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*Lightbreakers*

AJA GABEL



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I

*The Beginning*

## *Maya*

In the beginning, there was happiness.

Maya remembered how nervous Noah had been when they met, clenching and unclenching his hands and repeatedly brushing a single dark curl off his forehead. The curl always fell right back, the act fruitless. At first this disoriented Maya, seeing how nervous he was despite being attractive. And though she was an artist who believed the very idea of objective beauty was suspect, she had to admit he *was* objectively beautiful. In the years to come, she often caught people staring at his aristocrat cheekbones, his flop of dark hair, his broad and perfectly articulated shoulders. But when he spoke to her that first time, he stammered, tripping over the academic phrases she'd used from her training in art history, and almost immediately he confessed, "I'm sorry, I only really know science."

He had wandered into her student symposium talk, which wasn't technically public, but the way he carefully crept in and took a seat behind the professors made it seem like he'd been invited. She'd been presenting on a Japanese photographer she admired, who had been a major inspiration for her own painting practice. When the talk was over

and the congratulations offered, the professors dispersed. The stranger hung around, waiting to speak to her.

"That's all right," Maya said. "Art is for everyone." She felt stupid for blurting out a trite aphorism, but he gulped it right up. She felt like taking it back would be taking it from him. Her offhand thought was that she was safe.

She asked what kind of science he studied, assuming he was a graduate student, if an older one. He was white and had the same look of the intense white guys in the math department who had a nearby seminar at the same time as hers. He mumbled that he actually worked for JPL, the NASA research lab, as a physicist. *Oh*, she thought, *so he's smart, I'm in trouble*. As the room emptied, they remained talking. At one point, when neither of them moved for a spell, the motion-sensor lights flicked off.

"Oh no," Maya said, but Noah didn't seem fazed. In the darkness, he asked her to go out with him. When she laughed, delighted, the lights came back on.

They went to dinner right then, to a nearby taco stand, where they sat on folding chairs on the sidewalk. She told him that her talk was for her nearly completed master's in modern and contemporary art, focusing on the intersection of photography and painting, but that she wasn't sure if she wanted to continue on the doctoral track. She had a BFA in painting, and sometimes that was what she really wanted to do, paint. She told him some people said painting was dead, which she strongly disagreed with. That was like saying handwriting was dead.

"But handwriting *is* dead," he said, and this made her laugh again, at how plainly and earnestly he said it.

She was giddy with happiness. Any awkwardness fizzled away. They lingered with empty plates and shouted conversation at each other over the roar of passing motorcycles.

Now, looking back, she understood that Noah's earnestness was a

kind of hope that she—and this taco night, this electricity between them—could propel him away from his sadness. But no, at that point, she didn't know about the sadness. She wouldn't know about it until their fourth date and two sleepovers later, when she found a picture of a baby at the bottom of a drawer, beneath a bottle of Tylenol and a box of Band-Aids. All she knew on that first night, as he dropped her off in front of her apartment, was that something in him was splayed out, something that she could put back together if she could only gather it all up in her hands.

Later, she would understand this as her impulse toward caretaking: Noah harboring a wound, Maya desperate to mend it. And even later than that, she would understand that his sadness was a sediment layer, never far away, waiting beneath everything in him.

"Wait," he said through the car window. "Will you come out with me tomorrow?"

The way he'd asked her, "will you" instead of "do you want to," implied he needed her to come out. *Will you, do you have the will inside you to be with me.* She would and she did, for years after, even when she began to realize that being with him was not the simple answer they'd both thought it might be.

Someone had asked Maya this question—"How did you meet your husband?"—at the museum where she worked. It was the kickoff cocktail party for the fundraising campaign she had organized herself. She knew she should have felt pride, but standing in the airy gallery surrounded by the wealthiest people on the museum's roster, she was only itchy with boredom. The woman standing in front of her was wearing trousers and a silk blouse that Maya recognized as Gucci, the kind of matching that was curated at a shop on Rodeo Drive, an on-the-nose pairing that indicated the person had no actual personal style.

But Maya had to be vivacious and interesting to this woman. It was her job as development manager, as someone in charge of extracting money from wealthy dilettantes.

The question—"How did you meet your husband?"—was not uncommon, especially after people found out Maya was married to a scientist, as though science and art were incompatible. But today she hesitated before answering. This woman was staring at her, her expression expectant beneath a smear of gold eyeshadow. Caroline, Maya's boss and good friend, appeared before them, her smile tight.

"Maya?" Caroline said, laughing a little. "What, did you forget how you met your husband?"

What Maya was trying to describe was a delicate balance between what it had felt like then and what it felt like now. Then: lightness, the promise of the unknown. Now: Even though so much was known, there remained an unknown slice. But this slice was not light, not a promise. Only gray space on a map, unexplorable land.

Maya blushed. "Oh, sorry. I was just remembering it. He wandered into a talk I was giving to my graduate professors," she said, making it simple. But then she said, "When we got to talking, it felt like there was so much potential for happiness. Like we were two sides of a convoluted math equation. And once you solved for everything, all the variables or imaginary numbers or whatever, there we were. My flaws and needs accounted for in his strengths, and vice versa."

Caroline and the woman continued to stare at her, uncomprehending.

"He's a physicist but he mostly works in mathematical modeling," Maya said.

"Ah," the woman said. "One forgets math is the basis of everything."

"I don't know," Maya said. "The ancient cave paintings in France might have you believe otherwise."

Caroline shot her the quickest look—*What are you doing?*—before turning back to the woman. “Susan, that reminds me, have you read that essay in the Alexander Calder exhibition book? About his use of the Fibonacci sequence and geometry principles? It’s honestly very fascinating. Here, Sam can grab you a copy. Come this way.”

And like that, Caroline had saved her. Holding her flute of warm champagne, Maya scanned the party. Attendees were eating the passed mini-quiches and standing an appropriate distance from the art on the walls. Every now and then someone would uproariously laugh over the mellow sounds of the live jazz trio playing in the corner. Maya spotted the museum’s wealthiest targets, the couple with property in both the Beverly Hills flats and the actual hills, being charmed by the young ceramicist she’d invited, a long-haired Korean American man in loose carpenter pants and a threadbare T-shirt. She tried to catch his eye, to share a glance that would say, *Both of us Asians in this sea of white wealth, huh?* But he didn’t meet her eye, and she realized with an uneasy pang that to him, she wasn’t a peer. He was the artist, while she was the establishment, the suit.

Later, after donations had been taken or at least promised, and the crowd began to thin, Caroline found Maya once more. They’d been in college together, both art majors, but Caroline was more levelheaded and ambitious, always lining up internships and informational interviews. After school, she had dated around a couple of years before meeting Vincent, and then, like clockwork, she went to business school, bought a house in Los Angeles, and had a baby. Caroline had always been more grown-up than Maya, and Maya should have known that one day Caroline would hire her, which was exactly what happened when Maya’s painting career stagnated and she was desperate for a change. Maya had been unqualified for this job, but she learned In-Design and the donor database and how to ask people for money

without actually asking them, and the art she loved, always. They had a Robert Irwin at the museum, installed outdoors, and she was lucky to eat lunch some days while staring at it.

"You and Noah are *math equations*?" Caroline said, bumping Maya with her hip.

"No, we're one equation. Two sides."

"Okay," Caroline said. "Maybe the champagne is going to your head."

"She asked the question!" Maya protested.

"She didn't want a real answer."

Caroline took a napkin to a damp stain on Maya's silk shift. "You need soda water."

"I need . . ." Maya started to say. *A new job. Something to paint.*

But Caroline knew her. She knew what Maya wanted even when Maya didn't know how to express it. Their junior year they'd gone to Montreal for spring break and closed down a cheesy club that played French house music. Afterward, Maya had drunkenly dragged them toward the tiny convertible of the two beautiful Italian men they'd met on the dance floor, but Caroline seamlessly and believably made up the excuse that they *actually* had to go to the bathroom, and led Maya away from the strangers. From a terrace, they'd watched as the men drunkenly drove their car into a pole, crunching the hood and setting off the airbags. The men were okay, but Maya was shaken into sobriety.

"You knew the future," she had whispered.

"I knew the present," Caroline had replied. "You didn't want to go with them."

And Caroline was right, as she always was. Maya had gotten caught up. She tended to do that.

Which is why when Caroline said, "You need to quit?" Maya wasn't at all surprised that her friend had sensed what she was too afraid to

say. This job was only supposed to be temporary, and here she was, caught up in it.

Maya smiled and said, "I don't know. I can't quit. I need the money." She added quickly, "And of course, I'm so grateful that you hired me at all."

Caroline nodded. "Always."

"I need to know if anything I did was the right thing," Maya said, sounding a little funny but also a little desperate.

"Anything you did?"

"Noah's whole deal, what he was coming out of, what we were going to do together, it was so hopeful in the beginning. We were both so hopeful. But explaining all that to her just now, I thought maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was only me who was hopeful."

Caroline laughed. "Right now is when you discovered Noah's baggage?"

Of course Noah had baggage. Everyone had locked away parts of themselves. But lately Maya had been wondering if that locked-away part of Noah was what drove him to her, and if keeping her away from it was necessary to maintain the careful balance of their union. She hadn't thought of his sadness that way before, and now she couldn't see it any other way.

"You and Noah are perfectly matched," Caroline said. She linked her arm with Maya's. "Let the crew you so expertly hired clean this up. Paperwork can wait until the morning."

Caroline walked Maya to the parking garage and told her that if she wanted, she could take some time off after the fundraising campaign was over. A week or so. "See if you want to paint again—you know, regularly." Maya shrugged. Was that what was bothering her? Not painting?

When Maya got in her car and started the drive home, she couldn't

stop thinking. She thought about her and Noah's second, third, and fourth dates, and she thought about when they first brought up marriage, and then their actual marriage, now three years old, the age that most marriages decide to try to add a child or do without. Three was also the age Noah's child had been when she died. Almost four, Noah would say. Almost.

She replayed what she'd said to Caroline and the donor, that Noah accounted for her gaps and she accounted for his. It had felt like that when they met. It had felt like that for a while. Years into their marriage, though, she wasn't so sure.

She turned the car onto their street, up a winding hill in the Mount Washington neighborhood. A good school district, the Realtor had told them. Maya thought she wanted a kid, and Noah was not opposed to the idea. "Not opposed" were the exact words he'd used when she brought it up, in the toys section of Target, where she'd had to buy a baby shower gift. "I think I want it," he'd said, refusing to use a real noun, like *baby* or *child*. Of course, he'd already had it, long ago, with his first wife.

She wound around a blind corner and then into the steep driveway of their Craftsman. Noah's car wasn't there. It was 9:42 p.m., and he should have been home, even on a day he worked late. Maya walked into the house and set her boots neatly by the front door. She went straight to the kitchen, where she pulled from the fridge a cold bottle of pinot gris.

She poured a glass. What did she want? To know what to want, how to want it.

When she turned around, Noah's silhouetted figure in the doorway startled her backward, sending the wineglass stuttering across the counter. Miraculously, it didn't break.

"The door's wide open," he said.

"I just got home." She must have forgotten to close the door behind her. "God, you scared the shit out of me."

He turned on the lamp by the door, and she saw that his face wore a look she recognized, the same anxious, energized expression he'd had when he first suggested they get married.

"What's going on?" Maya asked.

On the couch, with Maya three sips into her wine and his untouched, he told her about Klein Michaels, the invisible clock, and a person he used to be, years before she knew him.