

Prologue

I was panting heavily, gasping for air, staring at the ceiling as fluorescent lights seared into my eyes. Blurred shapes moved around me—three medical staff, their voices distant, muffled, as if I were underwater.

My clothes were gone. A hospital gown clung to my skin. A needle had been inserted into my arm, administering a drip—why, I didn't know.

A doctor was speaking, but the words barely registered. I tried to respond but nothing came out.

How did I end up here?

I was healthy. Middle-aged, yes, but strong. Fit. I wasn't supposed to be wired up in a hospital bed, unable to breathe.

And yet, here I was.

The weight on my chest wasn't just physical. It was something deeper. Something that I had carried for far too long.

Love.

It is the force that both builds and breaks us. The thing that gives life meaning, yet also the thing that can shatter us beyond recognition.

There are different kinds of love—each with its own lessons, each shaping us in ways we never expect.

There is the love you are born into. The love of family. The foundation upon which everything else is built. But even this love is not always easy—it can be filled with warmth or with wounds, with safety or with scars.

There is the love of friendship. The quiet, steady kind that carries you through the hardest times. The people who see you at your worst and stand by you anyway. The ones who remind you who you are when you've lost yourself.

There is romantic love. The love that consumes, ignites, transforms. It can be tender or wild, comforting or chaotic. It can be a sanctuary—or a storm.

And then there is self-love. Perhaps the most difficult to cultivate, yet the most important of all. Because without it, every other kind of love becomes unstable.

I had experienced all of them.

I had known the steady familiarity of a marriage that spanned decades—one that built a family but also held years of unspoken resentments.

I had known the soul-shaking, all-consuming love that knocks the air from your lungs—the kind that feels destined, undeniable.

I had known love lost.

And I had come to realize that love is not just something we feel.

It is something we choose.

To love is to be vulnerable—to stand at the edge of uncertainty and trust that you will not fall. It is to risk pain, to risk heartbreak, to risk everything.

And yet, we do it anyway.

Because love is what makes us grow.

It pushes us, challenges us, forces us to confront the parts of ourselves that we might otherwise ignore.

And sometimes, it takes breaking completely to understand what love really is.

As I lay there, unable to move, my mind flickered through memories—moments of love in all its forms. The joy, the grief, the lessons, the losses. It was all connected.

And maybe, just maybe—this moment, this breaking point, was the beginning of something new.

Part 1: Michael

Chapter 1: *Eric's Last Words*

Eric and I met when we were six and grew up side by side. Through every stage of life - love troubles, school struggles, career ambitions - we were each other's constant. We partied, traveled, and chased adventure together. When I studied in France, he flew in, and we spent weeks touring southern Europe in a tiny Renault Clio, navigating with paper maps before smartphones took over the world.

I met my wife Julia when I was 22, and Eric stayed single for a while longer. Then one day, fate intervened. On a flight to Rome, he met Cristina. They were strangers at takeoff, but by landing, something had shifted between them. They married, just as I had years earlier - I was his best man, just as he had been for me. . They had a son and a daughter and life carried on happily.

Every year, Eric and I would escape into nature, going on hiking and fishing trips just to be. No noise, no deadlines, just the quiet understanding between old friends. But a few years after his youngest daughter was born, something changed. It started as a simple spasm in his leg. The doctor brushed it off as nerve inflammation, saying that it would pass. But it didn't. The spasms became epileptic attacks.

My sister Anna, who is a doctor, spoke with him. She arranged an appointment at her clinic, and a colleague ordered a scan. The result shattered everything. A brain tumor.

The world collapsed around them - and us.

Eric faced surgery, and miraculously, the tumor was removed completely. For a while, we allowed ourselves to believe that he was in the clear. But a year later, the tumor returned, aggressive and relentless. A second surgery, then rounds of brutal treatments followed. I visited him constantly, two, three times a week. He was still Eric, but the illness stole his body first. The man who once outran me on cycling trips could barely lift himself from bed.

We talked about everything - practicalities, philosophy, love. As his days passed, so did his patience for pain. He was ready to go.

His final weeks were spent in palliative care. Our conversations became deeper, more urgent. One day, between silences, he looked at me and said:

"Promise me you'll live life to the fullest."

I promised. He then said *"Michael, you're a good man, an amazing soul"*

Then he added something else, something I already knew but hadn't admitted to myself.

"Julia isn't the one for you anymore."

That night, I sat with his sister for seven hours—each of us holding one of his hands.

The hospital room was calm, almost serene.

The walls were white, except for one—painted a soft, light green, adding a quiet warmth to the space. The bright wooden furniture gave it a sense of comfort, an attempt to make it feel less clinical and more human.

Several large windows lined the room, letting in the faint glow of streetlights outside.

One of them was slightly open, allowing a gentle breeze to drift in—cool, crisp, carrying the quiet sounds of the night.

He was asleep, his breaths slow, his grip weak.

I left at midnight, pausing for a moment at the door.

Knowing it might be the last time.

At 6:30 a.m., his sister called.

He was gone.

I was in the living room, the space bathed in soft, flickering light.

The wooden floors felt cool beneath me, contrasting with the warm glow of the candle that I had placed before me. A single flame, encircled carefully, as if holding space for something unseen. Beside it, a fresh, unlit candle stood waiting.

The white walls gave the room an airy openness, while the large bookcase along one side was filled with well-worn books and carefully placed designer pieces—a blend of thoughtfulness and artistry, of collected moments and meaning.

I watched the candle flicker, its light dancing against the quiet stillness.

Grief settled like a weight in my chest.

But beneath it, something else stirred—a quiet knowing. I had made a promise. Something had to change.

Chapter 2: About me

I grew up in London, in a comfortable home with my parents and my younger sister, Anna. On the surface, everything was good, stable, structured, predictable. A good education, a close sibling bond, and parents who valued hard work over pressure.

But beneath that stability, there were arguments.

Loud. Exhausting.

Fights that filled the house and left the air heavy. The kind of conflict that didn't always resolve—just echoed, lingering long after the words had stopped.

I didn't realize how much they shaped me until much later, how they carved patterns into the way I handled relationships, how I responded to conflict, how I learned to internalize stress. I became the observer. The silent one. The peacemaker, hoping quietness would be enough to restore calm.

We lived in a nice neighborhood. Not extravagant, but comfortable. Safe. Predictable. My parents never pushed us too hard in school, but Anna and I were naturally driven. She pursued medicine; I took the path of international business, both of us wanting to carve our own way, to make something of ourselves.

I coasted through school with no major issues. I wasn't the most popular guy, but I wasn't at the bottom of the social hierarchy either. I was somewhere in between, moving through the social landscape without standing out too much. Enough to belong, but rarely the center of the room.

Still, there was a pull inside me.

A quiet restlessness.

A tension between who I appeared to be and what I truly felt.

Even in my early teens, I began questioning the world around me in ways that weren't just logical, they were spiritual. I would find myself lying in bed late at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering what connected us all. Wondering why some people hurt each other and others didn't. Wondering what love really meant, or if there was something greater guiding us, some presence beyond the surface of things.

I never fully followed a religion, but I believed in something. A force, a rhythm. A knowing. I'd feel it sometimes in the quiet moments, in nature, in music, in the stillness before sleep. A whisper of truth that couldn't be explained in words.

From a young age, I was deeply interested in people. Not just their actions, but their feelings, their energy, the emotions they carried that were never spoken aloud. I'd sit quietly in a group and sense the tension between two people before they even said a word. I became attuned to the unseen language between people. The undercurrents. The signals no one teaches you to read but somehow you just do.

This sensitivity made me reflective. It also made me vulnerable.

There was a clash in me, between confidence and insecurity. On the outside, I was social, adaptable, someone who could command attention when I wanted to. But on the inside, I battled self-doubt. Always wondering if I truly fit in, if I was enough.

I had this strange duality; some days, I was carefree, almost bohemian, uninterested in the expectations of others. I'd drift through the day, imagining possibilities, questioning everything. Other days, I was sharp, strategic, focused on success, eager to achieve, to prove something I couldn't quite name.

High school brought my first serious relationship.

We spent nearly all our time together, young love, intense, exciting, all-consuming.

But looking back, I see it now: I clung to it.

Not just because of her, but because it gave me an escape. A way to step outside the walls of my home, away from the tension, away from the uncertainty. She became my anchor, my safe place. I didn't yet realize how much I was already repeating a pattern, finding safety in love, hoping it would fill the emotional gaps I didn't know I carried.

And when school ended, I did what I always knew I would do.

I left.

I wanted more, new places, new experiences, new languages.

I wanted to throw myself into the world.

Not just for the adventure.

But for the connection.

For the people.

For the feeling of being alive and part of something larger than myself.

And I did.