

## Beneath the Pines

The sunlight sifted in, clear and bright, through the high windows of Anna's classroom. Outside, the sun's heat was relentless, but inside, the air conditioning kept the room chilled. Everything smelled new and clean, reminding Anna of a freshly unboxed present. This would be the first of many summer days spent in her classroom, preparing for the coming school year and its students. Nervousness and anticipation tickled her stomach like all the first days of school had before, but she took a deep breath to settle it. She couldn't let herself feel anything but excitement, at least for this day.

She was finishing putting up the last few of her posters, a mix of informational and inspirational. Her favorite was the one with the moon and the starry sky that had the famous shoot for the moon phrase scrawled on it. She was startled when a knock came from her open doorway and she turned to see her father's figure. He was wearing his usual business suit, and she remembered that as a child she didn't think he owned any other clothes, just suits. *He wouldn't be here if something wasn't wrong*, she thought, her heart sinking.

"Hi Papa," she said, walking over to him. They hugged because it seemed like the right thing to do, stiffly wrapping their arms around each other. His usually straight back was hunched slightly, and his few wrinkles stood out on his face.

"Anna," he said, "sit down please." The only chairs were those for her students, and they were slightly too small for the grown bodies of Anna and her father, even though they both were thin. Chalk dust floated in a ray of sunlight in the corner of the room, its mineral smell perfumed the air. He looked around her classroom. He looked at everything except at her. The silence between them stretched thin until he sighed heavily, met her questioning eyes, and said, "Anna, your mother's had a stroke." The weight of his words hung like dark clouds around her head. She didn't move while her brain processed what he had said. Seconds passed like little infinities while her heart struggled to pump frozen blood through her veins. Finally, she understood.

"Mother's had a stroke?" she half-asked, half-stated, staring at his hands, folded perfectly together on the table, knuckles white.

He nodded slowly, watching her reactions and emotions play across her face as he told her about how the neighbor had found her in her garden while he was at work. He had gone to her when he got the call, and now he was here for Anna. "The doctor's said it was because of the smoking-"

"That's ridiculous, she hasn't smoked in years!" Anna interrupted. *Who were these doctor's and why do they get to decide my mother's fate*, she thought furiously.

"They're keeping her in the hospital for a few more days, to keep an eye on her," he continued, ignoring her outburst, "you should know there's been some damage, and your mother will need help at home." Anna knew that her father had to return to work, and they couldn't afford to pay someone to look after her mother. Somewhere in Anna's mind, the thought of seeing her mother scared her. Her mother had always been strong and fiercely independent. She didn't work, but she was always gardening, cleaning the shrine, or helping out in the community. Her mother hadn't recovered well from the culture shock of coming to America, and they had no family here. They left everyone when they moved across the Pacific. These thoughts mingled with a grief as thick as mud that rose from Anna's stomach and up to her throat. It pushed itself into her chest and settled there, firmly weighing her down. *I don't want to put my career on hold*, she thought desperately, but she could feel her sense of duty being pulled by the force of her mother.

“Okay Papa, let’s go,” Anna said at last. As she walked through the door to the classroom, she paused to look at all she had done to it. She had been so excited to make a good impression that she had perfectly written her name on the blackboard. Ms. Komatsu’s fourth grade class, it read. Slowly, Anna walked back to the board and erased her writing in one quick motion.

Before Anna was born, her parents immigrated to San Francisco from their suburban homes in Tokyo. They were young, seeking adventure and new opportunities. When Anna was born in 1990, they had decided to stay and work towards citizenship. They bought a house, and her father put all of his efforts into moving up in his company while her mother tried to find a community to belong to. Her father had succeeded, but her mother had not. It turned out that her mother was not a socialite, and moving had not changed that. Anna had not thought of her mother as lonely, but when she walked into her mother’s hospital room all she could notice was the lack of flowers and get well cards. True, she had not been in the hospital long, but all the movies had Anna expecting more. Those movies did not prepare her for the shock of seeing her mother look so fragile sleeping in the hospital bed with foreign tubes pushed into her tawny skin. She pulled up a chair to her mother’s side and touched her arm tenderly.

“Hi Mother,” she whispered.

Anna’s mother exhaled heavily and turned her head towards her daughter. Her eyes opened slowly and only half way. “Konnichiwa,” she said, slipping into her familiar first tongue, though her voice was weak and cracked. Anna’s father had mentioned that she was in some pain. Her mother’s hands were lying on her chest, and Anna watched as every so often they trembled slightly. When the doctor came in, he explained that Anna’s mother was lucky to be alive. That she had a hemorrhagic stroke, which meant nothing and everything to Anna. His words blurred as he kept talking about possible future complications, limitations, and rehabilitation. As he left Anna understood little beyond the fact that her mother would be home soon, and that Anna should be moved in by then. She shook her head, trying to clear it and frame the resignation speech she would have to make later over the phone.

When moving back home, Anna had discovered that her parents were not fond of her choice of a pet. She had warned them that she had a dog and that she would be bringing him with her. They did not expect a large, energetic golden retriever/terrier mix like Boggy, who sometimes liked to chase her mother’s cats. Her mother complained constantly while her father made noncommittal noises at the dinner table when she tried to get him on her side. Other little arguments had been raised against her. She woke up too early to run and it disturbed her mother. She overcooked the eggs for breakfast. She didn’t water her mother’s plants enough. Anna had become extremely careful about what she wore so her parents wouldn’t see the pine tree tattoo on her right ribcage, but one hot early August day she decided to go for her jog in a sports bra and shorts, figuring she would be back home after her father left and before her mother woke up. Quietly creeping back into the house and removing Boggy from his leash, Anna thought she was safe until something made all her muscles tense. Frozen in the doorway like an intruder in her own home, she wondered at the source of her unease.

“Good morning,” her mother’s voice called out from the open living room.

Anna turned and saw her mother’s endlessly brown eyes staring at her, a book open on her lap. “Hello,” Anna said, her throat closing. Their house was built in such a way that the stairs were directly in front of the door, and the living room flowed from the right side. Anna was trapped, and the tattoo she had wanted to hide was exposed. Anna’s endorphins were still

high from her exercise, but she crossed her arms and rolled back and forth on the balls of her feet, waiting for her mother to speak. *Be cool*, she thought hopefully.

“I didn’t know they let teachers have those things,” her mother said, an eyebrow raising.

Anna didn’t realize she had been holding her breath until it came out all at once. She shifted uncomfortably, trying to think of a good comeback. “Well, I’m not a teacher anymore,” she said more bitterly than she had intended.

Her mother’s head tilted back and a raucous laughter poured from her that made Anna jump. Emotional lability, she remembered the doctor saying something about sudden mood swings due to a difficulty controlling emotion. She didn’t realize it would be like this, and she couldn’t remember what to do. *This is what people must think of teenage mood swings*, Anna thought. Quickly, she ran up the stairs and into her room, grabbed an old shirt, and threw it on while making her way back to her mother. While she watched, her mother stopped laughing and looked around the room, both their brows furrowed in confusion and pain, and she couldn’t help but wonder if her mother would remember seeing the tattoo.

The year before Anna had turned eighteen, her mother had made her policy and distaste towards body alterations clearly known. Anna hadn’t rebelled right away, rather she waited until she was safely living on her college campus to get one. She had it planned out for years, what she would get, where on her body, and at what shop. Recovering from the shock and the pain of the hour spent with a needle digging into the tender flesh of her ribs, she almost wished she could have told her parents. Komatsu, the name they shared and the name that unbreakably bound them to their heritage, meant small pine tree in Japanese. She wished she could show them to make them proud, but she knew it would only make them sigh, shake their heads, and curse the unruliness of their only child.

Days passed under the uncertain weight her mother’s silent judgment until one afternoon, after a particularly difficult morning therapy session, Anna woke up from a nap to find her mother cooking lunch. She walked downstairs to the sound of bowls clattering together and the smell of burning meat. In the kitchen, Anna’s mother was trying to cut vegetables. Her hands were shaking too much to hold the knife firmly. In one swift motion, Anna rushed in, grabbed the knife and shoed her mother out of the way. She took the pan off the stove and tried to save the darkened meat inside.

“What are you doing?” her mother yelled, stumbling away from Anna’s fast paced movement.

“What were you doing?” Anna snapped back, turning full force on her mother. They glared at each other across the kitchen tile. The smoke cleared, but their anger was rising. “You know you shouldn’t do this. You could get hurt.”

“I am not a child, Anna,” her mother said, moving slowly from the kitchen to sit at the dining room table, “I can do things on my own. And more than just peeling the vegetables.”

Anna looked out the window behind her mother. It overlooked the front garden and the street beyond. Anna had been trying to tend her mother’s flowers, but they looked pitiful in comparison to how blooming they were in her memory. Even the lush lilac and white of her mother’s favorite anemone seemed dull to her in reality.

“Did you hear me, Anna? I said I don’t need you!” her mother said, snapping Anna back into the kitchen. Anger flared from Anna’s stomach up to her cheeks making them flush a pale pink with the heat of her emotion.

“You don’t need me? Okay, bye,” Anna replied. She stomped from the kitchen and out the door, grabbing her purse and telling Boggy to stay. She didn’t know where she was going, she was just taking pleasure in walking away.

Anna ended up at a café around the corner from her parent’s house. She ordered her latte and sat down at the bar to watch the barista make it. She was still fuming from her fight with her mother. *I’ve given up everything for her*, she thought. She took a sip of her latte too soon and burnt her tongue on the hot milk. Expletives came out of her mouth loudly, and she ducked her face, abashed, when other customers glared at her. She stared, a little too hard, at her phone until she felt the pressure from their eyes dying down.

Outside, the day was growing hot. It was around the time of classes starting, and Anna was doing a poor job of trying not to think about it. She was mid-way through unraveling the argument with her mother when her father walked into the café, surprising her. It frustrated her how easily he sat down next to her. He had always been matter-of-fact, not dreaming for more than the weekend, and never taking them on a family vacation. Part of her always resented that they never had enough money to visit their relatives.

“I know about your argument with your mother,” he said. He hadn’t ordered a drink, but he had taken one of the newspapers abandoned at the bar and flipped through it, just to have something to focus on. He told her about a phone call he had received at work from her mother that was filled with yelling and tears. He knew his daughter well enough to guess that she wouldn’t have gone far.

“She’s impossible,” Anna said, her hands curling into fists. She wanted her father to be on her side.

“Anna,” he said, “she’s trying. I know you are too, but think of what this is like for her. If this isn’t working out, you can leave now and we’ll figure it out.”

Anna fidgeted in her chair while the rest of the café moved in perfect time. The warm, comforting smell of freshly ground coffee beans and steamed milk perfumed the air as the thought of getting her job back flashed through her mind before being replaced by the image of her mother in the hospital bed, face sunken and sad. “I’m staying,” she said after a pause.

“Okay,” her father replied, a slight smile of relief touched his face and a minor weight was lifted from both their shoulders.

She returned alone to her parent’s house in the early evening. Her father hadn’t stayed with her at the café much longer, silently understanding that she needed some time in solitude. The sun was dipping lazily in the horizon, just beginning its routine setting. She walked through the front gate to find her mother sipping steaming jasmine tea, sitting on the porch bench.

“Hey Mom,” Anna said, taking a seat by her mother’s side.

Her mother responded with a grunt while Boggy appeared in front of the pair, his tail wagging gleefully. Her mother reached a hand out to him, which he quickly licked before lying down. “He’s a good dog,” she said, a small half-smile lifted the left side of her face.

Anna chuckled and said, “Yeah sometimes.” Silence stretched out between them. Boggy lifted his head occasionally to watch the birds and squirrels whose light chatter filled the empty air melodiously. Wind rustled the leaves on the nearby trees and the pungent smell of freshly cut grass floated to them from the neighbor’s lawns. “I’m sorry about earlier,” Anna said, not looking at her mother.

Her mother nodded, accepting her daughter’s apology.

“If you want to cook,” she said, meeting her mother’s gaze and reaching for her hand, “let me help you.” Holding her hand, she could feel the muscles twitching under the skin as the nerves in her mother’s brain worked to heal themselves.