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Kuhrau, Straße des Friedens 50, 98724 Lauscha, Germany.

One last

Beat

L.H. Kuhrau

Chapter 1

The path sparkled under the morning sunlight, glistening with a thin layer of ice that had appeared overnight. Elisa, struggling in her towering heels, attempted to keep pace with me along the icy sidewalk. With each step, her heels betrayed her, causing her to slip and slide, making our journey to the hospital more challenging.

"Let me be; I don't want to deal with that silly doctor!" I exclaimed, frustration evident in my voice. However, Elisa paid no heed to my plea, steadfast in her determination to ensure I reached the dreaded medical appointment. I couldn't fathom her insistence; after all, at 22 years old, I believed I was perfectly capable of deciding when a doctor's visit was necessary.

Upon reaching the hospital, I felt a burning sensation in my lungs, and each breath became more laborious. Elisa, concerned for my well-being, declared, "I have to pick up James from kindergarten in two hours, so you better stay put in this hospital until then." I assured her it was just a trivial cold, but Elisa remained unconvinced, offering a reassuring grin and stating, "If it's just a cold, we'll be out of here in no time," as we entered the imposing white structure.

I harboured an aversion to hospitals, stemming from the painful memories of my father's final moments spent in one. The thought of entering a place filled with sickness, sorrow, death, and suffering left me distressed.

As we waited, I clung to the hope that the doctors would find nothing serious—who wanted to end like my dear father that night? Elisa, seemingly unfazed, flipped through a model catalogue, a distant dream she had harboured but relinquished after becoming a young mother. Her life had taken a drastic turn at 17, and while she adored her son James, the responsibilities had altered her ambitions, even if I did everything to make it easier for her.

"Miss Lusie Amans, please," a nurse called out, scanning the room. Elisa nudged me, signalling that it was my turn. As she helped me rise from the chair, everything around me suddenly darkened. The room filled with shocked exclamations and voices, but soon, all I could perceive was a slow, steady heartbeat.

Chapter 2

It was pitch dark, and my body felt heavy and unresponsive. My lungs burned with each breath, and I strained to open my eyes but failed. I sensed a hand in mine and tried to press it, mustering all my strength. "Lu, are you awake?" Elisa's voice came through the darkness. I made another attempt to open my eyes, and this time, it worked, albeit slowly. Gradually, I emerged from the shroud of unconsciousness. I wanted to ask her what had happened and where I was, but the pain that engulfed my body was so intense that I refrained. I just looked into her face, hoping for some answers.

"Are you alright? The doctors won't tell me what's wrong. They said you have to decide for yourself what to do," Elisa said after a moment's pause. "You know, I've known you since we were children. I would do anything for you, but I also have James. I don't want him in a hospital," she added. I tried to smile, but she didn't notice; she stood up and said, "I have to go now. Remember that I'll always be here for you if you need me, but I have to pick up James now. I'm sorry." Her decision to abandon me here, in a hospital where I don't have fond memories, struck a deep wound in my heart. On the other side, the pain distracted me, so I laid there alone, breathing as slowly as possible so that it hurt less. Time seemed to stretch into hours until a nurse finally came into the room, offering me some water. I attempted to speak again, managing to produce some faint sounds. "Please relax and avoid talking for a while. The doctor will be here soon to explain everything," she said hurriedly before

leaving, offering no further explanation. I felt incredibly vulnerable in that moment. I couldn't move, talk, or even breathe properly. I had no idea what was going to happen next, and I certainly wasn't prepared for it to be the end. It couldn't be the end; I had only just begun to live. I wasn't ready to compile a list of my final wishes, let alone consider the possibility.

As I waited, the murmur of voices grew closer. The room I was in was immaculately white, with windows on each side. The window to my left was large, offering a view inside the hospital. The other window, smaller in size, probably faced the building's outer wall. Peering through the large window, I saw three men. Two of them were wearing white coats and were clearly doctors, while the third man seemed visibly upset about something. One of the doctors entered my room. "Hello, Miss Amans. How are you feeling?" He greeted me with a polite smile. He looked younger than most doctors, perhaps around 30, with weary blue eyes and shoulder-length blond hair. A fit of coughing interrupted my attempt to speak. "Take it easy, please. I can come back later if you need more time," he said gently. I managed to whisper, "No, please; I want to know what happened. I want to go home." He hesitated for a moment before saying, "I don't think going home would be a good idea right now, but I'll explain the results to you."

My head started to throb. Why was going home not a good idea? Is it just because of my physical condition? "Normally, I would like to inform your parents or someone close to you when this happens," the doctor explained, looking into my tired eyes. "No, please, just tell me. I can handle it myself," I replied, trying to sound strong. His expression abruptly shifted to sadness, but he maintained his polite

smile. "You have cancer, Miss Amans. Lung cancer. You have about two more months without medical treatment. With chemotherapy, we might be able to hold it back for a year, but the chances of a complete cure are low," he said gently. It took me a few moments to find my voice. I had never met anyone my age who had cancer. I thought in disbelief, "That's not possible. I'm only 22 years old. I never smoked anything." He replied, "I'm sorry. We don't know the cause yet, but you should inform your parents and friends soon. You have limited time unless you choose chemotherapy." My tears fell freely, and I asked, "How much does it cost?" Already knowing the answer, I felt a pang of despair. "About \$7,000, but take your time to think it over," he said gently before leaving the room.

I did have a choice, but how could I contact my mother again after so many years? She was in her fifties, and her hair had already grayed after my father's death. He had also suffered from cancer, but it had primarily affected his brain. I was fourteen years old when he passed away. My mother told me he had fought hard, undergoing two rounds of chemotherapy, but had only grown weaker, leading to a painful end. Before his illness, he had worked tirelessly in a bank, but it was never enough to make ends meet. After his death, my mother worked wherever she could, mostly as a cleaner. I don't recall a single day when she rested; nobody can bear that forever, so her mental and physical state changed, like her treatment towards me, until I had to leave her one day.

"I'm going to tell her the options; it's her right!" I heard someone shout in the corridor. A large man with brown eyes and short hair entered my room. He didn't smile or say anything until he sat down beside me. "I'm sorry for the bad news, but I can help you, I

promise," he said, looking deeply into my eyes. Despite his young age, he exuded a commanding and self-assured presence.

"Alright, maybe this is a lot to take in. Let me explain. If you choose to come with me, I can assist you and give you a chance of a cancer-free life. I specialise in cancer; I'm a doctor, of course. I apologise for the commotion; I just opened a private clinic two years ago," he began. I was about to mention that I didn't have the money for such treatments, but he interrupted, "Don't. Don't think about the money. First, my medical treatment won't be as expensive. Second, you won't have to pay anything at all." "What?" I interrupted in disbelief. "Please, just hear me out," he said hesitantly. I was growing furious. How could he dare to give me hope again? "No! "I don't want you to give me hope now, and in two months, I might be even worse or dead," I exclaimed slowly, so that I didn't have to breathe all too much. "That won't happen if you come to my clinic!" he said at once. "If you stay here, they will drain every cent you have, then cast you aside." Do you want that? Do you really want to die?"

I felt my breathing become laboured, and the pain intensified. "Why would you help me?" I managed to ask, but my voice was shaky. He grinned and replied, "Do you really ask a doctor why he would want to save a life?" "You don't know me, yet you say you'll provide me with free medical treatment. I don't know any doctor who would give me this opportunity," I retorted, sensing I might have said something wrong. His face tensed up, and he said, "If that's what's bothering you, you can come with me now. It'll take a few months to get you healthy due to your advanced cancer stage.

It's your choice." After this, he stood up and turned to leave. Seeing my last chance slip away, my heart raced because of the pain.

Before he went out of the door, he turned towards me. In that second, I had already decided what to do. Why should I stay here? Because it is more comfortable? No, I want to fight against that. It had always been my nature, and even this sickness wouldn't change that. Therefore, I said, "I want to live; help me." He didn't say anything at first; he just stood there for a while, without a change in his expression. Finally, he declared, "Give me two minutes. I need to get a wheelchair before we can go," and he left the room in a hurry.

With all the thoughts he had given me, my head was spinning. Could he really help me? What had I agreed to? If he could help me, what would he want in return? Why would he help me when no one else would? As he had said, it didn't take him a long time to return. I tried to get out of bed by myself, but he warned me, "Don't move. I don't want to operate on you for a broken foot or leg too." With that, he effortlessly lifted me out of bed and settled me into the wheelchair. "Relax now; you're in the best care," he said, and despite my fear, a smile crept onto my lips. I had to believe him. Yes, a year might be a lot for someone who was initially given only two months, but what about a whole lifetime instead? It felt like he was offering me a chance to step into a new world, even though just one day ago, I had thought I had thousands of days left.

Chapter 3

As we arrived at the hospital, or at least that's what he called it, I was astounded. It looked more like a villa or a luxury hotel than a hospital. In front of the building, there was a driveway with cars I had only seen in movies before. On each side, flanking the huge building, was a fountain that looked like it belonged to a castle. The doors were at least twice as big as I am, and as he wheeled me inside, my mouth felt open in amazement. Where was I? Could this be heaven already?

"I hope this isn't too overwhelming for you; it's my clinic and my temporary home. We're heading to your room now," he said, his tone reassuring. Large, beautiful paintings adorned the walls, despite the building's predominantly white exterior. Looking up, I saw crystals hanging from the chandeliers. With him by my side, it felt like I had entered heaven. I couldn't help but smile a little.

As we entered my room, or suite, as I would call it, he laid me on the bed and showed me buttons to press if I needed anything, and then he kneeled down so that we were at the same eye level. "Please relax here; it's essential for your healing. I'll assign one of my best nurses to be with you all day and night. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me or others. I'll be here soon again," he explained, never breaking eye contact. When I didn't say anything, he turned to leave. "Wait!" I called out after him, my voice weak. He turned abruptly and inquired if I was alright. I smiled shyly and said,

"I don't think I've ever been better. Thank you so much." He smiled politely, nodded, and left the room.

In the middle of nowhere, I was in a hospital that looked more like a palace fit for a queen. As I gazed out into the vast garden, a nurse entered the room. "Hi, can I call you Lusie, or do you prefer Mrs. Amans?" she asked. "I'd prefer Lu," I replied, smiling kindly at her. She looked like a model, with blonde hair, long legs, not an ounce of extra weight, and eyes that glittered like diamonds. "I've got a salad and your first pills here; they're just vitamins." Your body needs more strength," she said as she arranged everything on the table. I was about to say something, but I didn't know what to say. On one hand, I wanted to express my gratitude, and on the other, I felt the urge to inquire about the mysterious doctor. Was it a good idea? Now that I was in his hospital, it felt wrong to express my scepticism. "Is everything alright? You seem lost in thought. You can ask anything," the nurse said, her voice soothing like an angel's. "I don't know; I'm just thinking about life and what's left of it," I replied. She chuckled lightly and looked at me. "Give him some time. I've seen so many people on the brink of death, but they all survived. You're young; you'll be alright." "How can you be so sure?" I asked. "I can't reveal anything about the medications here; it's a secret. Just trust that Mr. Favouner is the best doctor I've ever met. You'll be well taken care of," she assured me. Is that his name? I realized that he hadn't mentioned it to me before.

I realised that it must be shameful to find myself in what seemed like a palace, escorted by a man I knew nothing about; even his name was unfamiliar to me. I doubted my mother would be proud of my situation, but it seemed that people hesitated to challenge a sick person.

"I'll give you some advice: don't provoke him. He's intelligent and detests arguments that are baseless or based on ignorance. I'd

never try to dispute with him; I just comply. Also, don't bother him with questions about himself; he never reveals anything or displays any emotions. I doubt he has a family at all; at least, he never contacts them, from what I know. So be cautious, and you'll be in the best place to start anew," she said, flashing a bright smile as she poured a smoothie into a glass. I jokingly asked if cancer could undergo a vitamin shock, but she didn't seem to find it amusing.

"As I said, I don't know how it works, but it does. I've seen it many times, vitamin shock or not. So, relax, read, or do something you enjoy. You can also freely explore the building, except for the top floor," she explained before leaving the room.

I started to feel overwhelmingly tired. I wanted to finish my meal, but sleep overcame me. Thus, I spent my initial days in a cycle of sleeping, eating, and then sleeping again.

Time flew, and after nearly two weeks, when I had finished every morsel of the daily salad and sipped my smoothie, I grew tired of my lethargic routine. The only person I had encountered during those weeks was the blonde nurse, whose name escaped my memory. I longed for human interaction. Slowly, I managed to sit up, planning to explore the building or even venture outside, when the handsome doctor walked in.

"I see you're getting better," he remarked, entering without a knock, surprising me, though I hid my astonishment. "Have you eaten everything they provided?"

"Yes, sir," I replied. His eyes widened, and he seemed about to say something but continued instead. "As the nurse mentioned, you're free to move around the building. As long as your lungs permit, you can participate in light sports. From now on, we will perform an MRI examination twice a week.

I couldn't help but smile, and I had to restrain myself from bursting into laughter. After a brief pause, he suddenly locked eyes with me and inquired, "What's amusing?"

I smiled kindly at him. "It's just... I don't know you, and yet I trust and believe in you, like everyone else here. I'm simply not used to receiving the level of care you're providing now." Memories from my childhood surfaced, and I couldn't meet his eyes. I envisioned my mother returning from work and giving me a goodnight kiss when I was six. I would be lying in bed, ill and alone, as my parents worked. We didn't have money for rest, they would say. As I snapped back to reality, he was still standing in front of me, watching me.

"I'm sorry, this has nothing to do with you. I'm fine, so you can surely attend to your paying patients," I stammered.

"Don't," he said softly, taking a seat beside me. "They aren't any better than you just because they have money. If you think that, then I've misjudged you." Before I could respond, he stood up and walked away, leaving me once again in solitude.

The days passed swiftly, each one mirroring the routine of the last. Every morning, I would awaken to the same pattern: a refreshing shower, followed by a breakfast consisting of a salad, a smoothie, and a handful of vitamin pills. The doctor wouldn't pay me further visits; therefore, I would embark on a leisurely walk, returning for another round of smoothie, salad with chicken, and various vitamins and supplements. The remainder of my day unfolded differently each time—sometimes spent swimming, walking, reading, or undergoing an MRI session two times a week. It had already been a month since my initial stay in the conventional hospital, and inexplicably, I felt better.

One day, the doctor greeted me with his customary, "Hello, we are going to the MRI now." Every time he appeared, a sense of delight enveloped me. There was something undeniably special about his presence. He commanded respect from everyone around here; the nods and gestures of deference were evidence of that.

I often pondered whether his aloofness and pride were defence mechanisms or if he craved this reverence as a form of validation. It wasn't fair to label him as selfish, given the countless lives he saved. He was truly exceptional. I trailed behind him in silence, and he took a deep breath just as the elevator doors closed.

"Is everything alright?" I inquired.

"Always," he replied curtly. I couldn't help but chuckle. "Certainly, it must be. There isn't another wonder-doctor quite like you out there."

Instant regret washed over me as the words slipped out. "Is that how you see me? A wonder-doctor?" he responded dryly. "Do you have any idea what it's like to wear a mask all day?"

I was taken aback; this felt like a confession. Did he trust me, seeking solace for his loveless existence? "How could I?" I stammered. "Everyone sees you as the super doctor. What would they think if they knew that you, too, have a heart yearning for love?"

"Don't try to uncover my needs by convincing me through others. Love is a distraction and renders us vulnerable. It seems you haven't analysed me correctly yet," he said, revealing a side I hadn't seen before—the amusement in his eyes at my misjudgement. Before I could respond, the elevator doors opened, and his smile vanished, leaving me to ponder his words.

Chapter 4

As I lay in the MRI machine, my thoughts drifted back to Elisa. I missed her deeply, but she hadn't kept her promise to write or call me since she left. I first met her a month after my dad's death, and she helped me find light in life again. Even though parties and alcohol weren't my scene, seeing her happy made me feel better. Whenever I felt down, she would grasp my hand and guide me towards the light. Whether it was the beat in the disco, the first party, or the last, it was always with her. Why has she abandoned me now? Was it too much for her to handle?

Memories of the times we shared flooded my mind. I recalled how she confided in me about her first crush on the football team's leader. I could never quite understand how someone would devote their life to another person. Elisa was always trusting and naive, falling for good-looking guys who let her down repeatedly. That changed after James was born. He became her personal god, and together, we tried our best to give him a good childhood. We alternated between working and taking care of him, doing everything in our power to make them happy. Elisa is his mother, and I am his closest friend.

The steady beat of my heart ceased abruptly. They turned off the machines and concluded the MRI session. The first thing I noticed was Dr. Favouner's approving nod as I stood up. "Is it better?" I asked eagerly. He simply nodded slowly, his expression unchanged. Despite his demeanour, I was overjoyed and ran to him, smiling broadly and hugging him. The nurses in the room attempted to pull me away, but their boss intervened, saying, "It's fine; I can handle

her." Gratitude washed over me, and I pulled away. "Thank you so much," I exclaimed.

"Calm down; it hasn't disappeared yet," he cautioned.

"But it will; I know it. I trust you, sir," I replied, gazing into his face, trying to see past the mask. All I could discern was his clenched jaw. Was my happiness misplaced? Why was he so distant and impassive? He continued conversing with the nurses before turning back to me. "Come on, let's get you back to your room," he said, and my smile wavered.

I followed him back into the elevator. The doors took what felt like an eternity to close, but once they did, I seized the opportunity to speak with him without his professional facade. "I'm sorry I hugged you. I didn't realise you felt uncomfortable with physical contact." He chuckled lightly; it was a melodic sound. "As a doctor, it's not physical contact that makes me uncomfortable; it's more my fear of losing control in public presence."

"What?" I asked abruptly, peering into his eyes.

"I can't show any affection or form relationships with my patients," he explained. I smiled, challenging him, "And I am affecting you?"

Before he could respond, the elevator doors opened, and we stepped out. I thought he might elaborate in my room, but after ensuring I reached my destination safely, he hurried away. Was he afraid of forming connections or displaying any affection? How could I learn more about him when he appeared only in fleeting moments, always hiding behind his professional facade?

I took a shower in an attempt to quiet my racing thoughts. Why was he this way with me? It was incomprehensible. In one moment, I felt at ease and uplifted in his presence, but in official settings, he became an unfamiliar figure. I drifted into a restless sleep, dreaming of a hard and cold mask transforming into a joyous, laughing man who held me close and secure. As I reached out to touch him, he vanished. Once again, I found myself alone in the vast suite, now feeling colder without his presence. I needed to stop these thoughts. He was my doctor, and he would never be anything more. Elisa always said that I would die unloved and untouched in the end.

In that moment, the door swung open. My heart raced, and a wide smile spread across my face. To my disappointment, it was just the nurse. Instantly, my expression crumbled, like an unstable building collapsing. "Hi, how are you feeling? I've brought your smoothie," she said, her smile radiating like she had just won the lottery. "I'm okay, just wondering what's going to happen," I replied in a hushed tone. Her face softened, adopting a caring demeanour, akin to a mother tending to her child. "It's hard to say, but I think you'll have the operation soon; your stats have improved quickly."

My eyes widened. "Which operation? I thought I was getting better." She maintained her caring smile and gently explained, "That's true, but you can't heal cancer without removing it." My head started hurting. I hated the thought of an operation. I have never had any kind of operation before. As she saw my negative reaction, she offered to get the doctor, which I of course didn't decline.

It didn't take two minutes until the door opened again. "Why?" he asked. "I don't want any kind of operation," I protested. It felt like a bad excuse, and I fumbled uncomfortably, searching for a better one. "You know, it hurts my feelings that you have so little