your music and take charge of your music”,

Natalie nodded and said she had not really thought about that

“Well now you can and should, and tell you what, I will be more than happy to set you up, personally and I wouldn’t even charge you a dime”, said Richard and they both laughed.

Richard opened the door as Natalie got out of the car and he asked what time she would be done with rehearsals, Natalie told him and Richard nodded, he said he would pick her up
“And we could grab something to eat, if that’s okay with you”

“Thanks Richard but you really do not have to”

“You know, I really don’t like that phrase in your vocabulary, and any way, I need the company, I’ll see you later” said Richard and he kissed her cheeks and he was gone.

SIX

Richard smiled as Natalie walked out of the building, he walked to her and put her hand on his arm,

“Hey, you are a sight for sore eyes”, said Richard and he laughed

It had become a regular thing for Richard, he always turned up to pick up Natalie from her rehearsals and when he could not make it, he always called to let her know. Although

Natalie smiled when she heard his voice, she was a bit hesitant, but Richard did not notice “How was your audition?” he asked excitedly

“It was great thank you, I was nervous at the beginning but it went well” replied Natalie, she was auditioning for a play, the producers were auditioning for someone to compose music for their play and Natalie had decided to give it a shot,

“I’m so nervous, I have never done anything like this before, can you imagine getting this gig and more like it? That means I could actually be earning an income with the thing I love most in the world”, said Natalie as she and Richard walked the short distance to a café Natalie sighed, it seemed too good to be true, she had initially brushed the idea aside when Richard had told her about it a few weeks ago.

They sat down at the table and made their orders, Natalie shook her head, she still could not believe it. She had written songs and performed some at rehearsals and at her music lessons and for friends, but she had never really done anything serious like audition for something this big. Richard had encouraged her to apply for the project and after various half attempts, she eventually made her application with Karen’s help and submitted some of her materials. Then the company shortlisted her for the next process and then sent her a brief of the project, they were to compose, write and perform two songs for a scene in the play

“There’s no backing out now”, Natalie had whispered and especially, she did not want to let Richard down, so she had set to work on the project. She saw Richard at least once every

week when he came to pick her up from the music studio where she had her music lessons and rehearsals and he was always so eager to hear about her progress.

“I’m sure they would love you; you are brilliant Natalie and there are so many opportunities out there for you” said Richard as he took her hand in his, Natalie smiled and gently withdrew her hand,

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, sorry, I’m just a bit overwhelmed that’s all, actually, can you take me home, I’m tired”, she replied and Richard nodded, he looked at her for a while and said okay.

A few days later, Natalie almost burst with the news that she got the job as one of the composers for the play. After screaming with Karen on the phone, she called Richard to tell him, he was just as excited as Karen, without the girly screaming,

“I’m so proud of you Natalie”, he said and those words made her beam, she thought she was going to burst, he was out of town for business but told her he would pick her up for a celebration when he got back .

Karen announced that she was paying for dinner and Natalie laughed, she was still in a daze even days after she got the job, her dream job

“have you told your parents?” asked Karen and Natalie nodded, she had told Elizabeth and her mother that evening at dinner, her mother did not really understand what it was about

“My mum asked if I was going to be a musician now” said Natalie and she laughed as she remembered the conversation that evening, she had to painstakingly explain to her mother that she was going to be composing the song and lead the performance for a scene in the play

“Well, I still don’t understand much but it seems important to you and I am happy dear” her mother had finally said

“At least you’ve found something that will occupy your time” remarked Elizabeth absentmindedly, and Maybelline asked her what the matter was

“It’s Richard of course, I thought we were going to be seeing more of each other now that we are working together but I wonder if he is playing hard to get and it’s so annoying, I hardly see him, and when I want to spend some time with him, he always has one excuse or

the other” Elizabeth was upset now “I had decided to be cool about it all and let him do the running around this time but I feel like hitting him over the head with something”, Maybelline sighed and took her daughter’s hand in hers, “I actually expected things to move faster than this, maybe I should talk to Emily, so she has a talk with him and nudge him in the right direction?” Elizabeth nodded

“Your sister’s going to flip when she knows that Richard spends more time with you than he does with her, ironic isn’t it”, said Karen and she laughed heartily but Natalie only shook her head

“I’ve told Richard many times I don’t think it’s a good idea that he comes to pick me up every time but he just shrugs it off”

“Wouldn’t it be just wonderful if he falls in love with you instead of your selfish sister, you know she doesn’t love him right, she just loves the idea of him”

“Don’t say that Karen, I actually don’t want to talk about Richard, I want to focus on this project”

“Which you wouldn’t have got if Richard didn’t push you”, Natalie sighed and Karen laughed “Don’t look like that Natalie Stirling, you’re an amazing person and you deserve great joy and love in your life, so let’s toast to your success and many more to come”, she said and Natalie smiled brightly, she refused to let anything dampen her joy and excitement.

“How did the meeting go?” asked Natalie as she sat across from Richard in the park. When he returned from his trip, he called her and asked her to dinner to celebrate her success but Natalie had given an excuse that she could not make it, but she felt bad afterwards, what if she was reading something into his kindness. What if Richard was just being nice to her, he was such a great person and a good friend and so supportive of her and her music, was she really willing to risk such a friendship based on some assumptions that she may have. And he did deserve to be a part of her success as he was the one who pushed her to it, as Karen had often reminded her, that it was unfair and ungrateful for Natalie to cut him out of it all.

Natalie felt foolish when she heard Richard's voice outside the studio that afternoon, she knew she was going to see him today but she still was not prepared for it. She had felt like hiding in the studio after her classes that day but Karen just laughed at her, "You know he is just going to stay out there till you come out right?" she said "You could tell him I didn't come in today" groaned Natalie "What do you think?" laughed Karen and Natalie punched her, "I think you actually like Richard" "Of course I like him" "I mean, really like, like him", teased Karen and she laughed but she became serious when Natalie did not say anything and she turned to face her friend "On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?" she asked "Oh please Karen", Natalie laughed self consciously "That bad huh?" said Karen, Natalie hesitated but before she could say anything, Karen hugged her.

Richard took Natalie to the park, he got some sandwiches and wine and they sat down to enjoy a picnic,

Richard told her about his big meeting but said he did not want to talk about business, he was more interested in how her project was coming along and just like he hoped, this got Natalie beaming and excited, he knew how much this meant to her and he knew how hard she was working on it

"Oh my God Richard, they love the direction my song is going, I had a meeting with one of the directors, I got to meet the other composers and some other performers and it was just wonderful, so many talents in one room, it was amazing"

"I've got to hear it, go on, do a bit of the song"

Natalie laughed and launched into her song, Richard smiled and remarked that it was beautiful

"Now it's your turn" said Natalie mischievously

"My turn? For what?"

"To sing, "I've done mine, go on, I'm listening

Richard burst into laughter, "Of course not, I can't sing, I don't sing, not even in the shower, I'm tone deaf. I'd rather you sing, believe me, I'll scare away everyone in the park", Natalie laughed hard

"Hey, look, I got you something"

Natalie smiled

"Not another cd I hope, I haven't even finished listening to the ones you bought me", she said but Richard shook his head and said it wasn't. He took out a nice box and opened it, it was a bracelet, he took Natalie's hand and guided it to touch the bracelet. Natalie frowned as she traced her fingers over the bracelet,

"It's beautiful Richard but I'm sorry I can't accept it"

"Why? I want you to have it. You are very special Natalie"

Natalie shook her head and replied quietly that she did not think she should accept it,

"Thank you but I'm really sorry I can't accept it" she said and stood up

"I think we better leave now, I have had a lovely day but I've got some work to do, thank you for the picnic", Richard sighed and stood up, they packed up in silence and walked back to the car both lost in their thoughts.

Natalie smiled as she played a soft ballad in the restaurant, Karen accompanied with her saxophone, two couples were dancing to the music.

At the bar, Richard sat with two of his friends but he was no longer paying attention to what they were saying. He had come for drinks with his friends, he had not noticed Natalie in the restaurant at first, but he turned around when she started singing, he would recognise Natalie's voice anywhere. He had heard Natalie sing many times but he had never been at any performance of hers, and looking at her now, he was hooked, he could not take his eyes off her. Richard's attention was so focused on Natalie that his friends had to punch him to get his attention, but every time, his eyes strayed back to Natalie.

Richard stood beside his car waiting calmly as he looked towards the door of the restaurant. He smiled when Natalie and Karen finally came out, Karen smiled when she saw Richard, "Hello Richard" she called

“Hello Karen” said Richard and he turned to look at Natalie intently, “Hello Natalie”, he said quietly and just stood staring at her, Karen hid a smile

“Well here’s my ride, see you two later” said Karen, Natalie started to protest that she was going with Karen but Karen waved her off, she hugged Natalie tightly

“You should see the way he’s looking at you Nat”, she whispered in her friend’s ear and ran off laughing, this actually made Natalie panic

“Come on, I’ll take you home” said Richard, he was no longer smiling as he helped her into the car

“What are you doing here? Never expected to run into you here” asked Natalie and Richard explained that he came to have drinks with some friends,

They rode on in silence and Natalie began to feel uncomfortable, a short while later, Richard parked the car and turned to Natalie

“What’s going on? Are we at my place yet?” she asked but Richard did not reply and just kept looking at her

“Richard, are you okay? Is everything okay?” she continued when Richard still kept quiet, she reached out and he took her hand and kissed it, then he leaned forward and kissed her. Natalie was so caught off guard that it was a few seconds before she pulled away

“No...” she began to protest but Richard pulled her into his arms and kissed her, Natalie kissed him back but soon began to shake her head and tried to pull away but Richard held her

“Oh my God, Natalie, I love you, I love you very much” said Richard but Natalie was shaking her head and pulled away from him but Richard held her hand to his chest

“I don’t know how but I know you are unlike any other woman I know, when I saw you singing tonight, it hit me hard and I had to admit that I was in love with you, God, I love you Natalie”, he reached out to kiss her again but Natalie turned away, they were silent for a long time

“I think we better leave it’s late” Natalie said finally

Karen shrugged as she bit into her snack “Well I fail to see what the problem is”, she said with her mouthful

“Seriously Karen, the guy has been promised to my sister”

“Oh please Natalie, do you hear yourself? The guy has been promised? Where are we, in Victorian England?” laughed Karen but Natalie sighed and Karen soon sobered up

“Look Natalie, Richard is not a baby, he is a grown man and you guys trying to control his life is ridiculous and to be honest, mean” continued Karen but she raised her hand when Natalie was about to protest

“You are doing exactly the same thing your sister is doing, manipulating the poor man, you all think you know what he wants better than the man himself, you all believe you know what’s good for him and you are all manipulating him, although in different ways, but manipulating just the same and it is unfair” argued Karen

“I just want him to be happy Karen, I don’t have anything to offer him”, Natalie was almost in tears and Karen sighed

“Natalie, Richard is old enough to know his mind, the man runs a company for God sake and it is completely unfair to not trust him to be able to decide on what he wants and you are being unfair denying you both the happiness you deserve, so think about it Natalie, think long and hard before you send him on his way”, said Karen

However, Natalie made up her mind after her confrontation with Elizabeth and her mother a few days later

“What game do you think you are playing Natalie? I have failed to see the funny side of it” Elizabeth burst out

“What are you talking about?” asked Natalie

“I think the question should be ‘who’ are we talking about?” replied Maybelline

“It’s Richard and you know exactly what I mean” retorted Elizabeth, Natalie frowned and explained that she had not seen Richard in almost two weeks

“Precisely, and he has been asking where the hell you are, calling the house, that in my own opinion is the wrong enquiry, he is not supposed to be asking for you! I didn’t say anything when you two were spending time together. I was glad that he felt pity for you and was just helping you out, but frankly now, I don’t like how you are taking advantage of his help”

She crossed her arms and glared at her sister

“His attention is supposed to be on me, when he’s with me, he’s not supposed to be asking or talking about you” she snapped

“Natalie dear,” said Maybelline gently as she went to sit beside Natalie “I don’t want you to get hurt, I don’t want you to mistake Richard’s friendship for something else, Richard has always liked being needed, he can’t help it, he likes to help those less able and I don’t want you to read more into it than what it actually is, do you understand?”

“I haven’t done anything mum, and besides, it’s not my fault you are insecure about your relationship with Richard, Elizabeth. And as you’ve pointed out, why would Richard Waters be interested in me when you are with him?”

“Exactly, you are not just his type so stay away from him”

“Believe me, I know. I am going to my room I have a headache. Be rest assured sis, I haven’t seen or spoken with Richard, so you see, there’s no cause for alarm”.

SEVEN

Elizabeth beamed as everyone sang a happy birthday to her, she smiled as she looked around at her family and friends, she looked radiant and everyone commented on how beautiful she looked, she tucked her hand firmly into Richard's arm as they walked around saying hello

Richard whispered in Elizabeth's ear that he had to see someone, but she held on tightly to his arm

"You're not going to leave me all by myself today Richard Waters" Elizabeth whispered fiercely and then smiled sweetly, "Now come one, let's go say hello to my dad and his friends"

Robert kissed his daughter on the cheeks and raised his glass to her, "This is to you my dear, may this new year of your life be an even better one. You have been successful in your life and in your job, I am proud of you and your mother and I hope to hear greater news later today" he said and smiled at Richard, Elizabeth squeezed Richard's arm and kissed his cheek "Hear that Richard?" she asked, Richard smiled at her and gently tugged his arm away from Elizabeth's hold

"If you'll both excuse me, I need to see someone" he said and Elizabeth watched him walk away

Maybelline took Elizabeth's arm, she smiled and asked where Richard was off to

"I don't know mum, I told him he should not abandon me today of all days so he should be back soon and I hope to keep him on my arms throughout the night and after",

"Good, it's about time this is moved forward, Emily and I are expecting the news soon just as your father said" she said and squeezed Elizabeth's hand.

Natalie was standing in the balcony with Karen as Karen played the video of her latest performance, Natalie listened intently

“Come on Karen, don’t lose hope, I know you’ll perform the song better the next time”,
“That’s if they call me back”, grumbled Karen but Natalie smiled, “You were just nervous,
I’ve heard you perform that song many times, so I’m sure you’ll get a repeat performance”

“You are too optimistic Natalie, I tell you, the song was a flush, and I won’t be able to show
my face in class for a long time” said Karen and Natalie laughed

“It’s all right Karen, you were obviously just nervous because Regan was there” teased
Natalie

“Oh don’t remind me” groaned Karen and Natalie hugged her, “Trust me, it will be much
better the next time”

“You always see the bright side of everything Natalie Stirling and I love that about you” said
Karen

“So do I, hello Karen”, it was Richard and Natalie jumped at the sound of his voice

“Hello Richard, haven’t seen you all evening” said Karen as she hugged him

“Just got here not long, hello Natalie”

Natalie calmly said hello but her heart was beating so fast and loud that it was deafening,
she had missed his voice, she had missed the tenderness in his voice and she had missed
hearing him call her name, she missed their conversations and their friendship, she missed
him.

After running out of excuses for not seeing him, Natalie had finally told Richard to please
not call her or come see her, he had finally agreed but said he was not going to give up and
would give her some time to think about it and warned her that nothing was going to
change his mind about her.

There was an awkward silence, Karen looked at Richard who was looking at Natalie, she
cleared her throat and mumbled that she would go get a drink and hurried away

“You sure do know how to hide from someone Natalie, you should be in the CIA”, said
Richard but he was not smiling

“Why are you doing this to me Natalie? Why are you doing this to us?” but Natalie could not
speak, she was afraid she would burst into tears if she tried to say anything,

“I have missed you Natalie, much more than I can say, I thought I’d give you space and time to think things through, but I can’t wait any more my darling, I love you”,

“Please stop Richard, we shouldn’t be having this conversation”, whispered Natalie brokenly
“It’s been forever since I have seen you or talked to you, I have missed you terribly, Damn it Natalie, I almost went insane these past few weeks, not seeing you, hearing your voice or touching you and now you are telling me we shouldn’t be having this conversation. I love you and I know you feel something for me, I see it when we are together so don’t you dare tell me not to have this conversation”

Natalie remained silent and this only made Richard angry, “Talk to me Natalie, talk to me damn it!”

Natalie was furious as she turned around to him, there was pain and anger in her face,
“You can’t love me Richard, look at me, I am blind, blind as a bat, and I don’t even know what you look like for God sake. Elizabeth is in there; everyone is waiting for you to propose to Elizabeth, not me Richard. You can’t love me Richard, I don’t have anything to offer you, what kind of future can I give you, I will not be a burden to you”

“I can and I am in love with you Natalie, you and not Elizabeth, get that into your head. You’re the woman I love, not your sister. I have seen you, I know you are blind Natalie but that doesn’t make any difference” he argued fiercely but Natalie shook her head

“It does Richard; it does, what would people say, your family, and friends? I will be a burden to you, what will happen months from now, years from now? It takes determination to commit in a relationship such as this”, Natalie sighed

“I have been in relationships before and I know what I am talking about”

Richard took a deep breath and sighed, he took Natalie’s hand in his and put it against his chest

“Natalie, you are one of the smartest people I know, you are very special, others may not know it but I do. All those times we spent together, you have taught me more than any one has ever done, you’ve brought such joy, excitement and love to my life and I don’t give a damn what other people think, I’m not going to let that go and I am committed to you Natalie. I don’t know what will happen years from now but I need you to trust me and the love I have for you that we will face it together and overcome it.

“You’re not one helpless female Natalie, you’re fierce and independent and ambitious, you may be a lot of things Natalie Stirling but helpless, burden and weak are not among them” said Richard and he kissed her hand

“You feel something for me Natalie, don’t you? Please give this a chance, you do have feelings for me Natalie, no matter how little it may be I don’t care, do you Natalie? Do you?” Natalie burst into tears and nodded,

“Yes I do Richard, I love you, that’s what’s even worse, God knows I shouldn’t but I do love you” she said through her tears, Richard smiled and pulled her into his arms

“What about Elizabeth?” Natalie whispered

“I’ve told your sister many times that there can be nothing between us, besides, she doesn’t love me, she doesn’t know what love is” said Richard and almost in a whisper he continued

“I didn’t either till I met you Natalie, you taught me to see and appreciate the things in my life, I have come to see you and love you for who you are Natalie and for the record, I have told my parents that I don’t intend to marry Elizabeth, it’s you I want, if you will have me”, Natalie started shaking her head but Richard only held her tightly in his arms

“I don’t know what you’ve been through Natalie but I will not hurt you, I love you too damn much to think of hurting you” he said and kissed her

“This is where you belong, it is where I belong, and we belong to one another”

He kissed her again; Natalie’s arms were still by her side as many thoughts ran through her mind

“You know, this is the part you put your arms around me, I promise, I won’t bite”

Natalie laughed and sobbed at the same time as she threw her arms around Richard’s neck

“Tell me again that you love me”

Natalie sighed “I love you Richard Waters, I don’t know how or why but I do”

“You love me, that is what’s most important and I’m never letting you go” said Richard and gathered her in his arms and held her tightly.

