**Chapter Fifteen**

**I**f not for the fact that Phil was still using my body and making the entire thing seem like an incestuous affair between a son and a mother, I swear I could have broken down right there and then. I know I might have been through many *way-too-soapy* operas, but real life is always different from TV screens. And it’s much, much more touching.

The reaction on Tanya’s face when she stepped over the threshold was priceless. She froze―and by ‘froze’, I mean it, literally―her muscles tensed, and her face whitened. Even her breathing hitched. It was as if Medusa herself had turned her deadly, horrifying face on Tanya.

For a long time, Tanya stayed frozen to the threshold, her eyes glancing around frantically, drinking in the vision that befell her. She trembled, her arms making uncontrollable spasms that I knew was the aftereffects of this sudden recognition.

Yeah, I know. If returning home after a ten-year sabbatical is heart-warming, add in the ‘admittance to mental hospital’ part and it becomes deeply overwhelming.

“Tanny,” Phil whispered playfully. “If you were planning on standing here all day, you should at least inform me beforehand so that I could prepare a stool.”

Tanya snapped out of her trance and shook her head. “I just…” She blubbered, taking an almost involuntary step into the house.

Phil lay a gentle hand on Tanya’s back as he ushered her in. “…need to get some hot chocolate with marshmallows in it. Don’t worry, I’ve got that covered. So why don’t you go sit on the couch while I get the stove running?” He suggested.

Making sure that Tanya was sitting safe and sound in the couch, Phil sauntered over to the kitchen and started the stove. There was a dull click, but no fire came alive.

“Of course,” Phil grumbled. “When ten years become like hours to someone, it’s hard to blame that *someone* for forgetting that stoves do indeed abide by the fundamental laws of physics.”

Once he’d called for gas, Phil rifled through the cupboards. Besides the heavy lint of dust and cobwebs, there was basically not much stuff in them, only some old porcelain dishware and cutleries. Nothing edible.

Phil sighed. “Guess it’s takeaway then, huh. Man, I should seriously consider resetting my biological calendar now.”

Phil returned to the living room to find Tanya staring into the same picture that caught Phil’s eye just now. Her eyes seemed faraway and distant, but there was the faintest hint of longing in it. I realized it was the same gaze Tanya had when she first saw us back in Chambers’.

Phil smiled and walked over to her side. “Tanny, hey,” he cooed, placing the back of his hand against Tanya’s forehead. It felt warm, but not overly hot that might suggest that she’s burning up. “I’m here, and you’re gonna be absolutely fine. Food’s on its way, so just tell your little tummy to hang in right there, alright?”

I was expecting Tanya to keep her silence, losing herself in the trance-like state that she was now in, but Tanya swivelled her eyes to meet Phil’s. She stared at him, a deep, unfathomable frown stretched across her brows.

“It’s not my tummy.” She said suddenly.

Now it was Phil’s turn to frown. “What?”

“My tummy’s fine.” Tanya pointed a finger at her temple. “It’s my brain that’s…having problems.”

Taking that from a person who’d just been (illegally) discharged from an asylum, that piece of information surely didn’t seem very significant to me at all, but Phil grabbed at it. I couldn’t blame him. After all, this man was desperate to cure his wife’s condition.

“What problems?” Phil tried to keep the urgency out of his voice.

Tanya seemed agitated. “Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m not crazy or anything―”

“I know you’re not.”

“I just…can’t remember where I kept something.” Tanya shook her head, evidently frustrated. “And it’s nagging at the behind of my head.”

Phil gave a small laugh. “Believe me or not, Tanny, but I think I know *exactly* how you’re feeling right now.”

He had Tanya’s attention now. She looked up and stared her watery blue eyes right into mine. Or Phil’s, depending on how you want to see it.

“It’s one hell of a bastard, isn’t it? Hiding inside the dark, complicated maze within your mind, and whenever you feel that you’re close to grabbing it and unveiling its secret, it seems to be able to evade your grasp every single time.”

Tanya didn’t respond, but instead she gulped, almost involuntarily.

Phil chuckled. “Beats me. Have the same problem every time I see those Materials Science questions in exams.”

Miraculously, Tanya laughed. So loud and hysterical that I thought Phil must have triggered something in Tanya’s mind that turned her from an already off-the-beaten-track mental patient into a full-blown psycho. The laugh, which sounded more like a witch’s cackle, lasted for nearly half a minute.

As always, Phil didn’t think the same way as I did. He took Tanya’s loony laugh as a sign of her agreeing with his reasoning. He chortled heartily along, and no matter how crazy it might seem, the laughter did ease the tension that was building up in the room.

“Bet you felt like tearing your head apart trying to find that bastard of an answer, didn’t you?” Tanya choked out between hiccups of laughter, sending the two of them into another fit.

“So,” Phil said, once they had finally stopped laughing. “What’s troubling you?”

**B**ased on Tanya’s description, the ‘something’ she was looking for was a big, brown, rectangular-shaped envelope. When asked about its contents, Tanya merely shrugged and denied any knowledge about it, saying that it must have slipped her mind during her time at Chambers’.

“Okay, since Pizza’s not gonna be here for at least the next half an hour, why not we try searching for this envelope thingy together?” Phil suggested. “You take the ground floor, and I’ll take the upper one, ’kay?”

For some reason, Tanya appeared slightly reluctant at Phil’s seemingly-innocuous offer. Her lip twitched, and the deep frown on her forehead creased some more, before she finally gave in. “Fine. But be sure to call out to me once you find the envelope, yes?”

Phil grinned. “Roger that, ma’am. Let’s get to work.”

And this was how Phil ended up under the double bed in the master bedroom, choking on the abundance of dust and staring at the rusty spring works beneath the mouldy mattress. As he was cursing incessantly and trying very hard not to breathe, I was surprised when he suddenly retracted himself from underneath the bed and stared hard at the metallic bedposts. Then, without warning, he snorted.

“Pfft.” Phil whistled. “Rusty spring works. That explains the loudness of the bed whenever we had sex―”

I put on some imaginary earplugs. “Too much information!” I protested.

Naturally, Phil was oblivious to the fact that he was reiterating his way-too-noisy sex life aloud to me and prattled on for a few more moments, before turning back to the bed. After ripping off the bed sheets and finding no hidden pockets in the mattress, Phil slumped down on the bed, sending a plume of dust erupting into the air. He buried his face in his hands.

“This is taking too much time,” I heard him complain. “There must be something I’m missing. And what’s frustrating is that it’s probably sitting right in front of my very eyes. I *know* it is. I just don’t know what―”

Then it hit him.

“The words in black!” Phil cried, snapping his head up abruptly. “Damnation, purgatory, rebirth. That must be it! It sure as hell did look like Tanny’s writing, plus when I asked Tanny about it, she looked as if I’d asked her about her period or something. There must be a connection between the writing and this ‘thing’ of Tanny’s. But what is it?”

For a brief moment, Phil considered going downstairs and asking Tanya about the words in black, but decided against it. “The last time I confronted her, she nearly had a heart attack. Now is still not the right time. Guess I’m on my own then.”

“So, ‘damnation’ ‘purgatory’ and ‘rebirth’ in caps. What’s the connection?” Phil thought, sweeping his eyes across the room as he scanned for any possible clues. But what he saw were merely bedside lamps that he had touched almost every day, photos that he had never got bored of staring at, and books that he was so familiar with that he could probably recite the sequence of the titles with his eyes closed.

“Wait a minute,” He stood up. “Books.”

Dramatic music started playing in my head. I felt myself waltz over to the bookshelf and start rummaging through the collection of books on the shelf. Phil was apparently an avid fan of ancient literature. There were English transcriptions of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War*, Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*…and Dante’s *Inferno*.

Now, this first part of Dante’s *Commedia*, or, in layman English, *The Divine Comedy* (no, I wasn’t shagging behind the bicycle shed during Literature class) wouldn’t have stood out like a giant teddy bear among some petite sized Barbie dolls. Well, at least not if there weren’t two copies of it arranged side by side.

One of them was a smaller hardcover copy, its dark leather cover and gold-plated wordings being all too familiar to Phil. The other one was a larger version, almost box-like, but besides the size factor, everything on its spine was the exact replica of its smaller counterpart. Based on Phil’s extensive experience of sitting here, rifling through these books whenever he was either having a sudden craving for literature or a serious hangover, he had only seen the smaller *Inferno.* Its big cousin? Nuh-uh. It’s definitely a hostile.

“Yes. This makes sense.” Phil reasoned. “*Purgatorio* is the second installment in the Divine Comedy Trilogy. And Tanny wrote it as the second black word. Well, as a depression patient, it’s highly unlikely that she could come up with such a deliberate plan. It must have been Tanny’s subconscious dealing the cards all along.”

Phil grabbed the book around its spine and pulled it out. It felt surprisingly light for a hardcover its size. Weighing it in his hands as he scrutinized the cover, Phil couldn’t help but be impressed with the level of similarity of this copy with the original version. The designs of the covers of both copies was exactly similar, even to the minutest detail―the parts with embossed wordings coincided with the ones on its doppelganger.

The best part came when Phil flipped open the cover. The so-called ‘book’ turned out to be a folder of sorts, with a hollow inside which was concealed by the three sides that looked very much like the sides of a normal book. And within the hollow space lay a big, brown envelope.

“Whammy.” Pulling the envelope out, Phil tore it open and stared into its contents. It turned out to be a stack of papers bound together with a rubber band.

Phil frowned. This didn’t seem like anything he had in mind. “If Tanny was hiding something in this book disguise, it must be something important. Something like jewelry, cash even. ‘Recycled paper’ didn’t exactly fit into the profile of something that would be hidden inside a book named *Inferno*.”

Ten years was more than enough to oxidize a rubber band. When Phil tried to remove the rubber band, it snapped and stuck onto the papers, so he had no choice but to pluck it off manually. Ignoring the red trail that it left behind on the papers, Phil started spreading out the papers like a dealer spreading out his cards, scanning them for anything resembling significance.

One of them caught his eye. It was a black-and-white newspaper cutting, yellowed at several patches. There was a photograph at the middle; it was of a pregnant woman, but it wasn’t Tanya. But it wasn’t the woman that grabbed Phil’s attention. It was the man who was standing beside her.

Clad in typical white lab overalls and wearing a pair of huge square specs, Leonard Albright Mascon’s figure was unmistakable. The title wrote: ‘Newly Developed Medicine Cures Infertility’.

Suddenly remembering something important, Phil speed-read through the article. It was about a woman named Jasmine Pickles―who had been infertile for more than a decade due to blocked Fallopian tubes―succeeding in conceiving a child after consuming a newly developed drug called FallopFix. Guess which company manufactured the drug?

Yeah, that wasn’t even *hard*. LAMRAED. Phil’s BFF’s self-professed philanthropic company.

Frantic now, Phil placed the newspaper cutting on the floor and continued shuffling through the stack of papers hastily. One by one, the words in the articles leaped from where they stood into Phil’s eyes, and with each assault, he felt a paralyzing throb in his heart. They were all about the FallopFix drug.

‘FallopFix Brings Smiles to Women’, one said. ‘The Invention of The Century―FallopFix’, said the other.

But as Phil progressed down the pile, the auspicious degree of the articles began to decrease. Problems started to arise; ‘Side Effects of FallopFix Threatens Patients’ ‘WHO Raises Concerns about FallopFix’s Side Effects’ and ‘Researchers Fear for FallopFix’s Future’ were the typical titles of the remaining articles in the pile.

I didn’t even had to say “You see? I told you so.” The writer Juliet Marillier wasn’t conjecturing when she said that ‘nothing came without a price’, you know. But then another thought coursed through my mind.

*What about Tanya? Did she take the drug?*

Phil happened to be thinking the exact same thing. “No, no. Tell me you did not fall for this crap, Tanny.” Phil mumbled as his fingers began to frenziedly comb through the stack of papers, dreading any proof that might suggest Tanya had been consuming the drug.

The remaining articles were not helping either. Among them, there was this long article by a neurology professor in Stanford that piqued Phil’s interest. It stated that the FallopFix drug, if consumed consistently for a prolonged period of time, would inevitably tamper with the subject’s mind, hence altering his or her neurological functions eventually. The possible symptoms of the altered psychological system were irrational and erratic behaviour, anger issues, and multiple personalities.

With trepidation churning in his stomach, Phil tossed the article wildly aside and ripped through what was left of the pile of old newspapers. There was nothing much but a bunch of similar articles regarding the downside of FallopFix. He was about to give up when he reached the last paper in the deck.

It was a receipt. No, not a receipt; it looked more like a contract deal or something. At the headings, the words ‘Consent for FallopFix Trial’ were printed out in bold.

Phil knew what was coming next. “No.” he mumbled, almost instinctively, as he skimmed through the computerized wordings on the consent form. Then, when his eyes trailed the familiar signature at the bottom of the paper, Phil knew that the fact was undeniable.

“Tanya is a victim of an illegitimate drug trial,” Phil concluded. “And the perpetrator of the crime? Leonard Albright Mascon. That son of a―”

I left Phil to his cursing fit for a moment while I pondered upon the new information. So Tanya’s admittance to the mental institution was not a wronged accusation. She was indeed crazy―at least to a certain extent. However, did the side effects of the FallopFix drug wear off with time? Was Tanya any crazier than she was ten years ago? Based on my assessment of Tanya just now, she didn’t seem quite crazy to me, not unless you count the recital of the Seven Deadly Sins ‘loony’.

Phil who had suddenly remembered Tanya’s words to ‘call out to her once he found the envelope’, was starting to pack up the articles back into the brown envelope. Since the rubber band had broken off, Phil decided to just ditch it. “She probably wouldn’t even remember the rubber band anyway.” He shrugged.

After making sure that he had placed the ‘book’ back to its original position, Phil headed downstairs to report his find to Tanya.

**I**t didn’t surprise me when Tanya seemed vexed that her husband had found the envelope before her. When Phil showed her the envelope, she snatched it from him without a word.

As Tanya tore open the envelope and starting rifling through the papers inside, Phil wanted to confront her about the receipt, but thought better of it. “Let’s observe her reaction first.” He decided.

Once Tanya saw what was inside the brown envelope, she gave out a small gasp. I did not miss the tremble that went through her body. Then, when she reached the receipt, she started mumbling “No, no, no―”, with tears swirling in her eyes.

Phil was immediately by her side, wrapping his arms around her and stroking her hair with a hand. However, to Phil’s absolute surprise, Tanya pushed him away with all her might.

“No…stay away from me, Phil.” Tanya blubbered.

“Wha―why?” cried a hurt and bewildered Phil.

Tanya was sobbing uncontrollably now. She collapsed into an armchair, the contents of the envelope still clutched protectively against her chest. “I’m just…not well, Phil. I need a little space.”

Phil exhaled and gave a small laugh. Shambling over to the armchair, he squatted down beside it and looked at Tanya right in the eye. She met his gaze for a brief moment, before averting her gaze. But it was enough for Phil to see the remorse and self-accusation in it.

“C’mon, Tanny. Listen to me.” Phil cleared his throat. “This…*situation*…it isn’t your fault. You might be the one who had been sent to Chambers’, but you were misdiagnosed. I know it’s impossible for me to even start to imagine, let alone *empathize*, how the ten long years there must have been like for you. But there’s one thing I’m dead sure of―you are free now. You don’t have to go back in there anymore.”

Tanya smiled, as a tear trickled down her cheek. “I did it for you, y’know.” She mumbled.

Phil wiped away the stray tear with his hand and felt a thrill when Tanya didn’t back away this time. “Did what for me, dear?”

“The trial. I contacted Dr. Leonard, and he was surprisingly generous with his offer to give me a better future. A future with kids. *Your* kids.

Phil felt a stab of warmth at his heart when he heard Tanya’s confession. “But, seriously, why, Tanny? You knew I wasn’t coming back anymore.”

Tanya ogled Phil with a confused look in her eyes. “No, no―you were coming back, I was sure of it.” Suddenly, she fluttered her eyelids as her face flushed crimson. “But not until I cured my infertility.”

“Tanny, infertility can’t just be *cured*―” Then the meaning of Tanya’s words hit him. “You think the reason why I didn’t come back to you is because you were *infertile*?” Phil demanded, incredulous.

Tanya dipped her head low, as if ashamed of herself. “Wasn’t that what you were thinking right from the beginning? That I was nothing but a burden if I couldn’t bear you a child?”

“NO!” Phil exploded, causing Tanya to jump. “Why would I―?”

Sensing Tanya’s unease, Phil broke off in mid-sentence and laid both his hands reassuringly on Tanya’s arms. She tried to struggle away, but Phil held on firmly.

“Tanny,” Phil began in a mock serious tone, “you would *always* be a burden to me―intellectually-wise. The pressure to keep up with your amazing intellect had always been on my shoulders, and that’s exactly why I married you in the first place, remember? You and I, constantly ripping at each other’s throats over mathematical equations.”

Tanya gave a soft giggle, embarrassed.

Phil’s expression changed from mock seriousness into a more genuine one. “But whether or not you could bear those cute little babies for me, naturally or otherwise, it doesn’t matter―my love for you remains. And before this could get any much cornier, could you *please* believe me when I say ‘you don’t have to cure your infertility in order to win my heart’?”

I swear to God, the smile on Tanya’s face could have torn her face apart right there and then.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Tanya whispered.

Phil grinned. “Me too.”

Then, with no warning at all, they kissed.