

Chapter 1: A Chance Encounter

Birkenhead Boat Club Hall, Auckland, New Zealand – Fifteen Years Ago

The scent of sea salt and rain filled the air as Mira Ashford made her way through the grand hall of the Birkenhead Boat Club. The wooden floors gleamed under the warm glow of chandeliers, casting reflections of elegantly dressed guests who mingled over champagne and hushed conversations. Tonight, the annual charity gala for displaced children was in full swing, a cause that resonated deeply with her heart.

She had been one of the lead organizers, working tirelessly alongside volunteers to ensure the event's success. Dressed in a sapphire-blue gown that highlighted her tall, athletic frame, she moved with effortless grace. With a blend of modesty and brilliance, her demeanour was a lethal cocktail. Even amidst the glamour, her focus remained on making a real difference.

At twenty-two, Mira was already a rising star in the advocacy world, having completed her law degree with top honours. A former basketball and cycling champion during her school years, she now devoted much of her free time to coaching children in underprivileged communities. But tonight, she was here as both a host and a benefactor, to see no child suffering without support.

The auction was well underway, the auctioneer's voice echoing through the hall as he announced the next item.

"Lot #2: A sunset yacht cruise with the donor himself, Mr. Darius Sherman!"

A murmur swept through the crowd as people turned toward the young man scanning the room with his storm-grey eyes. Showing an amused detachment in his early thirties, Darius Sherman stood near the bar, tall and striking in his stylishly confident suit. The young entrepreneur and yachting enthusiast had made a name for himself in Auckland's elite circles, but his true passion lay beyond the city's confines.

Mira had seen him before, effortlessly navigating the waters near the harbor, his hands steady on the wheel of his yacht. There was an air of confidence and mystery about him that made her stomach tighten whenever their paths crossed from afar. She hadn't expected to encounter him up close tonight.

As the auctioneer called for bids, Mira crouched to retrieve a scarf fallen from her shoulders, just as a polished black dress shoe stepped forward, pinning that silk fabric gently to the ground.

"Allow me," a deep, warm voice rumbled above her, laced with amusement.

Mira glanced up, her breath catching slightly. Darius knelt before her, and his strong fingers lifted the delicate scarf. His touch lingered a second too long as he draped it over her shoulders. His storm-grey eyes held hers, filled with intrigue and something unreadable.

"You're the one who organized this?" he nodded toward the bustling crowd. "Impressive."

Mira flushed slightly, her natural humility kicking in. "It's not that impressive. Just giving back."

He smirked a slow-knowing expression: "Modesty and brilliance? An irresistible combination."

She straightened, offering a polite nod before stepping away, but something in his gaze told her he wasn't done with her yet.

Hours later, as the gala wound down, the weather had taken a turn. Rain lashed against the windows of the boat club hall, and most guests had already departed. Mira stood by the glass, watching the rhythmic dance of waves outside. The world beyond that moment blurred, her thoughts swirling like the tempest beyond the glass.

"I meant what I said earlier," Darius murmured, appearing beside her and offering his umbrella. "You're extraordinary. Don't let the world dim that."

Before she could respond, the rain intensified, and Darius stepped closer. "Let me walk you to your car."

Under the shelter of his large black umbrella, the air buzzed with an undeniable chemistry—electric and thrilling. As they walked side by side, Mira felt the warmth of his presence, the way his shoulder brushed against hers sending her heart racing.

"I'd love to see you again," he said, a hint of vulnerability in his eyes. "Maybe we could grab a coffee or dinner sometime?"

Mira's heart soared at the suggestion, the possibility of something more blooming in her chest. "I'd like that," she replied, a smile breaking across her face.

Later that week, they shared an intimate dinner at a quaint restaurant overlooking the harbour. Candlelight flickered between them, illuminating their faces as laughter flowed freely, punctuated

by the clinking of glasses. They spoke of dreams, aspirations, and obstacles, their conversation finding a rhythm that felt both exhilarating and familiar. With each passing moment, the connection deepened, an unspoken promise hanging heavy in the air.

As they walked back to her car, Darius took her hand, his fingers warm against hers. "I want to keep seeing you, Mira. I really do."

"I want that too," she replied, her heart racing at the thought of what could be.

But fate had other plans. Just days later, Darius received an urgent call that would take him back to London. He had sent Mira a message filled with apologies, explaining the situation and promising to stay in touch. "I'll come back for you," he assured her, but the distance between their aspirations slowly widened.

With Darius preoccupied with building his tech empire and Mira embarking on her journey at Harvard, life swept them into separate but relentless currents, each caught in a whirlwind of ambition and responsibility. Days turned into months, and their vibrant connection became a distant memory.

Chapter 2: Unexpected Reunion

United Nations Headquarters, New York – Present Day

The stark, modern lines of the United Nations headquarters stood tall against the Manhattan skyline as Mira Ashford strode into the grand lobby. Now thirty-seven, she had carved a formidable reputation in international law, specialising in humanitarian affairs. As one of the UN's lead negotiators, Mira had brokered peace treaties on the front lines of war zones, and founded Peaceful Horizon for Children, a charity dedicated to displaced children.

Her work had earned her respect, but it had also hardened her. There was no room for weakness in her world. Yet, as she walked through the bustling lobby, a familiar figure caught her eye, and her heart skipped a beat.

So when Rahul Mehta, her longtime friend and UN senior security director, leaned toward her and murmured, "Guess who's in the conference room—the boss of OBITA?" her stomach twisted.

She already knew it was Darius Sherman.

Darius stood at the head of the table, his presence commanding the room. With his tailored suit accentuating his athletic frame, the sharp lines of his jaw shadowed by the soft light filtering through the conference room windows, he looked as if he'd stepped out of a magazine. He hadn't changed much, yet there was an undeniable depth in his eyes that spoke of experience and maturity.

How is it possible that he still has this effect on me? Mira thought, her heart racing.

After all these years, he feels like a part of my past that I never quite let go of.

The anger she had buried deep inside her began to resurface.

You left without a word, Darius.

Darius turned, and their eyes met. His presence was sharper, more commanding. But those storm-grey twins still held the same unreadable intensity. Was that a flicker of regret passing between them, or did she discern longing?

“Ms. Ashford,” he greeted smoothly, extending a hand. “It’s been a long time.”

She took it, her grip firm, though the warmth of his touch sent shivers up her spine, igniting a mix of emotions she thought she had buried. “Mr. Sherman. Welcome to the UN.”

Why does he still make my heart race like this? Mira wondered, trying to maintain her composure.

I shouldn’t feel this way. I’ve built a life without him.

But the anger bubbled just beneath the surface, a reminder of how he had left without a word.

The past hung between them—heavy, unspoken. Darius had been a fleeting moment in her life, yet he loomed large in her heart. Did he ever think about what he left behind?

Darius felt a rush of emotion as he held Mira’s hand. *She’s still just as beautiful*, he thought, noting how her hair fell in soft waves and how her light brown eyes sparkled with intelligence and resolve.

How did I ever let her slip away? I should have fought harder to stay in touch.

As the meeting progressed, Darius found it increasingly difficult to focus on the agenda. His thoughts drifted back to their shared history—Birkenhead, the stolen moments, the longing that never quite faded. He wondered if Mira had thought of him as often as he had thought of her.

What if she's moved on? What if she's built a life without me? Still, the way she held herself—the way her voice rang out clear and determined—reminded him of everything that had once drawn him to her.

During a break, as the delegates filed out, Darius approached Mira, his heart pounding. “I’ve missed you,” he said, the words tumbling out before he could second-guess himself.

Mira met his gaze. Was it hurt he saw mix up with surprise? “I’ve missed you too, Darius. But you left without a word,” she said, the edge in her voice unmistakable. “I thought you didn’t care.”

The hurt in her voice struck him hard. “I had to go,” he said, struggling to explain. “There were things I needed to handle in London. I wanted to reach out, but...”

“I waited, Darius,” she interrupted. “I thought you’d come back. I thought we had something worth fighting for.”

The air between them crackled with tension—years of what-ifs and unspoken truths pressing in.

“Can we catch up after the meeting?” he asked, his voice quieter now. Steadier. “Please.”

Mira hesitated. She wanted to say yes, to lean into the possibility. But the scar was still fresh beneath the skin. “Sure,” she said, masking her hesitation with a calm smile. “But I have a lot on my plate.”

“Let’s just take one step at a time,” he said.

As she walked back to her seat, Mira’s heart raced. This was her chance to confront her feelings—to face the echo of the life they had almost had. But could she trust him again?

And then there was Sheryl Sherman—her long-time ally in the humanitarian trenches. Chaos in high heels. Mira had known her for years before learning she was Darius’s younger sister. It explained so much: the mischief, the sharp wit, the storm-grey eyes they both used to say more than their words ever did.