

# Tears of the Uniform

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## Chapter 1: The Grand Departure

The gymnasium pulsed with music, a joyous cacophony echoing off the walls adorned with vibrant streamers and balloons. The air itself seemed thick, saturated with the strangely comforting aroma of youthful perspiration, cheap cologne, and Aunt Carmen's signature fruit punch, a staple at every family gathering. Yet, amidst the revelry, Julien felt like an outsider, a spectator in a film where he was supposed to be the leading man. The smile plastered on his face for the past hour had morphed into an uncomfortable mask. He watched his classmates, their laughter echoing, their embraces fervent, and felt a pang of envy pierce his heart. They exuded a pure, unadulterated joy, a carefree spirit he secretly yearned for. Their eyes sparkled with the anticipation of a future brimming with possibility: university escapades, distant travels, and the intoxicating thrill of first love. For Julien, the future held only an imminent departure, a one-way ticket to a life starkly different.

"Hey Julien! You look like you're about to face a firing squad!" Antoine's booming voice shattered his thoughts. His best friend, sporting a mischievous grin and those irresistible dimples, proffered a plastic cup filled with a dubious reddish liquid. "Come on, soldier, have a drink! We're celebrating, remember? We'll miss you!"

Julien forced a more genuine smile and accepted the cup with a vague gesture. "Yeah, I'll miss you guys too."

"Don't worry, we won't let you forget us! We'll come visit you at the barracks, bring you pizzas and video games. Well, if they let you have those kinds of things in the military..."

"Yeah, and we'll tell you all about our conquests with the college girls! That is, if we manage to charm any..." added Kevin, the other member of their inseparable trio, with an exaggerated wink.

Julien chuckled softly, recognizing their familiar banter. Despite the festive atmosphere, a shadow lingered in his mind. The image of Liliane, her emerald eyes sparkling with

mischievous, her smile shy yet inviting, flickered before him. They had only been dating for two months, two months of stolen glances, hands brushing, and hurried kisses in the darkness of the local movie theater. Two months, a mere blink in time, yet it felt like an eternity.

"So, soldier, ready for the adventure?" Antoine's question interrupted his thoughts.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess..." Julien murmured, his gaze drifting towards an undefined point in the distance.

He excused himself a few minutes later, feigning a need for fresh air. In truth, he needed to escape the curious glances, the awkward questions, the well-intentioned but hollow congratulations. He needed to be alone with his thoughts, however bleak they may be.

Outside, the night air was balmy and star-studded. It was easier to breathe away from the stifling atmosphere of the gymnasium. Julien leaned against the school's brick wall, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. The scent of chlorophyll from the vast cornfields bordering the town tickled his nostrils. It was a familiar, comforting smell, evocative of his childhood, of summers spent at his Uncle Michel's farm, of long afternoons playing in the barn with his cousins. It was a scent that reminded him of Liliane.

Liliane... Her name echoed in his heart like a sweet, melancholic melody. Liliane, with her slightly crazy dream of owning her own farm, a sanctuary for abused animals and a haven for lost souls. She was different from other girls, more authentic, more in tune with the rhythms of nature. She possessed a crystalline laugh that could brighten even the darkest of days and a gaze that disarmed him completely.

He pulled out his phone and stared at the picture that served as his wallpaper. Liliane, radiant, cradling a orphaned lamb she had rescued a few weeks ago. His heart ached in his chest. Should he call her? Say goodbye one last time?

He hesitated for a long moment, torn by the fear of hearing her voice, the fear of hurting her. Perhaps it was better to cut ties now, to shield her from the pain of distance, the agony of waiting, the deafening silence that would soon separate them.

He knew the army was no walk in the park. His father, a veteran himself, had made that abundantly clear. Iron discipline, grueling physical training, unquestioning obedience... And above all, the constant threat of deployment, of missions abroad, of months without contact.

Could he subject her to that? Could he bear the thought of her waiting for him, putting her life on hold for a love so new, so uncertain?

No, he thought, his heart heavy with regret. It was better to leave without a word, to disappear from her life before she grew too attached. He convinced himself it was the bravest thing to do, the most selfless, the most loving.

Yet, as he slipped the phone back into his pocket, a tear betrayed his carefully constructed facade, tracing a lonely path down his cheek.

Julien moved away from the school grounds, his steps leading him through the quiet suburban streets. The houses, lined up like soldiers at attention, were mostly cloaked in darkness, only a few illuminated windows betraying signs of life. The nocturnal silence, punctuated by the distant hoot of an owl and the hum of air conditioners, amplified his sense of isolation.

He walked past the municipal park where he had spent countless hours playing basketball with Antoine and Kevin, clumsily flirting with girls on the bench beneath the shade of the old oak trees, dreaming of a future that now seemed terrifyingly uncertain. Every corner, every tree, every bench whispered memories, fragments of laughter and long-forgotten conversations.

He arrived in front of his house, a modest but welcoming structure with red brick walls and white shutters. The living room light was on, revealing the silhouette of his father slumped in his armchair, eyes glued to the television. He hesitated for a moment, a heartbeat in time, wondering if he should go in, face the well-meaning inquiries, the expectant gazes.

But he didn't have the strength. Not tonight. He turned and resumed his nocturnal wanderings, letting his feet carry him towards another familiar place, a place where he hoped to find some solace.

Liliane's farm lay at the end of a winding dirt road, a few miles from town. An old wooden farmhouse, its walls covered in ivy, its roof a patchwork of rusted corrugated iron, stood amidst fields that stretched as far as the eye could see. From afar, he could see the soft glow emanating from the kitchen window, a beacon of warmth and comfort.

Julien pushed open the creaking wooden gate and walked up the driveway lined with climbing roses. He paused for a moment in front of the house, observing the scene unfolding through the window.

Liliane sat at the kitchen table, poring over a thick botany book. Her ash-blond hair, always worn in a long braid that reached her waist, cascaded over her shoulders like a river of gold. She wore an old woolen sweater that swallowed her slender frame and a pair of faded jeans, yet, to Julien's eyes, she had never looked more beautiful.

He watched her for long minutes, his heart pounding in his chest, unable to move, to speak, almost to breathe. He admired her concentration, the way she furrowed her brow as she read, the delicate movement of her hand as she turned the pages. He was captivated by her passion for nature, for animals, for the simple and authentic life she had chosen.

Suddenly, she looked up towards the window, as if sensing his gaze upon her. Their eyes met through the glass, and Julien felt his heart clench in his chest.

He had never realized how expressive her eyes were, reflecting her gentleness, her determination, and a hint of melancholy that was uniquely hers. He watched as her lips curved into a tentative smile, and she rose to open the door, her movements imbued with a natural grace that never failed to leave him speechless.

"Julien! What are you doing here at this hour?"

Her voice, melodic and slightly husky, roused him from his trance. He realized then that he had been standing there like an idiot, unable to utter a single word.

"I... uh... I needed to see you," he stammered, acutely aware of the utter banality of his response.

"You could have called," she said softly, beckoning him inside. "It's getting cold out here."

He followed her inside, grateful for the gentle warmth emanating from the crackling fireplace. The kitchen was small but cozy, decorated with an exquisite taste that betrayed Liliane's feminine touch. Bouquets of dried flowers, gathered from the surrounding fields, adorned the walls, and shelves groaned under the weight of cookbooks and jars of homemade jam.

"Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Hot chocolate?" she asked, filling the kettle.

"Tea would be great, thanks," he replied, taking a seat at the table across from her.

An awkward silence settled between them, punctuated by the crackling fire and the steady tick-tock of the grandfather clock on the wall.

Julien stared at his hands, unable to meet the intensity of Liliane's emerald gaze. The weight of his unspoken words, his unvoiced fears, gathered like a brewing storm. The subtle scent of dried flowers, usually so comforting, felt suffocating tonight.

"You're very quiet," Liliane remarked, placing their steaming mugs on the table. "Is it because of the party? Did you and your friends have a fight?"

He shook his head, unable to articulate a single word. How could he explain the infernal tempest raging within him? How could he confess he'd come to say goodbye without daring to utter the words?

Liliane approached him, her movements imbued with instinctive concern. She crouched before him, resting her soft hand on his. Even through the rough fabric of his shirt, her touch sent a jolt of electricity through his body.

"Julien, what's wrong? You can talk to me, you know. We're together now."

Her words, spoken with disarming sincerity, shattered the last dams holding back his emotions. He bowed his head, tears stinging his eyes, and finally let the words spill from his constricted throat.

"I'm leaving, Liliane."

His voice, barely a hoarse murmur, seemed to reverberate in the small kitchen. The silence that followed was heavier, more oppressive than any words he could have uttered.

Liliane's head shot up, her emerald eyes wide with incomprehension. "Leaving? But... leaving to where? You mean... for university?"

He nodded, unable to meet her gaze. "Tomorrow. I... I'm leaving for the military base. Training starts tomorrow."

Silence descended again, heavier still, laden with the weight of shattered dreams and broken promises. Liliane remained motionless, her face frozen in an unreadable expression. Julien, his heart pounding in his chest, searched her features for any flicker of understanding, any indication of what she was feeling, but found none.

Time seemed to stand still, each second stretching into an eternity. Steam curled from the abandoned mugs on the table, forming ghostly tendrils in the still air. The crackling fire, once comforting, now seemed menacing, each crackle a reproach in the heavy silence.

Liliane, her face suddenly drawn, rose with agonizing slowness. She took a step back, as if Julien's proximity had become unbearable, and turned towards the window. The fogged glass reflected her spectral image, a fragile silhouette lost in the darkness of the night.

"Tomorrow?" she murmured, her voice barely audible.

The word, heavy with disbelief and a dawning panic, shattered Julien's heart into a thousand pieces. He surged to his feet, wanting to reach for her, to hold her, to comfort her. But a hesitant yet forbidding gesture of her hand stopped him in his tracks.

"Why?" she finally asked, still facing away. Her voice, usually so soft and melodious, was now rough, as if broken by a surfeit of emotions.

Julien felt incapable of movement, imprisoned by a growing guilt. Words tangled in his head, forming a confused and painful knot. How could he justify the unjustifiable? How

could he explain this visceral need, this aspiration to serve his country, an ideal that suddenly seemed so hollow in the face of the distress he saw in Liliane's eyes?

"Ever since I was little..." he began, his voice strangled. "My father... the army... it was a dream, you understand?"

The silence fell again, heavier, more oppressive than before. Liliane turned slowly, and for the first time, Julien could see the depth of her pain reflected in her emerald eyes, once so alive with joy.

"A dream..." she echoed, a humorless laugh escaping her lips. "And what about us? What were we?"

The question, simple yet heavy with meaning, struck him like a blow to the chest. He looked at her, truly looked at her, for the first time since his arrival. He saw the fragility of her slumped shoulders, the trace of a dried tear on her pale cheek, the distress clouding her gaze. And he understood. He understood the extent of his foolishness, the cruelty of his silence.

"Liliane, I... I don't know..." he stammered, his words seeming to disappear into the vastness of the kitchen. "Everything happened so fast... I didn't want... I didn't want to hurt you..."

"Hurt me?" she repeated, her voice suddenly strong, vibrating with contained anger. "But you already have, Julien! You're leaving! You're abandoning us!"

The word "abandoning" slapped him like an insult. He recoiled as if she had struck him. Him, abandon Liliane? The very idea was unbearable, and yet, the truth of her words hit him with full force.

"That's not it... That's not what I wanted..."

"Then what is it? Explain it to me! Make me understand!"

The desperation in her voice tore at him further. He took a step towards her, reaching out to touch her, but she flinched away, creating an insurmountable distance between them. "Liliane, please..."

The words remained stuck in his throat, unable to express the torrent of emotions overwhelming him. He felt lost, helpless, like a child caught in wrongdoing.

"Just go," she said simply, her voice devoid of all emotion. "Leave me."

Liliane's injunction, as soft as it was sharp, pierced him like a shard of ice. His whole being screamed in protest, every fiber of his being yearning to reach out to her, to pull her close and erase the pain he saw in her eyes. But his feet, as if rooted to the rough-hewn floor of the kitchen, refused to budge.

He looked at her for a moment longer, searching for a sign, a flicker of hope in her drawn features. But her face, usually so expressive, had become a mask of coldness, her lips pressed together, her jaw set. The only indication of the turmoil raging within her was the almost imperceptible trembling of her hands, gripping the edge of the table as if to keep herself from falling apart.

"Liliane..." he began again, his voice hoarse, but she raised a hand, stopping him short.

"Please, Julien. Just... go."

The neutral tone, devoid of anger or reproach, was more painful than any accusation. It spoke of resignation, a distance that chilled him to the bone.

He nodded, unable to speak, unable even to think clearly. He turned, letting his feet carry him towards the door like an automaton, each step echoing like a death knell in the heavy silence of the kitchen.

The cool night air hit him like a slap as he stepped across the threshold of the farmhouse. He paused for a moment on the porch, his gaze lost in the impenetrable darkness of the fields. The chirping of crickets, usually so peaceful, tonight seemed cruelly ironic.

He thought of all those hours spent dreaming of the future, of a glorious future clad in military uniform, his chest puffed with pride. He had never imagined that the realization of his dream could taste so bitter.

He cast a final glance at the house shrouded in darkness, clinging to the faint light still spilling from the kitchen window as if that flickering light represented the last tenuous link that bound him to Liliane, to the life he was leaving behind. Then, with a heavy heart and a soul filled with sorrow, he turned and walked into the black night, leaving behind far more than just a farmhouse, a burgeoning love, or a cherished dream. He was leaving behind a part of himself, a part he might never recover.

Dawn was just breaking as Julien arrived home. The house was silent, shrouded in a semi-darkness that felt strangely hostile. He dropped his duffel bag on the floor of the hallway, the thud resonating like a gunshot in the heavy silence. He felt hollowed out, unable to even identify the nature of the pain that gripped him.

In the kitchen, his mother was already bustling about, preparing breakfast with a mechanical efficiency that contrasted sharply with her usual cheerfulness. She offered him only a brief smile, her red-rimmed eyes betraying a sleepless night and unshed tears. His father, seated at the table with a steaming mug of coffee, cast him an unreadable look, a mixture of pride and apprehension etched on his weathered face.

Breakfast was a somber affair, punctuated by the clinking of cutlery and the crackling of toast in the toaster. Julien ate without appetite, Liliane's words still echoing painfully in his head. He felt guilty, cowardly, unable to explain, to justify his choice.

His younger brothers, Michel and Adrian, seemed oblivious to the tense atmosphere that hung heavy in the air. They fidgeted at the table, bickering over a toy, bursting into laughter at some private joke. Their usual infectious lightheartedness grated on Julien this morning. He envied their ability to live in the moment, to be unaware of the weight of the future and the pangs of doubt.

"Do you have everything you need?" His father's voice, deep and steady, broke the heavy silence.

Julien jumped, startled by the uncharacteristic note of concern in his father's tone. He nodded, unable to speak, his throat constricted with emotion.

"Is your bag ready? The bus arrives in less than an hour."

Julien nodded again, suddenly feeling very young, very fragile in the face of the immensity of the task before him.

He pushed himself away from the table and ascended to his room, each footfall on the creaking wooden steps echoing like a countdown. His room, once a sanctuary, now felt like a gilded cage, a symbol of the life he was leaving behind.

He paused for a moment, his eyes scanning the rock band posters that adorned the walls, the shelves overflowing with books and video games, the organized chaos that spoke volumes about his carefree adolescence. His gaze settled on a photograph of his

basketball team, a nostalgic smile gracing his lips. He remembered that day as if it were yesterday. They had clinched the regional championship, and Liliane, there to cheer them on, had kissed him passionately as the crowd roared its approval.

The memory of her radiant smile, etched in his mind, caused him to waver. He closed his eyes, attempting to banish the bittersweet memory, but it was futile. Liliane's face, clouded with an unspoken sadness, haunted him.

He drew a deep breath and forced himself to focus on the task at hand. Opening his backpack, he deposited the last remaining clothes and personal items he had gathered the previous evening. His movements were mechanical, his mind elsewhere, lost in a labyrinth of confused and painful thoughts.

An object, nestled at the bottom of the bag, caught his attention. It was a small, carved wooden box, a gift from Liliane for his last birthday. He opened it cautiously, revealing a priceless treasure: a lock of her ash-blond hair, tied with a pale blue satin ribbon, her favorite color.

A fireball erupted in his chest, an explosive mixture of pain and longing. He snapped the box shut as if he had been burned and shoved it deep inside his bag, determined to forget its existence.

A blast of icy wind swept into the room as his father opened the door. "Julien, the bus is here!"

The announcement struck Julien like a thunderbolt, bringing him crashing back to reality. He took a final breath, a last sweeping glance around the room that had been his cocoon for so many years, and headed for the door, his backpack feeling like a ton on his shoulders.

The bus, a massive military vehicle with an olive-drab exterior, sat idling in front of the house, its engine rumbling impatiently. Julien shook his father's hand, a firm, silent

handshake that spoke volumes. He embraced his mother, inhaling one last time her familiar scent of cinnamon and vanilla, a comforting aroma that whispered of childhood and winter Sundays by the fireplace. Michel and Adrian, perched on the porch steps, observed the scene with a mixture of excitement and incomprehension.

Julien gave them a strained smile, striving to appear confident, reassuring. He felt like an imposter, playing a role whose lines he had yet to learn.

He climbed the steps of the bus, each step drawing him closer to the unknown, to this life he had chosen without fully comprehending it. He cast a final glance at the family home, its red brick walls suddenly seeming fragile, insignificant against the immensity of the world that lay before him.

The bus lurched forward with a roar, pulling away from the house, the street, the life he was leaving behind. Julien stared out at the passing scenery, a blur of identical houses, immaculate lawns, and gleaming cars. The view, usually mundane, appeared that day with a new intensity, as if he were seeing it for the first time.

He realized with a newfound clarity that he was leaving behind much more than just a town, a house, a family. He was leaving behind a part of himself, a part he might never find again. And as the bus sped towards the horizon, carrying with it his dreams and illusions, a single question echoed in his mind: had he made the right choice?

## Chapter 2: The Clash of Realities

The silence on the bus was deafening. Each kilometer traveled deepened the chasm between Julien and everything he had ever known. His gaze, lost through the window, seemed to seek an answer in the monotonous landscape passing by. The laughter and lively conversations of the other recruits reached him as if through a fog. He envied their carefree excitement about this new adventure. He only felt a tremendous weight on his chest, the sensation of having swallowed a stone that refused to go down.

The arrival at the military base was a brutal shock. Gone were the bucolic landscapes, the endless fields, and the familiar smell of manure mixed with freshly cut hay. He found himself thrust into an austere universe dominated by gray concrete, rectangular buildings, and an iron discipline that permeated every corner. As soon as they got off the bus, the recruits were taken in hand by surly drill sergeants whose shouts and barked orders echoed like whiplashes in the cold morning air.

Julien felt small, insignificant, drowned in the compact mass of young men dressed in the same shapeless khaki uniform. He was assigned a number, a bed in a spartan dormitory, and a metal locker that would house the few personal effects he had brought. The life he knew, with its familiar landmarks and little habits, already seemed terribly distant.

The first days were a real nightmare. The early wake-up calls, exhausting physical exercises, incessant orders, and incomprehensible military jargon created a whirlwind that left Julien completely bewildered. Though he had prepared physically, nothing could prepare him for the psychological violence, the total deprivation of freedom and privacy.

The first night, lying on his uncomfortable camp bed, the smell of sweat and disinfectant burning his nostrils, he let out a muffled sob. Images of his former life played behind his closed eyelids: Liliane's smile, his brothers' laughter, the comforting warmth of the family kitchen on a Sunday morning... A poignant sense of regret gripped him, squeezing his heart in an icy embrace. Had he made a terrible mistake? Was he really ready to sacrifice everything he loved for this life of deprivation and relentless discipline?

The next day, after a night haunted by nightmares and uncertainties, came the ordeal of the military barber. Sitting on a wobbly stool, he watched with a pang as his rebellious locks fell to the floor, taking with them a part of his identity, of his carefree youth. His reflection in the mirror showed him the image of a stranger: a shaved head, a blank, lost look. Was this really him, this soldier in the making, this unknown person with a closed-off face?

Despite the shock and confusion, a primal survival instinct drove Julien to hold on. He forced himself to follow the frenetic pace set by the instructors, to memorize technical terms and complex procedures, to push his physical limits during intensive training sessions. Every muscle in his body screamed at the end of the day, every bone felt crushed by fatigue, but he held on, clinging to this new routine like a castaway to a buoy.

The avionics training began two weeks after his arrival. For the first time since his departure, Julien felt a spark of interest in his eyes. The classroom, far from the hustle and bustle of boot camp, was a haven of relative peace. Surrounded by complex diagrams, detailed models, and electronic components, he immersed himself in the workings of navigation, communication, and guidance systems. The courses, taught by a seasoned sergeant with a lilting New Brunswick accent, were surgically precise, blending theory and practice with ruthless efficiency.

Julien discovered with fascination the inner workings of fighter jets, combat helicopters, and surveillance drones. Each wire, each printed circuit board, each line of computer code represented a challenge to tackle, a puzzle to solve. The complexity of the systems excited him, stimulating his analytical mind and thirst for knowledge.

During a practical exercise on a flight simulator, he felt a shiver run down his spine when he managed to identify and resolve a critical failure in a virtual helicopter's hydraulic system. The sense of mastery, the pride of having prevented a potential crash, gave him a thrilling satisfaction, a glimmer of hope in the grayness of his daily life.

It was in the heart of this immersion in the technical and demanding world of avionics that Julien began to forge bonds with his fellow recruits. Far from the stereotypical image of the brutal and brainless soldier, he discovered a group of young men from all walks of

life, united by the same sense of duty and unyielding solidarity. There was Marc, a good-natured giant from the Prairies, passionate about automotive mechanics whose knowledge of engines was matched only by his gargantuan appetite. There was David, an introverted city dweller with a dry sense of humor, a computer genius capable of hacking any system with a few clicks. There was also Kevin, a former hockey player with a contagious smile and boundless energy, whose anecdotes about his past life in a small Quebec village made them roar with laughter.

Together, they learned, trained, suffered, laughed. They shared the thankless chores, the frustrations, and the small victories of daily life. They supported each other in difficult times, lifted each other's spirits during the inevitable bouts of blues.

One evening, as they were gathered in the barracks, enjoying a rare moment of respite after a grueling day, David spoke up, his face illuminated by the pale glow of the overhead bulb.

"Hey guys, have you given any thought to what you're going to do after training?"

The question, seemingly innocuous, brought their conversation to a halt. A heavy silence descended upon the room, broken only by the muffled sound of the sentries' footsteps patrolling outside.

Mark, always quick to steer the conversation towards lighter subjects, was the first to break the silence. "Me, I'm heading straight back to the fold! My old man's eagerly waiting for me to take over the family farm. You should see the size of his tractor, it's a real beast!"

An amused smile flickered across their faces, dispelling the tension that had settled in. Kevin chimed in enthusiastically, "Farm life's not for me! I promised my girl I'd marry her as soon as I finished my service. We're going to settle down in Montreal, she dreams of opening a restaurant."

David, usually so quick to comment with his characteristic irony, remained silent, his gaze lost in the distance. Julien thought he saw a shadow cross his usually impassive face, as if the question had awakened hidden demons within him.

Julien, for his part, felt incapable of projecting himself into the future. The army now occupied his every thought, his daily life reduced to a succession of exercises, courses, and drills. The very idea of civilian life, with its choices to be made and responsibilities to be shouldered, seemed as distant and unreal as a forgotten dream. The image of Liliane, with her laughing blue eyes and wheat-colored hair flowing in the wind, surfaced in his mind, causing a dull ache in his chest. Had he been right to leave her like that, without a word of explanation, without a last kiss?

The cruelty of his silence, the selfishness of his actions, dawned on him now. He had convinced himself that he was protecting her by disappearing from her life, but in reality, he had only hurt her more. Guilt, like a foul beast lurking in the shadows, gnawed at him from within, robbing him of what little peace of mind he had left.

"What about you, Julien? What are your plans after all this?" Mark's voice pulled him from his thoughts, bringing him back to the reality of the barracks.

Julien hesitated for a moment, unsure how to answer. "I don't really know yet," he murmured, avoiding the gaze of his comrades. "I still have time to figure things out."

The truth was, he couldn't even begin to imagine the future, to see beyond the narrow horizon of his existence as a recruit. The army, with its strict rules and immutable hierarchy, offered him a reassuring framework, a refuge from the uncertainty of the outside world. For the first time in his life, he felt like he belonged to a group, sharing a common goal with these men who, only a few weeks ago, had been complete strangers.

But this security came at a price: the renunciation of a part of himself, of his adolescent dreams, of the budding love he felt for Liliane. Was he willing to pay that price, to sacrifice his personal happiness on the altar of duty and discipline?

The question hung in the air, floating in the heavy atmosphere of the barracks, like an omen of a coming storm.

As the weeks passed, the training camp ceased to be a hostile place and became a crucible from which Julien emerged transformed. His body, pushed to its limits during demanding physical exercises, had hardened, sculpted into a protective armor. His hands, once hesitant on the keys of his phone, now handled precision tools and complex electronic components with dexterity.

The radio silence imposed on the recruits amplified their sense of isolation, but it also helped forge an unbreakable bond between them. Far from their families, their friends, their loves, they had no choice but to turn to each other, to draw from this nascent brotherhood the strength to overcome their trials.

Evenings in the barracks, precious moments snatched from the rigor of daily life, were punctuated by tales of their former lives, confidences whispered in the darkness, and shared laughter at the slightest joke. Julien, initially reserved, gradually opened up to these men who seemed so different from him, finding in their differences an unexpected source of enrichment.

One evening, as they were gathered around a makeshift table, fashioning playing cards from scraps of cardboard, Mark spoke up, his face weathered by the Prairie sun reflecting an unusual gravity.

"I got a letter from my little sister today. She's getting married in the spring."

A silence filled with empathy greeted his words. The joy of receiving news from the outside world was always tinged with a hint of melancholy, a poignant reminder of all they had left behind.

"Are you going?" asked Kevin, his usually cheerful gaze veiled with sincere compassion.

Mark shook his head, a sad smile stretching his lips. "No way. My deployment is already set. I'll be thousands of miles away."

A wave of collective sadness washed over the group. They were all facing the same implacable reality: the army, this demanding mistress, demanded their presence, their devotion, sometimes at the expense of family ties and personal aspirations.

Julien, in silence, let the words of his comrades resonate within him. A knot of anxiety formed in his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Liliane... her face, bathed in a soft light, imposed itself on his thoughts, reviving the agonizing pain of their separation. What was she doing at this very moment? Did she still think about him? Had she received the letter he had sent her a few days after his arrival, a clumsy and heartbreaking letter in which he tried to explain his actions, to express the ocean of emotions that overwhelmed him?

The mere mention of her name was enough to unleash a torrent of memories, fleeting and precious images: the sweet taste of her kisses, the softness of her skin beneath his fingers, the crystalline sound of her laughter echoing in the silence of the countryside. Each memory was a poisoned arrow piercing his heart, reminding him of the cruel reality of his choice.

"Earth to Julien? We were just talking about you!" David's voice, tinged with good-natured irony, brought him back to the surface of his thoughts.

"Sorry, I was... somewhere else," he murmured, trying to muster an apologetic smile.

"We were wondering if you'd heard from your sweetheart," David continued, fixing him with an intense gaze, as if reading the depths of his soul.

Julien felt his cheeks flush under the insistent scrutiny of his comrades. He hated that nickname, "sweetheart," which sounded false and out of place in this virile and brutal world. A nickname that evoked a distant world, a world where love had its place, a world to which he no longer truly belonged.

"No, nothing at all," he replied in a flat voice, seeking refuge in a lie out of both modesty and fear of betraying his emotions.

The truth, heavier than a sandbag on his back during morning exercises, burned him from the inside. Every day without news from Liliane was another stone added to the burden he carried. Hope, that flickering flame he nurtured in secret, threatened to be extinguished under the weight of silence.

He felt caught in the grip of a cruel paradox. The army, which was supposed to make him a man, was cutting him off from the world, preventing him from fully experiencing his emotions, from facing the consequences of his actions. The uniform, a symbol of courage and dedication, served as his shell, protecting him from prying eyes as much as from his own demons.

One afternoon, as he was repairing a circuit board in the avionics workshop, a flash of genius crossed David's mind. "I've found a way to bypass the network security!" he exclaimed, a mischievous grin illuminating his pale face.

Intrigued, Mark and Kevin gathered around him, eager for details. Julien, torn between curiosity and a vague premonition, eventually joined them.

"We'll be able to send messages to our loved ones!" David continued, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "No one will know, it's encrypted, undetectable!"

A wave of enthusiasm swept through the group. The possibility of breaking the radio silence, of reconnecting with the outside world, was too tempting to resist.

Only Julien remained silent, a diffuse unease washing over him. He envied the simple joy of his comrades, their eagerness to regain contact with their families. He, on the other hand, dreaded this moment, afraid of discovering a truth he did not want to hear.

What if Liliane didn't answer him? What if she had already moved on? The mere thought of this possibility chilled his blood, leaving him feeling as breathless as after a frantic run.

"Come on, Julien, are you in?" The insistence in Mark's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

He watched them for a moment, their faces illuminated by the pale glow of the computer screen, their fingers flying across the keyboard. They looked so young, so innocent in their eagerness to defy authority.

"No, thanks," he said, forcing himself to sound detached. "I'd rather wait until the end of training."

His words rang false, even to his own ears. The truth was, he wasn't ready to break the wall of silence, to face the consequences of his actions. He preferred to take refuge in ignorance, clinging to the fragile illusion of a bygone past.

As his friends tapped away at their keyboards, faces aglow with the digital joy each sent message brought, Julien retreated to a corner of the workshop, seeking refuge in the hushed sanctuary of his own thoughts. He closed his eyes, letting images of Liliane wash over him, clinging to these memories like life rafts in an ocean of solitude.

The pungent aroma of grease and jet fuel hung heavy in the air, a stark counterpoint to the metallic symphony of tools meeting metal. Bathed in the harsh glare of fluorescent lights, the avionics workshop had become Julien's sanctuary, a refuge from the tumult of military life and the torment of his own mind. Surrounded by intricate schematics, multicolored wires, and miniaturized electronic components, he found a peculiar peace in the resolution of technical problems, in mastering the complex systems that allowed aircraft to defy gravity.

Each wire stripped, each circuit board meticulously examined, each line of code patiently deciphered, represented a small victory over the chaos of the outside world. Here, amidst this symphony of precision, he could momentarily silence Liliane's absence, the dull ache of guilt he carried, the uncertainty of his future.

One morning, as he was disassembling an inertial navigation system, Sergeant Leblanc, his superior officer, approached, his weather-beaten face etched with an unfamiliar seriousness.

"Julien," he began, his voice a gruff baritone that echoed through the workshop, "I have a task for you. Something...different."

Julien straightened up, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. The unexpected announcement instantly banished his wandering thoughts, snapping him back into the rigid attentiveness of a soldier.

"At your command, Sergeant," he replied, his voice neutral, masking the flicker of apprehension that tightened his chest.

Leblanc, a man seemingly hewn from granite, whose piercing blue eyes seemed to bore into Julien's very being, held his gaze for a moment, as if gauging his reaction.

"A search and rescue helicopter arrived last night," Leblanc finally continued, his voice dropping to a low rumble. "Major mechanical issue. The mechanics are swamped, need a hand with the avionics. You're our best man, Julien. I'm counting on you."

The Sergeant's voice, typically booming, had softened, revealing a rare note of respect in this world where hierarchy reigned supreme.

A mixture of excitement and anxiety coursed through Julien. Working on an actual aircraft, not just a simulator, was a significant challenge, an unexpected opportunity to test his skills in the real world. Yet the thought of venturing outside the workshop, of leaving the protective cocoon of the base, filled him with unease. The outside world, with its temptations and uncertainties, suddenly seemed threatening, like a dark forest teeming with unknown dangers.

"Understood, Sergeant," Julien replied, his voice steadier than he expected. "I'll do my best."

His words betrayed a newfound determination. Immersing himself in the belly of a helicopter, grappling with the intricacies of its mechanics, offered a welcome escape, a way to channel the restless energy that consumed him from within.

Leblanc nodded, satisfied. "Good. Report to Hangar 5. Lieutenant Dumais will be expecting you. And Julien..." He paused, a rare smile, almost paternal, momentarily softening his rugged features. "Make us proud."

Hangar 5, a steel-grey behemoth casting an imposing shadow across the scorching tarmac, greeted Julien with a blast of hot air thick with the acrid tang of aviation fuel. Halogen lamps suspended from the dizzyingly high ceiling carved islands of harsh light from the surrounding gloom, revealing a hive of activity buzzing around a massive helicopter.

The aircraft, a Bell CH-146 Griffon with aggressive lines and olive-drab paint dulled by the elements, sat grounded, its immobile rotors pointing skyward like menacing claws. A group of men in blue coveralls, their backs bent with exertion, swarmed around the landing gear, while others, perched precariously on scaffolding, inspected the fuselage with meticulous precision.

Intimidated by the organized chaos of the hangar, Julien approached a man in khaki fatigues whose imposing stature and square jaw left no doubt as to his rank. Lieutenant Dumais, a mountain of muscle with veins like knotted ropes, greeted him with a piercing gaze and a handshake that threatened to crush his bones.

"So, you're the avionics prodigy I've heard so much about," Dumais boomed, his voice a gravelly rumble that echoed through the hangar.

"I'm here to assist you, Lieutenant," Julien replied, striving for a neutral tone despite the knot of tension tightening in his gut.

"Good. We haven't got time for pleasantries." Dumais gestured towards the helicopter with a curt nod. "This bird has a hydraulic system problem. Mechanics have checked everything, found nothing. I'm counting on you to find the gremlin."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and strode towards a group of men huddled around a control panel bristling with multicolored wires.

Heart pounding in his chest, Julien approached the helicopter with a mixture of caution and fascination. The aircraft, far more imposing up close, exuded an aura of raw power that both captivated and intimidated him. He ran a hesitant hand along the cool fuselage, fingertips tracing the rough paint, as if trying to absorb the very essence of this complex and dangerous machine.

A sweating mechanic, face smudged with grease, greeted him with a curt nod. "We checked everything, hoses, pumps, actuators... Nothing. It's like the system is cursed."

Aware of the weight of expectation upon him, Julien took a deep breath and leaned over the electrical schematics spread out on a metal crate. A maze of interwoven lines, cryptic symbols, and hastily scribbled annotations confronted him, a complex puzzle he needed to solve, and quickly.

The suffocating scent of hydraulic fluid, the deafening roar of a fighter jet taking flight in the distance, the relentless activity of men and machines around him... it all coalesced into an oppressive atmosphere, a sense of urgency that set his nerves on edge.

But deep within him, another sensation took root, as unexpected as it was exhilarating: challenge. This challenge pulled him from the routine of boot camp, from the sanitized world of simulators and technical manuals. This challenge allowed him to prove to himself, and to others, that he could make a difference, be useful, live up to the trust placed in him.

For hours, Julien became an electronic detective. Each wire a potential lead, each component a possible suspect. He tested sensors, checked relays, scrutinized circuit boards, searching for the anomaly, the break, the short circuit that would explain the malfunction. The silence around him, broken only by the hiss of hydraulic systems and the clink of tools, amplified his focus, transforming the hangar into a bubble outside of time.

Lieutenant Dumais, having completed another round of inspections that took him to every corner of the hangar, approached him, his expression doubtful. "Well, how are we doing? We don't have all night."

"Almost there, Lieutenant," Julien replied, refusing to be rattled by his superior's curt tone. "Just one last thing to check."

His gaze, sharpened by hours of intense concentration, had settled on a small metal box nestled amidst a tangle of wires, almost invisible at first glance. A sudden intuition, a

flash of insight in the labyrinthine world of mechanics, whispered to him that the source of the problem lay there, hidden within this seemingly insignificant element.

With the precision of a surgeon, he disconnected the connectors, carefully extracted the box from its housing, and gently pried it open. And there, revealed before his astonished eyes, was the culprit: a minuscule copper wire, barely thicker than a hair, had snapped, interrupting the electrical circuit that controlled the hydraulic system.

A triumphant smile spread across Julien's face. He had found the culprit, solved the riddle that had baffled the most experienced mechanics. The satisfaction he felt was not merely professional; it was also, and above all, personal. In this moment of success, he had proven to himself, and to others, that he was capable of overcoming obstacles, of facing the unexpected, of finding his place in this demanding world he had chosen.

Informed of the discovery, Lieutenant Dumais let out a low whistle of admiration. "Not bad, rookie! I must admit, I was beginning to have my doubts." He clapped Julien on the shoulder, a rare gesture of familiarity from this gruff man. "You've got the eye, kid. You'll go far in this man's army."

An hour later, the hydraulic system repaired, the helicopter took flight again, its powerful roar shaking the hangar to its very foundation. Julien stood on the tarmac, watching the aircraft disappear into the twilight sky, a sense of pride mingled with a strange melancholy washing over him.

He had proven himself, earned the respect of his superiors and peers. But at what cost? Far from Liliane, his family, everything that had given meaning to his life until then, he felt like a stranger, an actor playing a role he only half understood.

As night fell on the military base, shrouding the buildings and men in a cloak of silence and darkness, Julien realized his initiation was not over. He had passed one stage, but the path that lay ahead remained uncertain, fraught with pitfalls and agonizing choices. And

the question that had haunted him since his arrival echoed with a newfound intensity: was he prepared to pay the price to become a soldier?

## Chapter 3: Radio Silence

Time had transformed into a muddy, uniform river flowing through the military base. The days were identical, punctuated by the same relentless rhythm: a brutal pre-dawn awakening, grueling physical training sessions, dense theoretical courses on onboard electronics, disassembling and reassembling complex components until his fingers were black with grease and his mind saturated with information.

Each evening, exhausted, his body aching from exertion, Julien collapsed onto his bunk, the faint hope of a message, a sign from Liliane, evaporating into the cold, impersonal air of the dormitory. Radio silence, a standard measure in the Canadian army during initial training, fell upon him like a lead weight. He pictured Liliane, alone in her countryside haven, tending to her animals, her delicate hands caressing the silky coat of a newborn lamb, her laughing eyes gazing at the sun setting over the verdant fields. Jealousy gnawed at him, bitter and tenacious.

Yet, a strange camaraderie had formed among the recruits, a blend of healthy competition and unwavering solidarity. In this spartan life, stripped of all artifice, masks fell away, differences faded in the face of shared adversity. They were all in the same boat, united by the hardship of the ordeal, the longing for the outside world, and the uncertainty of the future.

One evening, as night had fallen on the base, cloaking the buildings and men in a mantle of silence and obscurity, Julien found himself sitting on the edge of his bed, his gaze lost in the void. Around him, his comrades went about their nightly routines, some writing letters they would never send, others conversing in hushed tones, sharing memories of their former lives as if to ward off the encroaching loneliness.

"Do you think we ever get used to this silence?" David's voice, tinged with a confiding tone, roused Julien from his reverie.

David, a slender young man with keen eyes, had become his roommate and, despite himself, his confidant. Hailing from a small town in northern Ontario, passionate about

computers and video games, he concealed a certain melancholy beneath his cheerful demeanor, a void he tried to fill with jokes and verbal acrobatics.

"I don't know," Julien replied in a hoarse voice, betraying the fatigue and doubt that gnawed at him. "Sometimes I feel like the more time passes, the harder it gets."

"Yeah, no kidding. Especially when you have someone waiting for you on the outside." David paused, casting a knowing glance at Julien. "You miss your farmer girl, don't you?"

Julien merely nodded, unable to utter Liliane's name aloud. It was as if the mere act of speaking it brought him closer to her, rekindling the pain of their separation and the guilt of his enforced silence.

"I wonder what they're all doing, the ones who are waiting for us," murmured Marc, his voice tinged with a sudden melancholy. A long silence followed his words, each man retreating into his thoughts, haunted by the specter of those who populated their lives before.

"My sister got married last month," Marc continued, breaking the silence in a neutral tone, as if stating a mundane fact. "I wasn't there."

The confession hung in the still air of the dormitory, heavy with unspoken words. Julien looked up at his comrade, surprised by this unexpected confidence. Marc, the life of the party, always ready with a joke or an encouraging smile, suddenly seemed fragile, his youthful face marked by an unusual sadness.

"She married her high school sweetheart, a big strapping lad who works in the lumber industry. My mother sent me a picture. They looked happy." A sad smile flickered across his face for a moment, before vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

Julien couldn't find anything to say. Words crowded his mind, clumsy and useless. How could he console someone who was suffering from the same absence, the same inner turmoil? He simply placed a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder, a silent gesture that spoke volumes.

The atmosphere in the dormitory had grown heavy, imbued with a shared nostalgia. Each man measured the weight of his sacrifice, the distance that inexorably separated him from those he loved.

The next day, a rumor spread through the ranks of the recruits, as swift and tenacious as a wildfire. David, always on the lookout for confidential information, announced it to Julien with a conspiratorial air: "I found a loophole in the base's computer system. We can send messages."

Julien stared at him, incredulous. "Are you serious? But... that's forbidden! If we get caught..."

"Relax, old man, no one will know. I found a way to bypass security. A small coded message, sent to a proxy server... and presto! The deed is done." David puffed out his chest, proud of his exploit.

A glimmer of hope flickered in Julien's eyes, as intense as it was fleeting. To be able to write to Liliane, leave a trace, a breath of his presence in this desert of silence... The temptation was great, almost irresistible.

"So, are you in? I can add you to my list. It's David and the cyber-rebels against the empire of silence!"

But David's enthusiasm collided with Julien's hesitation. Fear paralyzed him, cold and tenacious. The fear of silence, precisely. The deafening silence of an answer that would never come.

"No, David, thank you, but I can't. I'm not sure I want to know..."

David's disappointment was palpable, but he didn't press the issue. He understood the strength of Julien's attachment to his farmer girl, a sentiment that was beyond him, someone who approached life with a disconcerting lightness.

The days followed their course, monotonous and tiring. Until Lieutenant Dumais, with his impassive face and curt tone, disrupted the well-oiled routine of their training.

"Recruit Bélanger! Report!"

Julien stiffened, his heart pounding in his chest. What had he done? Had he committed a serious error? He approached the lieutenant, his body tense, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

"We have a slight technical difficulty with one of our search and rescue helicopters. It seems the hydraulic system is acting up. The base mechanics couldn't find anything. I was told you had a certain knack for electronics. It's your turn to shine."

The helicopter, imposing despite its forced immobility, sat in the middle of the hangar, illuminated by the cold neon lights that accentuated its metallic lines. The pungent odor of oil and fuel hung in the air, mingled with the more subtle scent of rubber tires and fresh paint.

Julien, intimidated by the task at hand, circled the aircraft cautiously, as if afraid of awakening a sleeping beast. Lieutenant Dumais, standing a few paces away, observed him in silence, his impassive face betraying no emotion.

"Get a move on, Bélanger! We're not here to admire the scenery!" The lieutenant's dry voice broke the silence that reigned in the hangar, making Julien jump.

Armed with a notebook and a tool kit, he slipped under the belly of the machine. Complex diagrams, representing the helicopter's hydraulic circuit, paraded through his mind, the fruits of long hours of study and practical exercises.

The complexity of the system fascinated him. Each hose, each valve, each sensor played a crucial role in the proper functioning of the aircraft, ensuring the safety of the pilots and the success of rescue missions.

He began by checking the oil levels, his eyes meticulously scanning the viscous fluid for any anomaly, any telltale air bubble. Nothing. Next, he moved on to the hydraulic lines, his fingers tracing the length of each metal artery, searching for a leak, a crack, any sign of weakness. Still nothing.

The hours stretched into an interminable void, punctuated only by the insistent hum of fluorescent lights and the guttural clang of tools against metal. Frustration gnawed at him, intertwined with a creeping sense of dread. What if he wasn't up to the task? What if he was overlooking the obvious, just like the seasoned mechanics at the base before him?

Fatigue settled upon his shoulders, concentration becoming a losing battle against the weariness that dulled his senses. The hangar, once an awe-inspiring cathedral of engineering, now loomed over him, a cold and sterile prison of steel and flickering neon, its very air thick with the ghosts of futile efforts.

It was then, like a spark in the desolate expanse of his thoughts, that a possibility ignited. What if the problem lay not in the tangible mechanics of the machine, but within the intricate electronics that governed it? After all, his expertise wasn't confined to the realm of gears and pistons. He had spent countless hours poring over control systems, deciphering the intricate schematics of circuit boards.

A renewed sense of purpose flickered in his eyes, pushing back the fog of exhaustion. He rose, ignoring the questioning gaze of Lieutenant Dumais, and moved towards the helicopter's avionics bay. The screen, dark and silent, stared back at him, a mute challenge.

Julien's fingers danced across the keyboard, entering a sequence of commands he had committed to memory during his training. The screen flickered to life, a burst of pixels resolving into a complex and austere interface. Excitement tightened its grip on his chest, each line of code scrolling across the screen a potential breadcrumb leading to a solution.

He delved into the aircraft's software architecture, analyzing sensor data, error logs, flight parameters. Lines of code scrolled past, a cryptic language that only he seemed privy to in this world of metal and oil.

Intrigued by this sudden flurry of activity, Lieutenant Dumais had drawn closer, peering over Julien's shoulder at the screen illuminating the young recruit's focused face.

"What are you up to, Bélanger? This isn't some kind of arcade!"

"One second, Lieutenant," replied Julien, his eyes glued to the screen, "I think I might have something."

His gaze, scanning the data stream, snagged on an anomaly, a discordant note in the flow of information. A pressure sensor, situated on the main hydraulic circuit, was transmitting erratic readings, triggering a chain reaction within the control system.

"Bingo," he muttered, a triumphant smile breaking across his face.

Lieutenant Dumais, still hovering over him, let out a skeptical grunt. "That's your big discovery? A faulty sensor? The mechanics would have spotted that ages ago."

"Not necessarily, Lieutenant. It's not a mechanical failure, but an electronic one. The sensor itself is probably fine, but the signal it's sending is corrupted. We need to check the wiring, there could be a loose connection, a frayed wire..."

A flicker of interest sparked in the Lieutenant's eyes, a mixture of surprise and reluctant hope. He had underestimated this quiet young man, dismissing him as a mere technician. He now saw in him a keen intellect, an analytical mind that went beyond the mere execution of orders.

"Alright, Bélanger, you've got my attention. Let's take a closer look."

A shiver ran down Julien's spine, despite the stifling heat of the hangar. The weight of the Lieutenant's gaze, mingled with the acrid scent of oil and fuel, seemed to press down on him. He felt like a tightrope walker, every movement requiring precision, every decision carrying the weight of potential failure.

"Well? What are you waiting for, Bélanger? Get to it!" Impatience vibrated in the Lieutenant's voice, a stark reminder of the urgency of the situation.

Julien once again disappeared beneath the belly of the helicopter, armed with his toolkit and a newfound determination. He felt like an explorer venturing into a jungle of multicolored wires and metal connectors, any one of which could be concealing the source of the problem.

Guided by his intuition and the intricate schematics imprinted on his mind, he progressed cautiously, disconnecting and reconnecting cables, testing for continuity, searching for the slightest anomaly in the electronic labyrinth. Time lost all meaning, each minute stretching into an eternity, every beat of his heart echoing in the hangar's cavernous silence.

Doubt, insidious and persistent, crept into his thoughts, threatening to drag him down into despair. What if the Lieutenant was right? What if it was just a faulty sensor, a blundering oversight that he had failed to identify? The humiliation of it already burned within him, amplified by Dumais' silent presence, his gaze a tangible weight upon him.

It was then that his fingers encountered an unexpected resistance, a minute bump on a wire that appeared otherwise flawless. He pulled gently, carefully sliding back the protective sheath, and stared in disbelief at a tiny copper filament, barely visible to the naked eye, cleanly severed. The break was so fine, so perfectly concealed beneath the sheath, that it could have easily escaped a cursory inspection.

A sigh of relief mingled with disbelief escaped his lips. This, then, was the cause of all the trouble, this minuscule broken wire that had brought down such a powerful machine. He felt both foolish and exhilarated, acutely aware of the fragility of complex systems, the critical importance of the smallest details.

"I found it, Lieutenant," he announced, his voice hoarse with a mixture of exhaustion and triumph.

The pungent odor of solder filled the air as Julien set to work repairing the damaged wire. His fingers, deft despite the pressure of the moment, worked the soldering iron with a practiced grace. Every movement was precise, methodical, a testament to countless hours of practice and unwavering focus.

Around him, the hangar throbbed with activity. Mechanics toiled on other machines, their voices blending with the screech of tools and the low rumble of engines. Yet Julien remained isolated in his bubble of concentration, oblivious to the surrounding chaos. Only the broken wire and the orange glow of the soldering iron seemed to exist in his world.

Lieutenant Dumais, leaning against a tool cart, observed the scene in silence. His face, usually a mask of stoicism, betrayed a flicker of satisfaction. He had sensed the potential

in this young man from the start, a spark of intelligence and determination that belied his quiet demeanor.

The silence was broken by the sharp hiss of the soldering iron as Julien returned it to its stand. The repaired wire, almost invisible to the naked eye, seemed to mock the world with its restored integrity.

"It's done, Lieutenant," announced Julien, his voice weary but edged with quiet pride. "The wiring is repaired. All that's left is to reconnect everything and run a system check."

Dumais stepped closer, examining the work with a critical eye. He gave nothing away, but inwardly, he was impressed by the young recruit's meticulousness and speed.

"Good work, Bélanger," he conceded, his voice betraying no emotion. "Go get a technician for the tests. Let's see if your fix holds up."

A technician, summoned for the task, set about reconnecting the helicopter's systems under the watchful eyes of Julien and the Lieutenant. Every click of a connector, every whirl of a reactivated system, resonated with the tension that still hung heavy in the air.

Finally, after an excruciating wait, the technician straightened up, a satisfied grin spreading across his weathered face.

"Everything's operational, Lieutenant. The hydraulic system is responding perfectly."

A wave of relief washed over Julien, releasing the tension that had coiled tight within him for hours. He had done it. He had proven his worth, not only to the Lieutenant, but more importantly, to himself.

Dumais, his satisfaction barely concealed, nodded curtly. "Well done, Bélanger. You've got the makings of a fine technician."

Those few words, uttered in a clipped, military tone, were music to Julien's ears. He had found his place, or at least, a glimpse of it, in this demanding and unforgiving world of the military.

Yet, as the hangar hummed back to life, the cacophony of engines once again drowning out the sounds of human voices and clanging metal, a shadow lingered at the edge of his thoughts.

Victory had a bitter aftertaste, tinged with a lingering sense of loss. Had he sacrificed a part of himself to earn his place in this world of steel and discipline? The radio silence still separated him from those he loved, a constant reminder of the choice he had made, a choice that felt both inevitable and unbearable.

Excitement rippled through the base. News of the imminent end to the radio silence spread like wildfire, igniting hope and reawakening dormant anxieties. In the barracks, conversations became consumed by the prospect, each recruit envisioning the long-awaited reunions, the sound of a beloved voice finally reaching them across the miles.

For Julien, this prospect was a source of both exhilaration and anxiety. He desperately needed to hear Liliane's voice, to assure himself that she was still out there, somewhere, waiting for him. But fear gripped him, cold and relentless as a glacial mist invading his very being. What if she didn't answer? What if the silence of those long months had carved an insurmountable chasm between them?

The days that followed were torture. Every physical exercise, every theoretical lesson seemed insurmountable, his mind obsessed by the image of Liliane and the silent echo of his phone. He found himself wandering the halls of the base, his gaze lost, as if to escape the unbearable wait that gnawed at him.

D-day finally arrived. The atmosphere was electric, charged with a palpable tension. The recruits, dressed in their dress uniforms, gathered in the courtyard, their faces drawn, their hands twitching. The silence that reigned was that which precedes a storm, heavy with promises and threats.

Lieutenant Dumais, his face as impassive as ever, walked towards them, a sheet of paper in hand. His gaze swept over the crowd of recruits, lingering for a moment on each face as if to engrave the imprint of this moment in his memory.

"Alright, rookies, the long-awaited moment has arrived. You will finally be able to contact your loved ones. But don't forget that you are still soldiers in training. Discipline and restraint are key."

He paused, letting his words hang in the still air.

"I will call your names. One by one, you will come and see me to obtain authorization to use the phone. And don't waste my time with sentimental drivel. Five minutes per person, not a second more."

Julien's name echoed in the courtyard, shattering the tense silence like a gunshot. His heart leaped in his chest, threatening to break his ribs. He had awaited this moment with feverish impatience, and yet, now that it was here, fear paralyzed him.

Around him, the other recruits were whispering, their faces betraying a mixture of excitement and apprehension. He met David's gaze, who gave him a knowing wink and a fist pump of encouragement. But even his friend's contagious good humor could not dispel the knot that tightened his stomach.

Slowly, as if caught in a slow-motion nightmare, Julien made his way through the crowd of recruits, their identical uniforms making him feel like he was wading through a

turbulent sea of anonymous shadows. Each step brought him closer to Lieutenant Dumais, who stood ramrod straight in front of a small folding table on which rested a field telephone, black and austere, like an instrument of torture.

The lieutenant fixed him with his glacial gaze, tapping his finger on the sheet of paper that served as his list. "Bélanger. Five minutes. Not a second more."

His dry, merciless voice resonated in the courtyard, reminding Julien that he was nothing but a soldier under his command, stripped of any will of his own. He hesitated a moment, the bitter taste of fear rising in his throat like poison. Then, with a superhuman effort, he managed to unglue his feet from the ground and approach the table.

The phone seemed to mock him, its black, cold receiver offering him the arms of a promise as intoxicating as it was terrifying. He seized the device with a trembling hand, dialing the familiar number with agonizing slowness, each digit requiring a superhuman effort.

The ringing pierced the silence of the courtyard, each beep hammering at his temples like a rusty knife. Once, twice, three times. Hope, fragile as a soap bubble, blossomed in his heart, only to vanish just as quickly in a sigh of disappointment. Liliane wasn't answering.

An icy emptiness invaded him, seeping into his veins like poison. The lieutenant's words became distant, drowned out by the dull buzzing in his ears, an echo of his own despair. Around him, life resumed its course, the other recruits jostling to take their turn, their mingled voices forming a distant and unreal clamor.

He hung up, unable to bear another second of the humiliation of that deafening silence. Lieutenant Dumais, impassive, watched him with a cold, indifferent eye, then, with a curt gesture, indicated the table to the next recruit.

Julien turned, stumbling like a punch-drunk boxer, and made his way through the indifferent crowd. He needed air, to escape the gazes that did not see his distress, the voices that did not speak his language.

He found refuge in the deserted dormitory, his den of canvas and military sheets. Slumping onto his bunk, he finally let the tears well up, hot and bitter, betraying the collapse of his last hopes.

Liliane's silence was a confession more cruel than any words. She had turned the page, forgotten their promises, their shared dreams. All that remained for him was the vast, icy emptiness of a life he had chosen without really choosing, a life where love had no place.

Night fell on the base, slow and insidious like the sadness that engulfed him. Outside, the pale lights of the streetlamps cast ghostly shadows on the austere buildings. Inside, the silence was broken only by the sighs of the sleepers and the plaintive creaking of the cots.

Julien lay prostrate on his bunk for a long time, his body broken by fatigue, his mind haunted by painful images and unanswered questions. Why had he made this choice? Was he really ready to sacrifice everything for a military career, for a uniform and a rank?

At daybreak, as the nascent dawn tinged the sky with a gray and uncertain light, an idea sprouted in his tormented mind. He could not remain this way, prey to his demons and regrets. He had to act, find a way out, give meaning to his life.

His face gaunt and resolute, he rose and headed for the dormitory exit. He did not yet know what he was going to do, or where he was going to go. But one thing was certain: he could no longer remain a prisoner of this silence that was slowly killing him. It was time for him to choose his own path, even if it meant starting over from scratch.

## Chapter 4: The Echo of His Dreams

Liliane's silence reverberated in his chest like a clap of thunder in a clear blue sky, leaving in its wake a shock wave that threatened to shatter him. He now wandered the corridors of the base, blind to the bustle around him, deaf to the banter of the other recruits celebrating the end of the radio silence.

How could he have been so mistaken? How could he have believed, even for a moment, that Liliane would wait for him, a soldier-in-training lost in a universe of discipline and rigor? He had been naive, blinded by his own desires, unable to face reality.

The ensuing weeks were an extended torment. Each passing day etched the void left by Liliane a little deeper. He sought refuge in work, immersing himself in the intricate schematics of navigation systems, in the labyrinth of multicolored wires within flight simulators. Electronics, once a passion, became a sanctuary, an anesthetic against the throbbing ache of absence.

Marc, his roommate, observed his transformation with growing concern. The cheerful, optimistic Julien of those early days had given way to a taciturn figure, haunted by an unfathomable sadness.

“Julien, something’s really wrong, isn’t it?” he finally blurted out one evening, alone in their dormitory.

Julien looked up from his avionics manual, startled by the gravity in his friend’s tone.

“I’m managing,” he mumbled, forcing a weary smile.

Marc wasn't fooled. He knew his friend better than anyone, had learned to decipher his silences, his evasive glances.

"Cut the crap, Julien. We're alone here. You think I don't see how distraught you've been since that call?"

Julien lowered his head, unable to meet his friend's penetrating gaze. How could he explain the inexplicable? How to articulate the abyssal void that was consuming him from within?

"It's Liliane..." he finally murmured, his voice choked with emotion. "She... she didn't answer my call."

Marc fell silent, letting the weight of this revelation settle over them like a leaden shroud. He approached his friend, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I'm really sorry, Julien. I didn't know..."

"It's nothing... well, of course it is, but..." Julien trailed off, unable to continue. Words jostled in his head, forming an inextricable knot.

"Do you think she's forgotten about you?" Marc asked with infinite caution.

The question, posed with such tenderness, shattered the last dams holding back Julien's tears. He nodded, speechless, letting the torrent of his emotions engulf him.

Marc held him close, letting him weep on his shoulder, aware that words were futile in the face of such pain. He'd known, deep down, that this long-distance love affair was

destined to fail from the start. But he had never dared voice it, preferring to let his friend cling to that fragile hope, the only light in the dreary reality of their military existence.

Silence descended once more, heavy and oppressive. Julien finally pulled away, wiping his tears with the back of his hand. He felt drained, exhausted by this explosion of grief.

"I don't understand," he whispered, his voice hollow. "We promised each other... We swore that distance wouldn't change anything."

Marc shook his head, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"Promises are like everything else, Julien. Sometimes, life takes care of them for us."

A heavy silence fell upon the dormitory, only broken by Julien's muffled sobs. Marc, ill at ease in the face of his friend's distress, simply patted his shoulder awkwardly. He had always been more comfortable in action than in emotional outpourings, and Julien's heartache left him at a loss.

The sound of boots echoed in the corridor, announcing the end of their break and the return to the relentless routine of training. Marc stood up, tugging nervously at the collar of his t-shirt.

"Come on, Julien, pull yourself together. We can't stay here dwelling on it. Lieutenant Dumais will have our hides if we're late."

Julien wiped his tears with a brusque gesture, trying to regain a semblance of dignity. He knew Marc was right. There was no point in wallowing in self-pity. He had to be strong, to keep moving forward, even if each step tore a piece of his heart out.

The following days were a long tunnel of fatigue and boredom. Julien clung to his work like a castaway to his raft, finding in the precision of electrical diagrams, in the implacable logic of hydraulic systems, a semblance of order in the chaos of his thoughts.

One afternoon, while immersed in the study of a state-of-the-art helicopter navigation system, he heard a commotion coming from the nearby workshop. Curious, he approached and peered through the partially open door.

Lieutenant Dumais, his face flushed with anger, was pacing the room nervously, while two seasoned mechanics, Sergeant Leblanc and Corporal Tremblay, tried to reason with him. At the center of the workshop stood the object of their discord: an imposing Chinook transport helicopter, its massive gray fuselage emblazoned with the Royal Canadian Air Force emblem.

"... this is the third time this damned system has failed in less than a week!" the lieutenant exclaimed in a booming voice. "It's like amateur tinkering! I want this bird operational by the end of the day, understood? Otherwise, you can kiss your weekend leave goodbye!"

Sergeant Leblanc, a stocky man with a face weathered by sun and wind, attempted a timid protest.

"Lieutenant, with all due respect, this system is particularly complex. We need specific spare parts, and..."

"I don't care about your logistical problems!" the lieutenant cut him off brutally. "I want results, and I want them now!"

Julien, who had been following the scene with growing interest, felt his heart beat faster. He had studied the Chinook's hydraulic system in detail during his theoretical courses, and he was convinced that he had identified the source of the problem. A small defective part, a simple pressure relay miscalibrated, was enough to compromise the entire system.

Driven by a sudden impulse, he stepped into the workshop, drawing the surprised gazes of the three men.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant," he said hesitantly. "I believe I might be able to help you."

Lieutenant Dumais fixed him with a dark stare, clearly not inclined to be interrupted by a mere rookie.

"And who are you to dare interrupt me?"

"Recruit Julien Lefebvre, Lieutenant. Specialty: Avionics."

"Avionics? And what does avionics have to do with hydraulics, pray tell?"

"The Chinook's hydraulic system is controlled by an onboard computer, Lieutenant. And that onboard computer, I happen to know quite well."

Lieutenant Dumais raised a dubious eyebrow, unconvinced by the audacity of this young recruit.

"You have a lot of confidence in yourself, Lefebvre. I hope for your sake you're not wasting my time."

Julien felt his stomach clench under the officer's scrutinizing gaze. He was playing for high stakes, he knew that. If he failed, he would face disciplinary action. But if he succeeded...

"Give me the benefit of the doubt, Lieutenant," he said, trying to mask his nervousness. "I'm willing to bet I can solve your problem in less than an hour."

A tense silence descended upon the workshop. Lieutenant Dumais, arms crossed over his imposing chest, observed Julien with a mixture of skepticism and curiosity. Sergeant Leblanc and Corporal Tremblay, meanwhile, exchanged amused glances, as if they had just witnessed a jester enter the stage in a play.

"Very well, Lefebvre," the lieutenant finally said curtly. "You have one hour. Not a minute more. Leblanc, Tremblay, provide him with all the necessary equipment."

The two mechanics nodded and hastened to carry out the orders, not without casting mocking glances at Julien. Julien ignored their silent taunts and concentrated on the task at hand. He felt strangely calm, as if the challenge of the situation had chased away his personal turmoil. For the first time in weeks, he felt like he had a clear purpose, a mission to fulfill.

He reviewed the Chinook's hydraulic system with the precision of a surgeon examining a patient about to undergo surgery. Each hose, each valve, each sensor was scrutinized by his expert eye. He consulted the technical diagrams, compared the pressure readings, and checked the electrical connections.

Time ticked by relentlessly, punctuated by the insistent ticking of the clock on the wall. Julien felt the pressure mount with each passing minute. He was convinced he had identified the source of the problem, but he couldn't pinpoint the weak link in the system.

Sergeant Leblanc, who was watching him out of the corner of his eye, couldn't help but let out a small, sarcastic chuckle.

"So, Lefebvre, all dried up?" he asked in a loud enough voice. "I warned you this wasn't child's play. Hydraulics, you don't learn that from books. You have to have oil in your veins, not just your brain!"

Julien felt anger rising within him, but he forced himself to remain calm. He hadn't come here to argue with these old veterans who looked down on him. He was here to prove his worth, to show that he was capable of rising to the challenge.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment to clear his mind, then focused again on the hydraulic system. He mentally went over each step of his diagnosis, each detail of the technical diagrams. And suddenly, as if by some divine inspiration, the solution appeared to him.

"The pressure relay!" he exclaimed, a gleam of triumph in his eyes. "It's the pressure relay that's faulty! It needs to be replaced."

Sergeant Leblanc, caught off guard by Julien's sudden confidence, opened his eyes wide in disbelief.

"The pressure relay? But... but that's impossible! We checked it three times!"

"Check again, Sergeant," Julien replied, his tone calm yet firm. "I guarantee that's the problem."

Lieutenant Dumais, who had been observing the scene with growing interest, intervened with an authoritative voice. "Leblanc, do as the recruit says. We're wasting valuable time."

Sergeant Leblanc, visibly annoyed, reluctantly complied. He removed the pressure relay in question and subjected it to a series of rigorous tests. After a few minutes, his face hardened.

"Damn it..." he muttered, incredulous. "The kid's right. The relay is faulty. But how did he know?"

Julien, savoring his small victory, merely offered an enigmatic smile. He felt no need to justify himself. The facts spoke for themselves.

Replacing the pressure relay was the work of mere minutes. Once the operation was complete, Lieutenant Dumais ordered a full system test of the Chinook's hydraulics. Julien held his breath, heart pounding in his chest, as the technicians swarmed around the aircraft.

The powerful roar of the engines filled the hangar, vibrating the very floor beneath their feet. The Chinook slowly rose, its massive rotors churning the air with immense force. Julien scrutinized every gauge, every indicator light, searching for the slightest sign of malfunction.

But the system functioned flawlessly. The Chinook was ready to return to service.

Lieutenant Dumais, his face creased with a broad, satisfied grin, turned to Julien. "Congratulations, Lefebvre. You've done a fine job. Never thought a rookie would bail my men out of a bind like that. You've got a bright future in aviation."

Julien, overwhelmed by a surge of pride mingled with relief, offered a shy smile. He had just secured his first victory in the unforgiving world of the military. And for the first time since arriving at the base, he felt a sense of belonging.

The Chinook's shadow, cast by the setting sun, stretched across the hangar floor, enveloping Julien in a wave of unexpected hope. Lieutenant Dumais's praise still echoed in his ears, a sweet melody momentarily drowning out the deafening silence from Liliane.

Sergeant Leblanc, his usual gruff demeanor slightly shaken, approached him, a wrench still in hand. "Not bad for a rookie who's never even stepped foot in a chopper," he conceded, a smirk playing on his lips. "You've got the eye, Lefebvre. The eye and a knack for circuitry."

A nervous chuckle escaped Julien's lips. "I had a good teacher, Sergeant. Avionics classes were all I had to keep my mind off things."

Corporal Tremblay, packing up his tools nearby, joined the conversation, a glimmer of admiration in his eyes. "You've got guts, kid. Standing up to the lieutenant like that, not everyone's got the stomach for it."

"I was just doing my duty, Sergeant," replied Julien, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Yeah, but you could've landed yourself a week of latrine duty if you were wrong," Leblanc retorted, clapping Julien on the shoulder. "You played, you won. Enjoy your glory while it lasts, kid."

Despite the Sergeant's teasing tone, Julien detected a note of respect in his voice. He had just earned his stripes with these hardened, experienced men. The feat, for a feat it was, spread like wildfire throughout the base. That evening, at the mess hall, all eyes were on him. He was greeted with nods, congratulations, and pats on the back. Even Marc, usually so quick with a joke, seemed impressed.

"Told you, you were a genius," he whispered in Julien's ear, handing him a tray of food. "Lieutenant Dumais wouldn't stop singing your praises on the phone. Seems like he wanted everyone to know about the feat of the young Lefebvre."

Julien blushed under the compliments, uncomfortable with the attention. He would have preferred a quiet evening with Marc, dissecting the world over shared cigarettes, hidden from view. But tonight, he had no choice but to play the part, to assume the mantle of the day's hero.

Yet, beneath the mask of satisfaction, a gnawing unease persisted. The joy of victory was tainted by Liliane's absence. What good were all these accomplishments, all these efforts, if she wasn't there to share them with him?

As night fell and the dormitory descended into darkness and silence, Liliane's face imposed itself upon his thoughts, more present than ever. He saw her smile, the mischievous glint in her blue eyes, heard again the sound of her voice, a sweet melody that haunted him day and night.

A crazy idea began to form in his mind, a glimmer of hope in the dark night of his despair. What if he risked it all? What if he found a way to contact her, to speak to her, to explain?

He sat up on his bunk, his heart pounding. He couldn't just sit there, idle, waiting for her to forget him. He had to act, even if it meant breaking the rules, taking insane risks.

He turned to Marc, who was fast asleep, his face peaceful in the faint moonlight. He hesitated for a moment, torn between his desire for confidence and the fear of waking his friend.

Finally, he decided against it. It was better not to involve him in his mad schemes. Marc, with his strong sense of loyalty, would feel obligated to follow him, to cover for him. No, this time, he had to do it alone.

Julien rose cautiously, fumbled for his clothes in the darkness, and tiptoed out of the dormitory. He headed towards the administrative buildings of the base, where the few public telephones accessible to recruits were located. He knew the chances of finding Liliane at this late hour were slim, but he had to try. He couldn't bear another week, an eternity, without hearing from her.

The cool night air whipped at his face, rousing him from his daze. The sky, an inky black, was studded with twinkling stars. An almost unreal silence hung over the base, broken only by the distant hoot of an owl and the hum of the neon lights illuminating the deserted walkways.

Arriving at the offices, Julien scanned his surroundings cautiously. He saw no one. The coast was clear. He quickly entered the building, his heart hammering against his ribs.

The hallway, dimly lit by flickering fluorescent lights, smelled of disinfectant and stale coffee. Julien clenched his clammy hands around his access card, his hesitant shadow preceding him on the tiled floor. He had never set foot in this wing of the base after dark. The atmosphere here was different, almost hostile, imbued with the heavy silence of unspoken orders and closely guarded secrets.

He finally located the phone booth, tucked away at the end of the hallway, like a confession of weakness in this universe of rigor and discipline. A dim light illuminated the black receiver, an incongruous object in this world of advanced technology.

Julien dialed Liliane's number with trembling fingers, his heart pounding in his chest like a prisoner trying to break free from his chains. Each ring echoed in the silence of the hallway like a death knell, amplifying his anxiety.

Several times, he almost hung up, overcome by doubt and fear. What would he say if she answered? How could he explain his awkwardness, his silence, his absence?

Just as he was about to give up, a familiar, distant voice broke the silence. "Hello?"

Julien's breath hitched, his throat constricting with emotion. He instantly recognized the timbre of Liliane's voice, a sweet and familiar melody that transported him back to their summer evenings, shared laughter, and whispered promises under the stars.

"Liliane..."

His own voice sounded foreign to him, hoarse and hesitant. He took a deep breath, trying to regain control of his emotions.

"It's me... Julien."

A heavy silence followed his words, a silence heavy with unspoken questions and unanswered pleas. Julien felt his heart clench in his chest, the fear of rejection chilling him to the bone.

Then, in a barely audible voice, Liliane murmured, "Julien... is it really you?"

The sound of his name, uttered with such disbelief and tenderness, sparked a glimmer of hope in Julien's heart.

"Yes, it's me," he whispered, his voice cracking with emotion. "I... I just wanted to hear your voice, to know how you were..."

Silence descended again, heavier, more oppressive than before. Each passing second was torture, a cruel reminder of the distance that separated them.

Finally, in a trembling voice, Liliane spoke.

"We're not supposed to communicate, Julien. You know that."

"I know," Julien murmured, "but I had to talk to you. I..."

He stopped, unable to find the right words, the words that could bridge the chasm that had opened up between them.

"How are you?" he finally asked, his voice rough with concern. "The farm... how's the farm?"

A soft sigh came from the other end of the line.

"The farm is fine," Liliane replied after a moment of silence. "It's hard work, but... rewarding."

Her voice was devoid of its usual vivacity, lacking the fervent enthusiasm that always ignited her words when she spoke of their shared dream. Julien felt his heart constrict, a familiar ache returning. Something had shifted, irrevocably so. The distance, the silence, had dulled the flame that once burned between them.

"And you?" Liliane finally asked, her voice a soft, melancholic whisper. "How are you... over there?"

Julien hesitated, caught between the longing to confide in her, to confess his doubts and the loneliness that gnawed at him, and the fear of hurting her further.

"I... I'm fine," he finally answered, his voice betraying his unease. "Training is tough, but... I'm managing."

The words felt hollow even as he uttered them. Liliane, who knew him better than anyone, would surely recognize the facade he was trying to maintain. But he couldn't bear to disappoint her, to reveal his vulnerability, his wavering confidence.

"Is that all you have to say?"

Liliane's question, barely audible yet laced with a quiet sorrow, shattered Julien's resolve. It was in that moment he understood the depth of his mistake, how he had allowed distance and silence to erect an insurmountable wall between them.

"Liliane, I..."

He faltered again, words crowding his tongue but failing to articulate the tumult of emotions within him. How could he express the inexpressible, give voice to the chaos that had taken root in his heart?

"Julien?" Liliane pressed, her tone tinged with growing concern. "What's wrong?"

"I... I have to go," he stammered, his throat constricting with a sudden, overwhelming anxiety. "They... they're probably looking for me."

The lie was blatant, even to his own ears, but he couldn't bring himself to prolong this agonizing conversation, this litany of unspoken words and misconstrued intentions.

"Julien, wait!" Liliane cried out, her voice raw with a sudden, desperate plea. "Don't hang up..."

But it was too late. Julien had already disconnected the call, the receiver clattering back onto its cradle with a finality that echoed in the silent hallway like an unassailable verdict.

He leaned against the cool wall, the phone still clutched in his clammy hand as if willing a miracle, a reversal of the impossible. The silence that followed was more deafening than the cacophony of the mess hall or the roar of helicopter engines. He was alone, utterly alone, the chasm between him and Liliane wider than ever.

The shrill ring of a nearby phone jolted him back to reality. He flinched, dropping the receiver which clattered against the base with a dull thud. He scrambled to retrieve it, his heart pounding in his chest. Had he been discovered? Would this nocturnal transgression seal his fate in this unforgiving world?

"Recruit Lefebvre?" a gruff voice barked from the other end. "This is Sergeant Leblanc. What are you doing at this hour?"

Julien froze, paralyzed by the weight of authority. "Sergeant..." he stammered, his throat constricting with fear. "I was... I was..."

"Never mind," Leblanc cut him off sharply. "Get off the phone and get to bed. And make it snappy! Dorm inspection in five."

Julien didn't need to be told twice. He hung up with a hasty murmur and bolted out of the phone booth, his heart threatening to burst out of his chest. He hurried through the deserted corridors, his elongated shadow trailing behind like a harbinger of his guilt, and slipped back into the dormitory, silent as a fugitive evading capture.

He burrowed under the cold sheets, shivers wracking his body, and squeezed his eyes shut, trying in vain to banish the images of his colossal failure. Liliane's face, etched with sadness and disappointment, haunted him like a phantom, a cruel reflection of his own shortcomings.

Dawn broke over the base, painting the sky in hues of gray uncertainty, mirroring the turmoil within Julien. The morning dorm inspection, usually a humiliating ritual in the eyes of most recruits, felt surreal, as if his own life had become nothing more than a poorly staged play.

He went through the motions with the other recruits, an automaton obeying the barked commands of the drill instructors. The physical exercises, usually grueling, felt strangely effortless, his body moving with a newfound ease, as if liberated from the weight of his torment.

He had made a mistake, an unforgivable one. He had broken the rules, betrayed the trust that had been placed in him. But more importantly, he had come to the painful realization that this life, this military career he had embraced with such fervor, was nothing more than a dead end, an escape route leading him straight to the wall of his own making.

The time had come to make a choice, a difficult one, but necessary nonetheless. He couldn't continue like this, torn between two worlds, two lives that could not coexist. He had to make a clean break, even if it meant abandoning everything, starting over from scratch.

## Chapter 5: The Light at the End of the Tunnel

The autumn sun splashed the hangars of CFB Borden in warm orange hues. A brisk wind whistled through the base, snapping the Canadian flags that flew proudly atop their poles. Julien, clad in his dress uniform, observed the scene with a touch of nostalgia. It had been weeks since he'd seen such a clear sky, one not obscured by the gray monotony of military life.

Today marked the graduation ceremony for the avionics course. Months of relentless effort, of sleepless nights poring over technical manuals, of frustrations and small victories. He had learned to decipher the complex inner workings of flying machines, to tame printed circuits and hydraulic systems like a lion tamer taming his beasts. He had become, almost without realizing it, an expert in his field.

Yet, the excitement that should have filled him on this momentous day was strangely absent. A leaden weight seemed to press down on his chest, a confusing mix of apprehension and impatience. Soon, he would be reunited with his family, his friends, Liliane...

The young woman's face filled his mind, vivid and inescapable. Her laughing eyes, her shy smile, the way she tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear when she was absorbed in thought... The memory of their last kiss, right before his departure, sent a shiver down his spine. A kiss filled with hope and promises, but also a certain apprehension in the face of the unknown.

Had they kept their promises, he and Liliane? Had the distance, the radio silence, the trials of military life extinguished the embers of their nascent love?

He felt like a stranger in his own skin. The uniform he wore with pride sometimes felt like a disguise, a barrier against the outside world, but also a gilded cage. He had changed, undeniably so. The rigors of the military, the iron discipline, the distance from his loved ones had forged him, hardened him, but also isolated him.

The shrill blast of a whistle brought him back to the present. The ceremony was about to begin. He joined his comrades, a diverse group of young men and women united by a shared thirst for adventure, for challenges, for serving their country. There was David, the resident joker, always ready to lighten the mood with his uncanny impersonations of drill instructors. There was Emily, the quiet computer whiz, who could solve a coding problem faster than anyone else. And then there was Marc, the tall, silent one with the melancholic eyes, whose past remained a mystery to them all.

Together, they had endured hardships, shared moments of doubt and joy, forged an unbreakable camaraderie. They were more than just roommates, more than just brothers in arms, they were a family, bound by the fire of shared experience.

The officer in charge of the ceremony, a Lieutenant Colonel with a hawkish gaze and an imposing physique, took the podium. His voice, deep and resonant, filled the hushed silence of the assembly.

"Today, you have done honor to your country, to your uniform, to yourselves. You have shown courage, perseverance, and the ability to surpass yourselves. You have learned to work as a team, to support one another, to never give up, no matter the obstacles."

The Lieutenant Colonel's words reverberated around Julien, but failed to truly reach him. He was there, physically present, but his mind wandered elsewhere, to a small, peaceful village in the heart of Quebec, to a farmhouse surrounded by rolling green fields, to a girl with eyes the color of a summer sky.

The ceremony drew to a close in a symphony of congratulations, firm handshakes, and warm embraces. Julien clasped his comrades tightly, a pang of sorrow echoing in his chest at the thought of their imminent separation. After months of camaraderie, shared experiences, and unwavering support, the return to civilian life, with its unspoken rules and pretenses, suddenly felt unbearably dull.

"So, Lefebvre, we're expected at the mess to celebrate properly! What do you say we drown our diplomas in beer and grilled sausages?"

David, his face beaming with jovial excitement, interrupted Julien's somber reflection.

"Uh... yes, of course," Julien replied, forcing a smile. "I'll be there in a few minutes. Just need to make a quick call."

He peeled himself away from the group, his eyes scanning for a secluded corner away from prying eyes. He needed a moment of solitude, to process the maelstrom of emotions within him, to mentally prepare for the uncertain future that lay ahead.

He spotted an empty phone booth near the infirmary and slipped inside with an urgency that belied his outward composure. His trembling fingers dialed the number he had whispered countless times in the solitude of his bunk.

Each ring resonated in his chest like a hammer blow, amplifying his anxiety. He had no idea what to expect, no guarantee she would answer, not even a prepared script for this long-awaited conversation.

The ringing tone pulsed once, twice, each shrill vibration seeming to pierce his very being. Doubt began to creep in, casting a shadow on his burgeoning hope. Had he miscalculated the time difference? Had her number changed, her life perhaps taken a different course?

Then, just as he was about to give up and hang up, a familiar voice, slightly muffled, hesitant, broke through the static.

"Hello?"

It was her. Her voice, a forgotten melody, transported him back months, to a time when his heart beat solely to the rhythm of her laughter and promises. He closed his eyes, savoring the moment, momentarily speechless.

"Hello? Who's there?" she repeated, a tinge of worry coloring her tone.

"Liliane... it's me, Julien."

Silence. Interminable. Unbearable. Julien held his breath, terrified he had misjudged, shattered the fragile thread that still connected them. Then, in a rush, as if the words had been held captive for too long:

"Julien? Is it really you? But... how?"

Her voice, this time, brimmed with incredulous joy, palpable relief. A torrent of questions tumbled from her lips, each one a testament to the longing, the waiting, the tenacious hope of a love tested by distance and time.

Julien struggled to respond, to find words that could adequately express the inexpressible, to bridge the chasm carved by their protracted silence. He stammered out a disjointed explanation, mentioning the completion of his training, the exceptional leave he had been granted, his overwhelming urge to hear her voice once more.

But his words felt hollow, inadequate, failing to convey the tumult of emotions raging within him. How could he articulate the soul-crushing loneliness of those sterile barracks, the weight of sleepless nights spent replaying memories, the frustration of not being able to share his triumphs and tribulations? How could he make her understand how the military had reshaped him, distanced him physically without diminishing his love for her?

"Liliane, I..." he murmured, his throat constricting with emotion. "I'll call you as soon as I get back to Quebec. There's so much I need to tell you."

"Back to Quebec? But... when?"

The joy that had illuminated Liliane's voice vanished abruptly, replaced by a bewildered apprehension.

"I don't know yet," Julien replied, hesitation creeping into his voice. "In a few days, maybe a week. It all depends on the military administration. It's the procedure..."

"The procedure..." Liliane echoed, her tone suddenly distant. "Yes, of course. The army comes first."

An icy chill washed over Julien. He had made a mistake, a colossal one. Instead of reassuring her, showering her with the depth of his affection, he had retreated behind the impenetrable wall of military protocol, inadvertently erecting a barrier between them.

"Liliane, wait! " he cried out, panic constricting his chest. "That's not what I meant. I..."

But it was too late. The line went dead, leaving him alone with his regrets and the deafening silence of the disconnected call.

He remained slumped in the phone booth, the pungent odor of disinfectant clinging to the receiver like a physical manifestation of his despair. The silence around him felt heavy, suffocating, as if the world had shrunk to encompass only the gaping void of his blunder.

How could he have been so clumsy, so utterly tactless? He had yearned for this moment with a feverish intensity, counting down the days, the hours, the minutes until he could hear her voice again, and he had managed to obliterate it all with a few pitiful sentences.

He cursed his own ineloquence, his ease with the intricate language of machines a cruel irony in this moment of human connection gone awry. Why was it so effortless for him to decipher the complexities of an electronic circuit, yet so utterly impossible to navigate the nuances of the human heart, especially his own?

Slowly, he replaced the receiver, the sharp click of the disconnected line echoing like a death knell in the cramped space. He felt like he had stumbled at the edge of his own life, his history, like a tightrope walker missing his mark and plummeting to the unforgiving ground below.

He emerged from the phone booth, unsteady on his feet, as if intoxicated by an unfamiliar, bitter brew. The autumn sun, which moments ago had bathed the world in warm, comforting hues, now felt glacial, a cruel reflection of his own desolate state.

He wandered aimlessly around the base, crossing paths with familiar faces, friendly greetings, bursts of laughter that reached him as if from a great distance. He felt utterly detached from this world he had embraced with such enthusiasm just months earlier. The army, this surrogate family that had promised adventure and brotherhood, now felt like a gilded cage, a flimsy sanctuary from the complexities of the real world.

The prospect of the celebratory gathering in honor of the new graduates, once a source of eager anticipation, now filled him with a profound sense of dread. He couldn't bear the thought of feigning happiness, of enduring polite congratulations while his heart lay in shattered fragments at his feet.

An impulsive decision, born of a visceral need to escape, to be alone with his pain, took hold. He slipped away from the base during a lapse in the instructors' vigilance and headed towards the woods that bordered the military compound.

The silence of the forest, broken only by the rustle of fallen leaves beneath his boots, was a balm to his tormented soul. He walked for what felt like hours, aimless, allowing his feet to carry him along winding paths.

Rounding a bend, he stumbled upon a clearing bathed in a pool of golden light. In the center, a majestic, ancient oak stood sentinel, its foliage ablaze with the ephemeral beauty of autumn.

Julien approached the tree and sank down at its base, his back resting against the rough bark. He closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath of the cool, damp air, redolent with the scent of decaying leaves and damp earth.

An unexpected tranquility washed over him. The silence of the forest wasn't the heavy, accusing silence of the phone booth. It was a benevolent, soothing silence, as if nature understood his pain and invited him to shed his burden.

Julien sat there for a long time, his gaze fixed on the mesmerizing, yet commonplace spectacle of nature preparing for its winter slumber. The wind, gentler here than on the exposed grounds of the base, sent fallen leaves skittering across the forest floor in a chaotic yet strangely harmonious dance. A curious squirrel paused to observe him for a moment before disappearing into the hollow of a nearby tree, only to reappear a few minutes later, meticulously nibbling on a nut.

This simple scene, so insignificant to most, held a profound resonance for the young man accustomed to the sterile, regimented world of the military base. Here, there were no drill sergeants barking orders, no technical manuals to decipher, no rigid schedules to adhere to. Just the peaceful, indifferent passage of time, oblivious to the turmoil of human hearts.

Yet even this idyllic setting couldn't completely quell the storm raging within him. Liliane's face, her eyes filled with that perplexing mix of joy and reproach, haunted his thoughts like a persistent, melancholic melody. Had he really been that awkward, that

insensitive on the phone? Had she not understood that his desire to see her again outweighed all the military regulations in the world?

A wave of anger, irrational yet powerful, surged through him. Why should he have to justify himself, to adhere to codes that suddenly seemed absurd and unjust? Wasn't he free to choose his own destiny, to pursue his own happiness without answering to anyone?

He rose abruptly, as if propelled by a spring, and began to pace the clearing with long, restless strides, his military boots crunching on the carpet of fallen leaves. He felt suffocated, trapped in a machine whose gears seemed to be grinding him down.

He had to act, and swiftly, before doubt and guilt gnawed at him from the inside out. Retrieving his phone, he punched in Liliane's number, his heart a frantic drum in his chest. This time, fear and awkwardness wouldn't paralyze him. He would tell her everything, unvarnished and true. He would confess his mistakes, his weaknesses, but also the profound depth of his feelings.

The ringing cut through the forest's quietude, each tone seemingly echoing off the trees, amplifying the gravity of the moment. Julien held his breath, praying she would answer, pleading for another chance to rebuild what he'd broken.

Time warped, each second stretching into an eternity of uncertainty. Just as hope began to dwindle, a hesitant voice pierced the silence. Not the voice he yearned for, but that of Liliane's aunt, her tone laced with polite surprise. In a torrent of anxious words, Julien explained his desperate call, his heart threatening to burst from his chest. Her response, though delivered with gentle sympathy, shattered his remaining hope: Liliane wasn't there. She'd gone to help a neighbor with the difficult birth of a calf and wouldn't be back until nightfall.

Despair washed over him, leaving a bitter taste on his tongue. He felt cursed, doomed to chase a happiness forever out of reach. Thanking Liliane's aunt, he ended the call, his phone feeling heavy and useless as he tucked it away, incapable of filling the void that gnawed at him.

Nightfall draped over the forest, shrouding the clearing in a soft, melancholic darkness. Chilled to the bone and drained by his tumultuous emotions, Julien lay on the bed of dead leaves, his backpack serving as a makeshift pillow. The cloudless sky sprawled above him, a vast, indifferent spectacle. Millions of stars twinkled, silent witnesses to his loneliness and turmoil.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying in vain to banish the images that crowded his mind: Liliane's face, blurred and distant like a watercolor smudged by rain; the words of his barracks mates, a confusing blend of crude jokes and aborted confidences; the barked orders of drill instructors, echoes of a world he no longer fully recognized.

One agonizing question pulsed within him, a shadow he couldn't shake: had he made the right choice enlisting? Had he sacrificed his budding love, his personal happiness, on the altar of ambition and duty?

He didn't have the answer. Or rather, he refused to acknowledge it. To admit his error was to confront his own fallibility, his vulnerability to emotions he couldn't control. It was to call into question everything he had built in recent months: the pride of wearing the uniform, the camaraderie of his brothers-in-arms, the satisfaction of a job well done.

Slowly, lulled by the rustling of the wind through the branches and the hypnotic dance of the stars, he drifted into a restless sleep. Dreams, muddled and fleeting, haunted him. He dreamt of Liliane, but her back was turned, her figure receding with each step he took towards her. He dreamt of the military base, transformed into a hostile labyrinth where he wandered endlessly, unable to find his way. He dreamt of his childhood, of his grandparents' farm, the smell of freshly cut hay, and the sweetness of summer evenings spent watching fireflies flicker in the falling darkness.

He woke to the biting chill of dawn, the unpleasant sensation of a stone settling in his stomach. The forest was slowly coming alive, the first rays of sunlight piercing through the branches, caressing his gaunt face. He felt filthy, exhausted, utterly depleted.

He trudged back towards the base, his steps automatic, like a robot on the verge of shutting down. As he approached the perimeter of the camp, an unusual flurry of activity on the landing strip startled him. Men in coveralls swarmed around a Chinook transport helicopter, its imposing silhouette stark against the still-pale horizon.

A strange fascination drew him towards the massive aircraft, a symbol of power and technology. He knew the Chinook by reputation, a titan of the sky capable of transporting troops and equipment into the heart of the most hostile combat zones. Seeing this war machine grounded, surrounded by mechanics bustling like ants around fallen prey, sparked his curiosity, tinged with a hint of apprehension.

Discreetly approaching a group of mechanics engaged in an animated discussion, he strained to hear, hoping to understand the cause of this unusual commotion.

"—...can't get it off the ground for the joint exercise with Trenton base. Lieutenant Dumais is fuming, he'll have our hides if we don't find a solution fast!"

A stocky man with a bushy mustache, clearly the crew chief, pounded on the helicopter's fuselage with a frustrated fist.

"—What's wrong with the blasted thing now?" inquired a young mechanic, his face dotted with freckles, apparently unfazed by Lieutenant Dumais's authority. "We practically rebuilt it last week!"

"—It's the hydraulic system acting up," replied another mechanic, his face grim. "We've checked everything, bled the lines, replaced faulty seals, but nothing seems to work. The pressure keeps dropping, impossible to maintain stable rotor speed."

Julien listened intently, his analytical mind kicking into gear despite his fatigue and inner turmoil. Hydraulic systems were his domain. He had spent countless hours poring over complex schematics, memorizing maintenance procedures, and training on sophisticated simulators.

A crazy idea took root in his mind, an idea that just hours ago would have seemed inconceivable, unthinkable even. What if he offered his help? What if he attempted to solve this technical problem that seemed to be baffling these seasoned mechanics?

He hesitated, weighing the risks. Interfering in such a sensitive operation without authorization could land him in serious trouble. But an irresistible force urged him to act, to prove his worth, to feel useful, if only for a moment, to forget the weight of his own demons.

Summoning his courage, he approached the crew chief, who was still ranting about the Chinook's temperament.

"Excuse me, Sergeant," he ventured, his voice timid but determined. "I overheard you're having trouble with the hydraulic system. I'm an avionics technician, fresh out of training, and I'd like to offer my assistance."

The sergeant, momentarily halting his tirade against the obstinate machine, turned sharply, his flushed face a mixture of surprise and annoyance. He looked Julien up and down, his scrutinizing gaze lingering on his crisp uniform and youthful face.

"What's this?" he growled, his tone gruff. "We don't need green recruits here, son. This is a job for specialists, not apprentice wizards!"

"I understand, Sergeant," Julien replied, striving to remain calm in the face of the man's hostility. "But I assure you, I'm fully qualified to address this type of malfunction. I graduated top of my class in hydraulics and..."

"And what?" the sergeant interrupted, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Have you ever gotten your hands dirty, pretty boy? Smelled that hot oil and jet fuel? Pulled an all-nighter to get a bird back in the fight by daybreak?"

The sergeant stepped closer to Julien, towering over him.

"The army ain't a playground, son. We don't play war here, we wage it. So go play hero somewhere else and let us do our jobs!"

Julien felt a surge of anger rising within him, but he fought it back down. He couldn't afford to lose his cool, not now. He had to prove he could handle the pressure, that he was up to the task at hand.

"Sergeant," he said, his voice level despite the emotions churning inside, "with all due respect, I'm not here to play hero. I'm here to help. I've spent months studying hydraulic systems; I know this Chinook like the back of my hand. Give me a chance, you won't regret it."

The Sergeant, visibly taken aback by the young technician's composure, hesitated for a moment. He scrutinized Julien again, his gaze sharp, as if trying to discern his true motives. A flicker of a smile touched the Sergeant's weathered face.

"You've got guts, rookie, I'll give you that," he conceded. "But guts don't always get the job done. You need skill, experience. That, my friend, you can't learn from a book."

He turned towards the group of mechanics, who were observing the exchange with unconcealed amusement.

"Alright, gentlemen, we've got a volunteer! Who's willing to show him how we fix a real helicopter?"

A wave of laughter greeted his question. The mechanics, enjoying the spectacle, jostled each other, exchanging smirks. Only one, a young man with sharp blue eyes and a lean face, stepped forward, a surprisingly encouraging smile on his face.

"Come on, rookie," he said, clapping Julien on the shoulder with unexpected camaraderie. "We'll show you how things work in the real world. But be warned, you mess this up, you're eating the Chinook's blueprints for breakfast."

The pungent odor of hydraulic fluid and kerosene filled the air, mingling with sweat and the palpable tension that hung heavy beneath the helicopter's massive belly. The young mechanic, a Corporal Tremblay if Julien remembered the hasty introduction correctly, proved to be a demanding yet supportive mentor. He bombarded Julien with pointed questions, testing his theoretical knowledge with the rigor of an academy instructor, all the while introducing him to the practicalities of field mechanics, a hint of amusement flickering in his eyes at the young recruit's enthusiasm.

And enthusiasm Julien had in spades. Forgetting his fatigue, the biting cold that numbed his fingers despite his regulation gloves, and even the weight of his romantic woes, he threw himself into the task of diagnosing the aircraft's ailment. Each valve, each line, each sensor became a piece of an intricate puzzle he was determined to solve.

Guided by Tremblay's precise instructions, Julien moved with surprising agility through the bowels of the machine, poring over technical diagrams, comparing the values displayed on the measuring instruments with those in the maintenance manual, offering hypotheses that were sometimes met with an approving nod from the corporal, sometimes with a skeptical grunt.

Hours melted away, punctuated by the clinking of tools, the muffled curses of the mechanics, and the whistling wind that whipped under the Chinook's fuselage. Julien, engrossed in his task, lost all track of time. He was in his element, oblivious to all else, focused solely on solving this technical challenge that had taken on the air of a sacred mission.

After what felt like an eternity, a spark of excitement lit up Tremblay's face.

"I think we've got it, the little bugger!" he exclaimed, pointing to a minuscule sensor, almost invisible to the naked eye, nestled in a tangle of cables and lines. "If I'm not mistaken, this little guy has been messing with us for a while now. Sending erroneous information to the hydraulic computer, which explains the pressure fluctuations."

Julien, following the corporal's finger, peered at the offending sensor. Sure enough, a hairline crack ran across its metallic surface, almost imperceptible. He instantly understood the source of the malfunction, a wave of triumph mixed with relief washing over him.

"You're right, Corporal!" he confirmed, his voice trembling with excitement. "The sensor is faulty, it needs to be replaced."

Tremblay, a satisfied grin spreading across his face, clapped Julien on the shoulder.

"Not bad, rookie! Not bad at all! We can finally get this hunk of metal off the ground and grab a hot cup of coffee. Lieutenant Dumais can yell at someone else for a change!"

Replacing the faulty sensor was child's play for Julien and Tremblay. Within minutes, the operation was completed with an efficiency that earned grudging admiration from the other mechanics, previously skeptical of the rookie's abilities.

As the refurbished Chinook finally rose into the air with a deafening roar, Julien felt a surge of pride, mixed with a strange gratitude towards this steel giant that had allowed him, for a brief moment, to forget his inner turmoil.

Dawn was breaking, painting the sky with a soft orange glow that contrasted sharply with the paleness of Julien's face. He was exhausted, covered in grease and sweat, but happy. He had proven his worth, earned the respect of his peers.

Yet, as he made his way back to the barracks, a feeling of incompleteness lingered. He had managed to fix a machine, but could he fix his life, mend the pieces of his broken heart?

The road ahead would be long, he knew. But for the first time in weeks, he felt ready to face it.

## Chapter 6: Homecomings and Disillusions

The familiar rumble of the bus engine faded into an almost deafening silence as Julien stepped off onto the curb. The crisp morning air, heavy with the scent of pine needles and damp earth, hit him full force, chasing away the last vestiges of his restless sleep. He took a deep breath, as if to fill his lungs with this newfound freedom. Around him, his fellow recruits stretched, laughed, and chatted with a familiarity that seemed almost surreal to him. For months, their lives had been reduced to the spartan discipline of the military base, to intense training and grueling physical trials. And now, here they were, back to civilian life, as if nothing had changed.

Julien, on the other hand, felt like a stranger returning home after a long absence. The world he had left behind only months ago seemed both familiar and strangely distant. Colors seemed brighter, sounds sharper, smells more intense. He felt like he was observing the scene through an invisible veil, unable to fully integrate into this setting that should have been so familiar.

He glanced down at his civilian clothes, faded jeans and a too-large t-shirt that he had donned with a certain apprehension that morning. His fleeting reflection in the bus window made him flinch. His face, thinned by intense physical exertion and marked by a tan that the summer sun could never have given him, looked hard, almost hostile. His hair, once long and unruly, was now cropped close to his scalp, lending him a severe air that belied the gentleness of his blue eyes.

"Julien? Is that really you?"

A hesitant voice pulled him from his thoughts. He turned and saw his father, Arthur, making his way through the crowd of families who had come to welcome the young recruits. A hesitant smile lit up his weathered face, betraying a joy tinged with apprehension.

"Yes, Dad, it's me," Julien replied, his voice thick with emotion.

He walked towards his father, arms limp, unsure of the reaction he would elicit. He had changed so much, physically and mentally, that the fear of rejection crept in like a menacing shadow.

But Julien's fears were swept away as his father pulled him into an unexpectedly tight embrace.

"My boy," he murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "Look how you've grown! You've become a man."

Julien closed his eyes, surrendering to the comforting warmth of his father's embrace. For the first time in weeks, he felt safe, protected from the outside world and his own demons.

The embrace lingered, charged with an unspoken emotion that words would have betrayed. Then, as if reluctantly, Arthur released his hold and stepped back, his hands resting on his son's shoulders, his face beaming with pride.

"Come on, the others are waiting for you," he said, gesturing towards a small group a few feet away.

Julien followed his father's gaze and felt his stomach clench. His mother, Anabelle, stood at the forefront, arms crossed over her chest, her face etched with worry. Beside her, his two younger brothers, Michel and Adrian, jumped up and down with impatience, their eyes bright with curiosity. And then, a little further back, stood Liliane.

Julien's heart leaped in his chest. She was there, real, even more beautiful than in his memories. Her long blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders like a sheaf of ripe wheat, contrasting with the azure blue of her eyes, which shone with a strange light, a mixture of joy and apprehension.

For a moment, Julien hesitated, destabilized by the torrent of conflicting emotions that washed over him. He had yearned to see her again, to hold her close, to breathe in her delicate wildflower scent. Yet, a sudden and unfamiliar timidity paralyzed him. How should he greet her? What could he possibly say after months of silence? Was he still the same boy she had known? Was she still the girl who had haunted his dreams?

Summoning his courage, he walked towards the family group, each step bringing him closer to Liliane, closer to the unknown. He noticed her mother step forward to meet him, arms outstretched, her face illuminated by a smile that couldn't quite conceal the anxiety etched beneath.

"Julien, my darling!" she exclaimed, embracing him with a force that surprised him. "I've missed you so much!"

Julien let himself be enveloped by her, inhaling the familiar scent of lavender perfume, the same fragrance that had permeated the linens of his childhood bedroom. He closed his eyes, savoring this moment of maternal comfort, trying to block out the weight of the gazes upon him.

"Mom, am I squeezing you too tightly?" he asked, his voice muffled.

Anabelle drew back slightly, her hands resting on his cheeks, her expression grave.

"No, not at all, my dear. It's just that... you've changed so much."

A strained smile touched Julien's lips. He knew he had changed. The army had transformed him, both physically and mentally. But to what extent? Was it a positive change or a negative one? It was a question that had haunted him for weeks.

"For the better, I hope," he offered, his voice uncertain.

"Yes, of course, for the better," Anabelle confirmed, but her smile seemed forced. "You look stronger, more... mature."

An awkward silence descended upon them, as if Anabelle's words, instead of reassuring Julien, had only amplified his unease.

He then felt two small hands patting his legs. He looked down to see his younger brothers, Michel and Adrian, gazing up at him with a mixture of admiration and curiosity.

"Julien, is it true you learned to fight with knives?" asked Michel, his eyes wide with excitement.

"And shoot guns?" added Adrian.

Julien couldn't help but smile. His brothers' innocent enthusiasm at seeing him transformed into a seasoned soldier touched him.

"Easy now, boys," Arthur interjected, casting them a reproving glance. "Let your brother get settled. He'll have plenty of time to tell you about his adventures later."

Then, turning to Julien, he added, "Come on, go say hello to Liliane. She's dying to see you."

Julien's heart leaped in his chest. He had almost forgotten Liliane's presence, so absorbed had he been in his reunion with his family. He looked up and met her gaze.

A shy smile graced Liliane's face, but Julien detected a flicker of uncertainty in her blue eyes. She seemed both pleased and apprehensive, like strangers meeting for the first time. An invisible distance seemed to separate them, a chasm carved by the months of silence and the miles that had stretched between them.

"Hi, Liliane," Julien said, his voice betraying a nervousness he tried to mask.

"Hi, Julien," she replied, her voice as soft and melodious as he remembered.

He noticed her tugging at her leather-gloved hands, as if trying to conceal a nervousness she couldn't quite suppress. Their eyes met briefly, then darted away, unable to sustain the intensity of this unexpected reunion.

A heavy silence fell upon them, amplified by the murmuring of the crowd that surrounded them. Julien desperately searched for a topic of conversation, a magic phrase that would break the ice and return them to the easy camaraderie they had shared before his departure. But the words remained trapped in his throat, imprisoned by a sudden shyness that made him feel like a stranger to himself.

"So..." he began awkwardly, "How are you?"

The banality of his question made him inwardly cringe. Was that truly the best he could offer after all these months?

Liliane shrugged, a fragile smile flickering across her face.

"I'm good," she replied evasively. "And you, how was your... training?"

The word "training" sounded strangely artificial coming from her lips, as if she struggled to comprehend the reality of what he had experienced. And how could he blame her? How could he explain the rigor of the training, the brutal camaraderie of the barracks, the fear that gripped your insides during live-fire exercises? How could he make her understand that the carefree young man she had known was gone, replaced by a soldier in the making, forever marked by his military experience?

"It was good," he settled on saying, avoiding her gaze. "It was... intense."

Another silence descended, heavier than the last. Julien felt the weight of his mother's inquisitive gaze, the restrained impatience of his brothers, the palpable awkwardness emanating from his father. He felt like a failing actor on the stage of a play he no longer understood, unable to deliver his lines, to play his part.

"Well, I think it's time we headed back," Arthur interjected, breaking the general discomfort. "We've prepared a feast to celebrate your return, Julien. You must be starving!"

The prospect of a family meal, with all the attention and questions that awaited him, did not fill Julien with enthusiasm. He would have preferred to stay alone with Liliane, even for a few minutes, to try and break the ice, to pick up the threads of their interrupted story. But he knew that this was neither the time nor the place.

"Yes, that's a good idea," he replied neutrally.

He cast one last glance at Liliane, hoping for a sign, a word, that would prove she felt the same awkwardness, the same unfulfilled desire to reconnect. But she had turned away, preferring to discuss the merits of a new video game with Michel.

Julien's heart sank. Had he been wrong to believe she would wait for him? Had she already moved on? Had the distance, the silence, eroded their feelings?

The car ride was torture for Julien. Wedged between Michel, who was chattering incessantly about his exploits in a violent video game Julien knew nothing about, and Adrian, who peppered him with endless questions about life on the army base, he felt more isolated than ever. He stole furtive glances at Liliane, seated in the front with her parents, but she seemed absorbed in the conversation, her delicate profile outlined against the passing scenery.

Once home, the excitement of the reunion continued unabated. His Aunt Claire and Uncle Marc, accompanied by their three boisterous daughters, arrived unexpectedly, transforming the lunch into a joyful chaos. Julien, bombarded with questions, comments, and pats on the back, felt increasingly alienated from this cheerful gathering. He sought refuge in Liliane's gaze, hoping to find some understanding there, but she seemed distant, caught up in a lively conversation with her cousins.

The afternoon stretched on in an interminable succession of children's games, animated discussions, and forced laughter. Julien, exhausted by this emotional tumult, felt unable to pretend any longer. He slipped away to the garden, seeking a moment of peace amidst the chaos.

Seated on a stone bench, beneath the welcoming shade of an old oak tree, he let his gaze wander over the familiar landscape of his childhood. His mother's vegetable garden, where bright red tomatoes nestled beside plump squash, the wooden swing his father had built for him and his brothers, the little stream where he had spent hours fishing for trout with Liliane... So many happy memories came flooding back, reminding him of a happiness lost.

The sound of light footsteps on the grass roused him from his thoughts. He looked up to see Liliane approaching, a wicker basket filled with wild strawberries in her hand. She stopped before him, hesitant, a shy smile illuminating her face.

"May I?" she asked, gesturing to the empty space beside him on the bench.

"Of course," replied Julien, his heart beating faster than he would have thought possible.

Liliane sat down beside him, a little stiffly, and placed the basket of strawberries on her lap. An awkward silence settled between them, echoing the discomfort of their earlier reunion.

"So... are those strawberries for your mother's pie?" Julien ventured, desperate for something to say.

"No, these are for us," replied Liliane, handing him a plump, juicy strawberry. "I thought we could eat them here, in peace."

Julien took the strawberry she offered and raised it to his lips. The sweet, tart taste of the fruit exploded on his tongue, awakening memories of carefree summers spent picking wild strawberries with Liliane.

"Thank you," he murmured, unable to meet her gaze.

"Julien," Liliane began, her voice hesitant, "I wanted to say... I know I wasn't very... welcoming, earlier. It's just that... I was surprised, that's all."

"Surprised?" repeated Julien, confused.

"Yes, surprised to see you like this," explained Liliane, gesturing towards him. "You've changed so much..."

"It's the army, I suppose," sighed Julien. "It changes you, whether you want it to or not."

"Yes, that's the feeling I get," murmured Liliane, her gaze drifting into the distance.

A new silence fell over them, heavier and more significant than the ones before. Julien sensed that Liliane wanted to tell him something important, but the words seemed to escape her.

The aroma of ripe strawberries hung in the air, mingling with the scent of freshly cut grass and damp earth. Julien, his eyes fixed on Liliane's restless hands, felt his unease grow. Each silence, each hesitation, each measured word fed the doubt taking root within him.

Summoning his courage, he decided to break the silence.

"Liliane, what's wrong? You seem so... different."

The young woman looked up, startled by the gravity in his voice. Her blue eyes, usually so frank and sparkling, seemed veiled with an indefinable sadness.

"Different? What do you mean?"

"I don't know, it's difficult to explain... You're here, but I feel like you're somewhere else, as if... as if you didn't really want to be here, with me."

A long sigh escaped Liliane's lips. She placed the basket of strawberries on the bench between them, as if to establish a distance.

"It's not that, Julien. It's just that... a lot has changed while you've been away."

"Changed? What do you mean?"

Liliane stood up and began to walk along the gravel path that meandered through the garden. She walked with slow steps, her head down, as if carrying an invisible weight on her shoulders. Julien followed her with his gaze, worried. The setting sun bathed her slender silhouette in a golden aura, accentuating the fragility of her features.

"Everything has changed, Julien," she repeated in a voice barely audible. "The farm, my plans, me..."

She stopped in front of a bed of multicolored flowers, her fingertips caressing the delicate petals of a red rose.

"Do you remember our conversations before you left? About my dream of having my own farm, of living in rhythm with nature, far from all the noise, all the agitation?"

"Yes, of course I remember," replied Julien, perplexed. "That dream is what makes you so... unique, so... you."

Liliane turned to him, a melancholic smile illuminating her face.

"That dream, Julien, I made it happen. While you were gone, I worked tirelessly to make it a reality. I learned, I grew, I... changed."

The tone of her voice, tinged with a pride mingled with sadness, gave rise to a growing unease in Julien. He sensed that Liliane was hiding something from him, that her words, however sincere, only revealed part of the truth.

"But what does that have to do with us?" he asked, his voice hoarse with worry. "Is it... is it that you don't love me anymore?"

The question, brutal, hung in the evening air like a confession of weakness, causing Liliane to recoil. She shook her head, her eyes filled with a pain that tore at Julien's heart.

"No, it's not that... Well, not exactly..."

She hesitated a moment, as if searching for the right words, the ones that could express the unspeakable, soothe the storm brewing in Julien's soul.

"It's just that... I met someone."

His breath catching in his throat, Julien drew back as if those few words, uttered in a near-inaudible murmur, had struck him in the chest. An icy coldness spread through his veins, freezing the blood that had been pounding in his temples just seconds before. Around him, the verdant garden, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, suddenly lost its color, transforming into a blurred, unreal backdrop.

"You... you met someone?" he repeated in a hollow voice, hoping the echo of his own words would erase the meaning of those spoken by Liliane.

The young woman lowered her eyes, unable to meet Julien's bewildered gaze. She played nervously with a lock of her blond hair, a tic that Julien had never known her to have and which betrayed her discomfort. A long silence fell between them, heavy with the weight of unspoken words, the premonition of an imminent catastrophe.

"Yes," she finally replied, her voice barely louder than a breath. "Well... it's complicated."

"Complicated?" choked out Julien, unable to mask the bitterness that colored his words. "And that's supposed to reassure me?"

Liliane raised her head, her blue eyes, usually so soft and laughing, now shone with a strange glint, a mixture of distress and a flicker of defiance.

"That's not what I meant, Julien," she sighed. "It's not easy for me either, you know?"

"Oh really? And what, then, is easy in this whole situation?" Julien retorted, unable to contain the anger rising within him. "You spend months without giving me any news, you leave me to stew in silence and uncertainty, and now you drop this on me as if it were nothing?"

"That's not how it happened!" exclaimed Liliane, hurt by Julien's sharp tone. "I... I tried to write to you, to call you, but..."

"But what?" Julien interrupted, his face contorted with anger. "Were you forbidden from communicating with the outside world? Did you lose my address by any chance?"

"No, of course not!" Liliane retorted, exasperated by Julien's insistence. "It's just that... every time I wanted to write to you, the words failed me. How could I tell you about my life here, about the farm, about... about him, when you were over there, facing I don't know what..."

"Reality, Liliane," interrupted Julien, his voice hoarse with suppressed pain. "I wasn't on vacation, you know? I was learning to be a soldier, with all that entails: discipline, danger, distance... I thought you understood that, that you were waiting for me..."

"I thought I was waiting for you too, Julien," murmured Liliane, her voice broken with emotion. "But the days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, and the void you left... it ended up being filled by something else, by someone else..."

She stopped, unable to go on. Tears welled up in her eyes, threatening to spill over at any moment. Julien, his heart clenching in his chest, felt the anger that had been consuming him for the past few moments evaporate, leaving in its place a dull ache, deeper and more insidious. He had dreamed of this reunion so much, imagined a thousand and one ways to hold her in his arms, to tell her how much he had missed her. And now, facing her, he felt more distant than ever, separated by a gulf of misunderstanding and regret.

"Who is he?" he finally asked, his voice cracking with emotion.

The question, murmured rather than articulated, betrayed a vulnerability Julien wanted to conceal. He knew he had no right to ask it, that she owed him no explanation. But he couldn't help but hope, against all odds, that her answer would soothe the wound that was opening within him, gaping and raw.

Liliane hesitated for a long time, torn between her desire to protect this new love and the need to be honest with Julien, with herself. She knew that every word uttered would only aggravate his pain, but silence now seemed impossible, a betrayal of the trust he had always given her.

"His name is Thomas," she finally began, her voice barely audible.

She paused, searching for the right words to describe this man who had managed to creep into her life, to fill the void left by Julien's absence, without ever trying to truly replace him.

"Thomas works at the village veterinary clinic," she continued, as if the mere act of saying his name out loud gave him substance. "He's the one who helped me care for a sick lamb last spring. We hit it off right away, we had so much to talk about..."

Her voice trailed off into a confused murmur, as if she was still hesitant to reveal the details of this new relationship, to expose it to Julien's silent judgment.

"He's passionate about his work, he has an incredible gift with animals," she resumed after a short silence. "And he's kind, attentive, understanding... He listened to me talk about you, about the farm, about my dreams, without ever judging me, without ever making me feel guilty..."

Every word uttered by Liliane pierced Julien's already wounded heart like a dagger. Before his very eyes, she painted the portrait of an ideal rival, a man seemingly possessing all the qualities he lacked: presence, stability, and the ability to understand and share Liliane's deepest aspirations.

"There's no need to justify yourself, Liliane," he interrupted, his voice weary, laced with a bitterness he didn't attempt to conceal. "I'm not one to judge."

He stood abruptly, as if to escape the intensity of her gaze, the silent confession of his own failure. A profound sense of injustice washed over him, mingled with a dull ache that seemed to seep into his very marrow. How could he have been naive enough to believe Liliane would wait for him, frozen in time, while he learned to be a soldier in a hostile and unfamiliar world?

"I think it's time for me to go," he said, turning on his heel.

"Julien, wait!" Liliane cried out, her voice vibrant with a newfound emotion.

He stopped short, his body tense, torn between the urge to flee and the overwhelming desire to hear what she had to say.

"I'm so sorry, Julien," she murmured, approaching him, her face bathed in tears. "I didn't want to hurt you. I tried... I really tried to... to stay true to you, but..."

Her voice broke in a sob. She raised her eyes to Julien, pleading for his understanding, his forgiveness.

"But you met someone," he finished for her, his voice hoarse with suppressed pain. "I understand, Liliane. You don't have to apologize."

A heavy silence fell between them, pregnant with unspoken words, regrets, and an infinite sadness. The sun, having disappeared below the horizon, left the garden bathed in a melancholic twilight, mirroring the bruised state of Julien's heart.

"I should probably go," he repeated, more to himself than to Liliane. "My leave ends tomorrow morning."

He turned and started down the gravel path, each step taking him closer to the familiar house, closer to the reality he dreaded facing.

"Julien!"

Liliane's voice, stronger this time, more determined, made him turn back one last time. She stood motionless in the middle of the garden, her silhouette a fragile shadow in the fading light.

"I... I just wanted to say... that I'll never forget what we had. Our walks in the woods, our swims in the creek, our dreams for the future... All of it was real, Julien. And no one, do you hear me, no one will ever take that away from me."

Her words, charged with restrained emotion, echoed in the evening silence like a promise and a farewell. Julien looked at her for a long moment, etching every detail of her face into his memory, as if to create one last image, one last refuge against oblivion. Then, without a word, he turned and disappeared into the night, leaving Liliane alone with her tears and regrets.

The next morning, Julien left his family home before sunrise. He couldn't bear the thought of facing his parents' questioning eyes, his brothers' awkward inquiries. He scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, leaving it in plain sight on the kitchen table, next to his empty plate.

"Gone to rejoin my comrades. Don't worry about me. I love you."

He hadn't lied. He needed to be with his comrades, immersed in the harsh, familiar world of the barracks, where emotions were rarely expressed, where pain was hidden behind discipline and camaraderie. He needed to lose himself in the deafening roar of helicopter engines, in the acrid smell of kerosene and machine grease, to forget the delicate scent of wild strawberries and the bitter taste of lost love.

Sitting on the bus that was taking him back to the military base, Julien closed his eyes and let the miles roll by beneath his closed eyelids. He didn't look back, refusing to turn towards that painful past that no longer belonged to him. He stared straight ahead, towards an uncertain future, where love had no place, where only mission, duty, sacrifice mattered. A soldier's future, cold and unforgiving.

## Chapter 7: A Choice to Make

The bus devoured the miles, swallowing familiar landscapes and depositing them as faded memories in Julien's mind. Each bend in the road brought him closer to the military base, to that sterile world where emotions were stored away like ill-fitting uniforms. The euphoria of homecoming, the balm he had imagined soothing his raw wounds, had evaporated as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a dull, throbbing ache.

The familiar presence of his brothers, once a source of laughter and endless banter, had become an indecipherable enigma. Their teenage preoccupations, their animated conversations about video games with barbaric names, their incessant squabbles over insignificant matters, all seemed to belong to a bygone world, a world in which he no longer had a place. He watched them move around him like strange and fascinating creatures, unable to penetrate the veil of their thoughts, to rediscover that instinctive complicity that had once united them.

Family meals, once moments of sharing and laughter, had become painful exercises in silent diplomacy. He felt his mother's anxious gaze, that strong and caring woman who was trying, however futilely, to pick up the pieces of a shattered vase. His father, meanwhile, seemed embarrassed, ill at ease, as if afraid to shatter a fragile equilibrium with a misplaced word. Their questions, cautious, hesitant, came up against the wall of indifference he had erected around himself. How could he explain the chasm that now separated him from them, the invisible barrier that the military experience had erected between their two worlds?

At night, huddled in his old childhood bed, he relived every moment of his reunion with Liliane, dissecting every word, every look, every silence. He clung to her words like a castaway to a piece of driftwood, desperately searching for a sign, a hope, a glimmer of love in that ocean of doubt. But the truth struck him with full force, as icy as a bucket of water in the dead of winter: Liliane had changed, evolved, turned the page on a chapter in her life that he had not been allowed to witness. She had found comfort, companionship, perhaps even love, with another. A man who was present, available, able to share her dreams and aspirations. A man who did not carry the weight of silence and distance, the burden of unspeakable secrets and painful memories.

The image of Liliane, radiant and in love, haunted him day and night, torturing him more than any physical exercise, more than any deprivation. He felt betrayed, abandoned, forgotten. Forgotten like an old yellowed photograph at the bottom of a drawer, like a letter never sent, like a dream that vanished with the first rays of dawn.

And as doubt gnawed at him, as the feeling of injustice burned him from within, a nagging question imposed itself, as tenacious as a weed: had he been right to sacrifice his love for Liliane on the altar of his military ambitions? Had he made the right choice in choosing uniform and discipline over apron and freedom?

The weight of his sacrifice, hitherto borne with pride, now seemed unbearable. He felt as if he had lost everything: his love, his bearings, his identity. He was no longer the carefree, lovestruck Julien, the young man full of dreams and hope. But neither was he a seasoned soldier, hardened by battles and trials. He was lost, tossed between two worlds, two identities, two destinies.

One evening, as he wandered aimlessly through the streets of his hometown, he caught sight of his reflection in a shop window. The stranger staring back at him had a drawn face, distant eyes, shoulders stooped under an invisible weight. That stranger was him. Julien, the soldier without a war, the lover without love, the hero of his own tragedy.

The silence emanating from Liliane was more deafening than the roar of helicopter engines. Julien's scarce attempts to coax her into discussing her absence, to penetrate the shell of politeness she had erected around herself, were met with a wall of evasive smiles and laconic replies.

"Everything is fine, Julien, really. It's kind of you to worry," she repeated tirelessly, a weary smile gracing her lips, like one reassuring a child frightened by a shadow in the closet.

But behind this mask of normalcy, Julien detected a glimmer of avoidance, a palpable tension that chilled him more surely than the icy breath of the Canadian winter. Their conversations, once fluid and passionate, now resembled dialogues of the deaf, punctuated by awkward silences and furtive glances.

One evening, driven by an intuition as tenacious as a starving wolf, Julien decided to go to the place that best symbolized their burgeoning love: the old wooden bridge that spanned the stream, a silent witness to their first kisses, their promises whispered beneath the stars.

The sun was slowly declining on the horizon, setting the sky ablaze with hues of orange and violet. The air was soft, laden with the damp scent of wet earth and the melodious song of nocturnal birds. Julien leaned against the weathered railing, his heart pounding in his chest. He felt as if he were engaged in a duel with an invisible adversary, a battle whose outcome would determine his future.

The familiar squeak of a bicycle brought him out of his thoughts. Liliane. She approached slowly, a troubled air about her, her ash-blond hair caressed by the evening breeze. She stopped in front of him, her eyes fixed on the rushing current of the stream, as if searching for the right words at the bottom of the tumultuous water.

"Julien, what are you doing here?" she asked, leaning her bicycle against the railing. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Her voice was neutral, devoid of the spontaneous joy that once characterized it. Julien felt an icy knot forming in his stomach, a grim premonition that shook him to his core.

"I wanted to see you, Liliane," he replied, trying to maintain an even tone. "I needed to talk to you."

He hesitated for a moment, unsure how to approach the subject that was gnawing at him, how to articulate aloud the fears that haunted him.

"Something's wrong, Julien," she interrupted, her gaze suddenly insistent. "I can feel it. You can tell me, you know. We tell each other everything, you and I. At least... we used to."

Her last words hung in the evening air, heavy with innuendo, barely veiled reproach. Julien took a deep breath and decided to take the plunge, to break once and for all the wall of unspoken words that had risen between them.

"It's just that... I feel like you're hiding something from me, Liliane," he said hoarsely. "Since I've been back, you've been... different. Distant. As if you're afraid of something."

She did not answer immediately, merely staring at him with her large green eyes, now devoid of their playful sparkle. The silence grew heavier, punctuated only by the sound of the wind in the leaves and the lapping of the water against the bridge's pillars.

"You're right, Julien," she finally admitted in a barely audible voice. "There are... there are things I haven't told you. Things that have changed while you were away."

A glacial shiver ran down Julien's spine, as if Liliane's words had pierced the armor he had striven to forge around his heart. He guessed the truth, felt it lurking behind every word uttered with disconcerting caution, and yet, a glimmer of hope, however tenuous, persisted in flickering within the depths of his being.

"Things... like what, Liliane?" he murmured, his raspy voice betraying the anguish that gripped him.

She looked away, fixing her gaze on the silver ribbon of the stream that snaked at their feet as if it held the answers to his unspoken questions. The sun, now dying, cast the foliage in a pale light, throwing long, unsettling shadows on the path that bordered the bank.

"Thomas is working at the village veterinary clinic," she continued, as if the mere act of saying his name out loud gave him substance.

The next morning, Julien woke up with a feeling of emotional hangover. Liliane's words still echoed in his mind, each syllable etched in acid in his memory. He felt as if he had crossed a minefield, each step bringing him closer to the final explosion.

He joined his family for breakfast, dragging his feet like a death row inmate going to the scaffold. His father, absorbed in reading the local newspaper, did not seem to notice his despondency. His mother, however, scrutinized him with a worried look, trying to decipher the despair etched on his face.

"You don't seem yourself, Julien," she said, handing him a steaming cup of coffee. "Is something bothering you?"

"No, Mom, everything's fine," he replied in a monotone voice, avoiding her gaze. "I'm just having trouble getting over the jet lag, that's all."

The lie burned his lips, but he swallowed it without a flinch, preferring the illusory tranquility of dissimulation to the torment of an explanation he did not feel strong enough to face.

The following days passed in a blur of boredom and uncertainty. Julien wandered around the family home like a ghost, haunted by memories of lost happiness and the menacing shadow of an uncertain future. He tried to cling to scraps of normalcy, participating in banal conversations, performing daily tasks with automatic diligence.

Yet, behind this façade of normality, an inner struggle raged. On the one hand, the familiar attraction of military life, the promise of reassuring order, a clear mission, unwavering camaraderie. On the other, the nagging desire for a simple, authentic life,

punctuated by the seasons and the work of the land, alongside Liliane. Two paths, two destinies, two versions of himself clashed in a merciless struggle.

One afternoon, while helping his father repair a rickety fence at the bottom of the garden, Julien felt the irrepressible need to break the silence, to confide his torments to someone, even if it was only a listening ear.

"Dad," he began hesitantly, "have you ever felt like you made the wrong choice? Like you took a wrong turn somewhere?"

His father stopped working, laid his hammer on the yellowed grass and fixed his gaze on his son's. His blue eyes, usually sparkling with communicative joy, suddenly seemed dull, veiled with an unusual melancholy.

"Choice, Julien, is the burden of man," he replied after a long silence. "We spend our lives making choices, big or small, and living with the consequences of those choices. Sometimes we are lucky enough to be able to go back, to rectify the situation. But most of the time, we have to learn to live with our mistakes, to make do."

He paused, as if searching for the right words to express a complex thought.

"What matters, Julien, is not so much making the right choice, but owning the choices we make. To live them fully, without regrets, without bitterness. That's true freedom, you know. The freedom to make mistakes, to fall, to get back up and keep moving forward."

His words, simple but charged with profound wisdom, resonated within Julien like a revelation. He realized that his father, this solid and pragmatic man, had also known doubt, uncertainty, the fear of failure.

One evening, a letter arrived, discreetly slipped into the mailbox, as if not to disturb the fragile balance of the household. A white envelope, with no return address, bearing only Julien's first name written in a fine, familiar handwriting. His heart leaped in his chest, a wave of hope mingled with apprehension washed over him. He instantly recognized Liliane's handwriting.

Excusing himself with an "I'm going to get a glass of water," he discreetly slipped into his room, the missive clutched in his clammy hand. The mere sight of his name, traced with that elegance he knew so well, awakened within him a whirlwind of contradictory emotions.

Closing the door behind him, as if to protect himself from a suddenly hostile outside world, he collapsed on the edge of the bed, the envelope still sealed between his trembling fingers. A part of him, the most fearful part, the part that dreaded the impact of the truth, would have preferred to leave the letter closed, to lull himself a while longer with the illusion of possible hope.

But curiosity, a wild hope of finding a hidden message, a glimmer of love despite the distance, drove him to break the wax seal that held the letter closed. The familiar scent of Liliane, a subtle blend of cut hay, wildflowers, and mild soap, wafted from the envelope, enveloping him in a bittersweet veil of nostalgia.

With a hesitant hand, he unfolded the sheet, his eyes scanning the lines with feverish avidity. Liliane's words, imbued with a disarming sincerity, a tenderness tinged with sadness, danced before his eyes, each sentence further fanning the embers of his emotions.

She spoke of her daily life on the farm, the spring births, the summer harvests, the immutable rhythm of the seasons that dictated her life. She confided her doubts, her simple joys, the loneliness that sometimes washed over her despite the affection of her parents, the void left by Julien's absence.

"I hope you don't resent me for not writing sooner," she confessed in a passage that made Julien's heart clench. "I was afraid, afraid that my words would distract you, disturb your training. Afraid, too, of missing you too much, of making you want to leave everything to join me."

And then, almost timidly, she spoke of Thomas, the village veterinarian. A friend, she specified, someone she could count on, who had been her shoulder to lean on in difficult times.

A pang of jealousy shot through Julien as he read these lines. He pictured Liliane, confiding and laughing, in the company of this man he didn't know, but whose influence over her he could guess.

Yet, as the words flowed, Julien understood. He understood that Thomas was but a chapter in Liliane's story, a secondary character in a play in which he, Julien, was the absent hero.

The letter ended with a question, a question that echoed in the silence of the room like a distant echo: "Will you ever come back to me, Julien?"

His hand trembling, Julien reread the letter, again and again, as if to imprint himself with every word, every punctuation mark, every silence between the lines. He felt a confused mixture of hope and despair growing within him, the dizzying sensation of being at a crossroads, condemned to make an impossible choice.

A pale dawn filtered through the drawn curtains, cloaking the room in a wan and unreal light. Julien, sprawled on his bed, his clothes rumpled from a restless night, stared blankly at the ceiling. Liliane's letter, lying on the nightstand, resembled a wounded bird, its words of love and doubt hovering in the still air of the room.

A profound fatigue inhabited him, a weariness that had nothing to do with lack of sleep. It was a weariness of the soul, the weight of choice bearing down on him like a leaden

cope. Should he listen to the voice of reason, the one that whispered of security, of career, of the clear path of a model soldier? Or should he yield to the call of his heart, that primal cry that screamed Liliane's name, that demanded a return to the land, to simplicity, to love?

The shrill ringing of the telephone made him start. He sat up painfully, his sore muscles protesting with every movement. Picking up the receiver with a hesitant hand, he recognized the deep voice of Master Sergeant Tremblay, his direct superior.

"Julien, Tremblay here. I hope I'm not waking you up too early."

The tone was cordial, almost friendly, but Julien detected a hint of impatience beneath the measured words.

"No, Master Sergeant, no problem. I'm already up," he lied, forcing himself to adopt an alert tone.

"Perfect. You remember I told you about a specialized training opportunity?"

Julien felt his stomach clench. The famous elite training, the one reserved for the best, the one that opened the doors to a dazzling career in the Air Force.

"Yes, Master Sergeant, of course."

"A spot just opened up. We thought of you, Julien. Your results are excellent, your attitude is irreproachable. It's a unique opportunity to prove yourself, to climb the ladder quickly."

The master sergeant paused, giving Julien time to digest the information.

"It's demanding training, of course. Six months at CFB Borden, day and night. Not a lot of leave, you understand. But the payoff is a choice assignment, a high-responsibility position. It's the kind of opportunity that only comes along once in a career, Julien."

Each of the master sergeant's words echoed in Julien's mind like a hammer blow, further sealing the coffin of his dreams of a simple life. Six months. Six months cut off from the world, immersed in the sterile world of the military base, far from Liliane, far from the farm, far from himself. Six months to forget, to repress, to mold himself into the model officer.

"So, Julien, what do you say? Are you in?"

The master sergeant's question hung unanswered for a moment, suspended in the heavy silence of the telephone line. Julien closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind, to silence the conflicting voices that raged within him. On the one hand, the lure of excellence, the recognition of his peers, the pride of serving his country at the highest level. On the other, Liliane's face, her eyes filled with hope, her whispered question like a prayer: "Will you ever come back to me, Julien?"

A sigh escaped his lips, heavy with the weight of indecision. The silence stretched on, taut as a bowstring about to loose a decisive arrow. Outside, the morning song of a mockingbird seemed to mock his inner dilemma.

"Master Sergeant, I... I need some time to think. It's an important decision, I can't give you an answer right away."

His voice betrayed his turmoil, the clash between the lure of ambition and the call of his heart. A heavy silence greeted his words, laden with barely veiled disappointment.

"I understand, Julien. But don't take too long, the spot won't stay open forever. I'll give you until tomorrow morning, nine o'clock, to give me your final answer. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Master Sergeant, understood. Thank you."

He hung up, his heart pounding, feeling caught in the gears of a machine he had lost control of. Liliane's letter seemed to stare back at him, its words echoing in his mind like a forgotten promise.

An idea then sprouted in his mind, as crazy as it was irrepressible: what if he went to see her? Immediately. Without waiting. As if his life depended on it.

Ignoring the dull ache radiating from his sore muscles, he jumped out of bed, feverish with this glimmer of hope piercing the fog of his thoughts. He had to see her, talk to her, read the truth in her eyes.

A few hours later, he was behind the wheel of the old family pickup truck, devouring the miles with a feverish impatience. The landscape sped past him, blurred and insignificant, as if the whole world had been reduced to this road that led him to her.

Arriving in front of the family farm, he jumped out of the car without even taking the time to turn off the ignition. Heart pounding, he crossed the yard in a few strides and knocked on the door with a force that betrayed his anxiety.

Liliane opened immediately, her eyes wide with surprise. She was wearing an old plaid shirt and faded jeans, her hair tied back in a loose braid. She was beautiful, with a simple, luminous beauty that hit Julien like a punch in the stomach.

"Julien? What are you... what are you doing here?"

Her voice betrayed her astonishment, mixed with a hint of worry. Julien stared at her for a long moment, breathless, the words crowding on his lips without finding their way out.

"Liliane, I..."

He stopped abruptly, realizing the futility of explanations, the urgency of the situation. Taking her in his arms, he pulled her to him with a force bordering on brutality.

"I had to see you," he murmured, burying his face in her hair. "I needed to feel you close to me."

Liliane didn't resist, letting herself be enveloped by his familiar warmth. For a long moment, they stayed like that, entwined, as if to ward off the distance, the lost time, the mistakes of the past.

"Julien, what's going on?" she finally asked, her voice barely audible against his shoulder.

He pulled away then, looking straight into her eyes, his gaze alight with a newfound resolve.

"I have something to tell you, Liliane. Something important."

## Chapter 8: The Uniform and the Apron

The silence that followed Julien's declaration was as thick as the maple syrup he once enjoyed so carelessly. Liliane, her face frozen in an unreadable expression, had stopped pouring the tea, the delicate china teapot trembling slightly in her hand.

A fly buzzed insistently against the windowpane, as if to underline the palpable unease that had settled in the once-cheerful kitchen. The sun's rays, filtering through the lace curtains, seemed to have lost their luster, bathing the scene in an uncertain, almost unreal light.

Liliane's eyes, usually sparkling with infectious joy, were veiled with an unspeakable sadness. Her lips, which he had so longed to kiss, formed a thin line, betraying an inner tension he had never detected before.

The delicate scent of wildflowers, carefully arranged in a stoneware vase, could no longer mask the acrid smell of fear that was rising within him, as cold and tenacious as the morning dew.

"You... you mean...", Liliane began in a barely audible voice, before breaking off, as if the words refused to cross the barrier of her trembling lips.

Julien felt his heart constrict in his chest, an invisible vise tightening around his ribcage, making it difficult to breathe. He had imagined this moment hundreds of times, rehearsing every word, every gesture, but the reality of the situation, raw and unvarnished, left him disarmed, unable to cope with the emotion that washed over him like a tidal wave.

"Liliane, I...", he tried again, his voice hoarse with distress.

But before he could continue, a thud from the yard shattered the fragile equilibrium that had reigned in the room. It was Thomas, the veterinarian, who had come to inquire about the health of a lamb born a few days earlier.

His arrival, as untimely as it was unexpected, abruptly broke the tenuous thread of their conversation, bringing them brutally back to the reality of their situation. Liliane straightened up, as if awakened from a dream, and placed the teapot on the table with a precise gesture, masking her emotion behind a mask of politeness.

"I have to go see to the lamb," she said, turning to Julien, a forced smile lighting up her face. "Will you excuse Thomas? He won't stay long."

Before he could even answer, she had disappeared down the hallway, leaving Julien alone with his confused thoughts and the weight of his unspoken words.

A wave of icy cold seemed to submerge Julien despite the lingering warmth of late summer. The sweet scent of chamomile tea, the very same Liliane brewed with such care, could no longer mask the bitterness that crept up his throat. He watched her walk away, each step further carving the chasm that seemed to be growing between them.

The sudden appearance of Thomas, an imposing silhouette framed in the doorway, only served to accentuate his despair. The veterinarian, his face weathered by the sun and his hands calloused, exuded an aura of calm and confidence that contrasted sharply with Julien's inner turmoil.

"Good afternoon, Julien," he boomed in a deep, reassuring voice, shaking the young man's hand with cordial firmness. "How are you? The soldier's life hasn't hardened you too much, I trust?"

A hint of irony pierced through his words, a benevolent humor that Julien had often appreciated in the past. But today, every word resonated like an additional sting, a cruel reminder of his own awkwardness and his inability to decipher Liliane's feelings.

"Good afternoon, Thomas," he replied in a colorless voice, doing his best to mask the unease that gripped him. "No, the job hasn't changed me that much."

The conversation started haltingly, interspersed with heavy silences. Thomas, with his natural ease and his deep knowledge of farm life, seemed to effortlessly fill the empty space between them, a space that Julien himself had created by his absence and his painful choices.

He told anecdotes about the recent births in the stable, the challenges of breeding, the vagaries of the weather, and Julien felt a growing sense of strangeness, as if he were observing a play whose text and stakes he did not know.

He stole glances towards the hallway, hoping for Liliane's return, but the young woman seemed to be taking her time, leaving an unbearable doubt hanging in Julien's mind. Was it a way to punish him for his silence, for his inability to express his feelings? Or did her distant attitude mean that she too had turned the page, finding in Thomas a complicity and an affection that he was no longer able to offer?

Jealousy, silent and tenacious, began to gnaw at Julien's insides. He observed Thomas' hands, those expert hands that cared for the farm animals with such gentleness, and he could not help but imagine them brushing against Liliane's face, stroking her silky hair. The image, as fleeting as it was painful, made him flinch, betraying his turmoil.

"Everything alright, Julien?" Thomas asked, a flicker of concern crossing his frank gaze. "You seem to be elsewhere."

"Yes, yes, everything's fine," stammered Julien, forcing a tight smile. "Just a little tired from the journey."

He got up, pretending the need for some air, and hurried out into the yard, as if to escape the suffocating atmosphere that pervaded the kitchen.

The cool air hit his face, chasing away the torpor that had settled over him. The sky, a limpid blue, stood in stark contrast to the chaos reigning in his mind. The farm, once synonymous with peace and comfort, now seemed like a foreign land, where every corner evoked the memory of Liliane and the unbearable possibility that she might no longer belong to him.

He wandered aimlessly around the yard, one hand absently stroking the freshly painted fence, the very same one he had helped repair a few years earlier. The pungent scent of manure, an incongruous blend of damp earth and cut grass, reached him in wafts, stimulating his olfactory memory, rekindling buried images of his carefree childhood.

A distant whinny, followed by the plaintive moo of a cow, broke the peaceful silence of the countryside. He looked up at the horizon, where the rolling line of hills stood out against the blazing sky, and a wave of nostalgia washed over him, as powerful as the wind that ruffled the branches of the ancient oak trees lining the path to the river.

He walked mechanically towards the riverbank, seeking refuge in this secret place, witness to his first pangs of love, his adolescent dreams and his promises whispered in Liliane's ear. The river, once tumultuous and impetuous, now flowed peacefully, reflecting on its silvery surface the last rays of the setting sun.

Sitting down on a flat stone, polished by time and the elements, he let his gaze wander over the hypnotic spectacle of the flowing water, carrying away with it his dark thoughts, his doubts, his fears.

A gentle, familiar presence drew him from his contemplation. Liliane stood before him, arms crossed over her chest, an unreadable expression on her face. Her wheat-colored hair, which he had so loved to caress, shone with a golden sheen in the fading light of dusk.

"You'll catch a chill," she said simply, holding out a steaming cup towards him. "I thought you might like some tea."

He stared at her for a long moment, searching her eyes for the answer to his unspoken questions. But her gaze, usually so expressive, remained impenetrable, like a stormy sky masking the light of the stars.

He took the cup gratefully, feeling the warmth of the liquid spread through his hands, numb with the nascent cold. The comforting scent of chamomile, mixed with a subtle note of cinnamon, awakened in him an urgent need for comfort, for a return to some form of familiarity.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice hoarse with contained emotion.

He took a sip, letting the warmth of the brew flood his parched throat. A silence settled between them, heavy with unspoken words and unexpressed expectations. The chirping of crickets, punctuated by the distant hoot of an owl, marked the steady beat of his heart.

Liliane settled onto a neighboring stone, her gaze fixed not on him, but on the river's flow. Her features were drawn, delicate shoulders seemingly burdened by the weight of the world. Julien studied her profile, etching each detail into his memory: the elegant curve of her neck, the wisps of golden hair catching the fading light at her temple, the graceful movement of her slender hands as she smoothed back a stray strand.

"So...", she began, her voice barely a whisper against the backdrop of the evening's hush. "Is this what you came to tell me?"

Her question, deceptively simple, hung in the air like a veiled accusation. Julien felt a knot forming in his throat, threatening to choke him.

“Liliane, I... I didn't come here to hurt you,” he stammered, words tangling on his tongue like unruly vines. “I... I needed to see you, to know...”

He faltered, unable to articulate the depth of his feelings, the panicked fear that gripped him at the thought of losing her.

“To know what, Julien?” she pressed, her voice strained, a tremor barely perceptible in its depths.

“To know if... if you had forgotten me,” he finally choked out, his heart pounding against his ribs. “If... if you were happy.”

A heavy silence followed his confession. Liliane turned to him, her face awash in the uncertain light, her storm-grey eyes mirroring the turmoil that raged within him.

“Happy?” she echoed, as if tasting the word on her tongue. “Do you really believe that’s possible, Julien? That I could ever be happy... without you?”

His breath catching in his chest, Julien straightened, his gaze locking onto hers, desperate to decipher the hidden meaning behind her words. Was it a reproach? A confession? For a fleeting moment, he thought he detected a flicker of hope in the azure depths of her eyes, a promise as fragile as the moon's reflection on the restless river.

“Liliane, I...”

Words crowded his throat, a chaotic torrent of apologies, regrets, passionate declarations. But faced with the restrained intensity of her gaze, he fell silent, aware of the futility of words against the chasm that separated them.

A broken sigh escaped her lips, a heart-wrenching sound that seemed to emanate from the depths of her soul. She looked away, her gaze returning to the rushing current as if drawing strength from its relentless flow.

"You can't imagine what it was like when you left, Julien," she murmured, her voice heavy with a soul-crushing melancholy. "The emptiness, the silence, the endless waiting... It was as if I had been abandoned on the dock, my heart adrift, uncertain if your ship would ever return."

Each word pierced Julien's heart like a dagger, tearing at the veil of illusions he had woven around his hasty departure. He saw with painful clarity the extent of his selfishness, the blindness that had prevented him from seeing the suffering he was inflicting on the one he loved.

"Liliane, I... I'm so sorry," he stammered, his voice thick with remorse. "I never imagined... I never meant to hurt you, ever."

He reached for her hand, a clumsy gesture to bridge the distance between them. But she drew back, an almost imperceptible movement that spoke volumes.

"I know you didn't do it on purpose, Julien," she said, without bitterness, but with a lucidity that chilled him to the bone. "You did what you thought was right, what your duty dictated. But I... I was left behind, alone with my grief and my doubts."

She paused, drawing a breath, fighting back the tears that welled up in her eyes. The silence returned, heavier than ever, laden with unspoken regrets and shared pain.

"I tried to move on, Julien," she finally continued, her voice barely audible. "To rebuild my life, to find meaning without you. And then... Thomas came along."

The veterinarian's name, uttered with disarming simplicity, hit Julien like a jolt of electricity. The jealousy, dull and persistent, which he had tried to stifle, resurfaced with a vengeance, burning him from the inside.

"Thomas is... a good man," Liliane continued, seemingly oblivious to the storm raging within him. "He is present, attentive, he understands my passion for the farm... He helped me through some difficult times."

She fell silent again, leaving him alone with his demons and the growing fear of losing her forever.

A long moment passed, punctuated by the incessant murmur of the river and the melancholic song of a nocturnal bird. Julien, devastated by Liliane's revelations, felt incapable of formulating a response, trapped in a vortex of conflicting emotions. Jealousy, sharp as a knife blade, twisted in his gut, while guilt, heavy and tenacious, dragged him further into the mire of his past mistakes.

"Don't misunderstand, Julien," Liliane said, breaking the silence in a soft but firm voice, as if to dispel a misunderstanding before it could take root. "Thomas is just a friend. A dear friend, certainly, who offered me support and comfort when I needed it most. But he could never take your place."

A glimmer of hope, as fleeting as a shooting star, streaked across the dark sky of his thoughts. Liliane's words, spoken with disarming sincerity, resonated within him like a forgotten melody, rekindling the flickering flame of their past love.

"So...?" he breathed, his voice hoarse with suppressed emotion.

He searched her eyes, pleading for an answer in the storm-grey depths. But Liliane remained silent, her face awash in the uncertain light, as if she herself was searching for her way through the labyrinth of her feelings.

"I don't know, Julien," she finally admitted, her voice barely a whisper. "Everything is so different now. You've changed, I've changed... The gap between us seems insurmountable."

She stood up, her slender silhouette outlined against the fading light. A gentle breeze arose, rustling the branches of the weeping willows that lined the riverbank, swirling around her a few brightly colored fallen leaves.

"I waited for you, Julien," she continued, her gaze lost on the distant horizon. "For months, I nurtured the hope of your return, clinging to your letters like a lifeline. But time passes, wounds heal, and life goes on, with or without you."

Each word, uttered with painful slowness, fell upon Julien like a blow, bringing him back to the harsh reality of their situation. He had believed he could return, as if nothing had changed, reclaim lost time, and rekindle the flame of their love. But he realized, with a cruel clarity, that things are never that simple.

"Liliane, please, don't say that," he begged, reaching for her hand in a gesture of despair. "I know I made mistakes, that my silence caused you pain. But I love you, Liliane, I never stopped loving you."

His confession, spoken with heart-wrenching sincerity, hung in the evening air, a cry from the heart in the face of the immensity of loss. Liliane turned to him, her face etched with emotion, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"Julien," she murmured, her voice breaking with emotion. "I... I don't know anymore..."

A sob choked her words, a heart-wrenching sound that shattered Julien's heart. He leapt to his feet, taking her in his arms, holding her close as if to protect her from the world, from the pain that gripped them both. She buried her face in his uniform, inhaling his familiar scent, a comforting mix of sweat, leather, and a hint of military laundry detergent.

"Oh, Julien," she whispered against his neck. "I don't know what to do, what to think..."

He held her tighter, powerless against her tears, the heartbreak that coursed through them both. He felt the tremor of her body against his, sensed her indecision, and a surge of anger rose within him, directed at himself, at the cruel hand of fate that seemed determined to tear them apart.

"Listen to me, Liliane," he said, gently tilting her chin up so he could meet her gaze. "I know I was a fool, that I hurt you. But I'm here now, and I don't want to lose you. I'll do whatever it takes for us to get through this, together."

His words, spoken with newfound conviction, seemed to calm the storm raging within her. She gazed at him for a long moment, searching his face as if to detect the slightest hint of doubt, the slightest trace of hesitation.

"That's easy to say, Julien," she murmured, brushing a stray tear away with the back of her hand. "But reality is far more complex. You have your career, your ambitions... Where do I fit into all of this? And what about Thomas? What do we do about him?"

The mention of the veterinarian, like a menacing shadow hanging over their fragile reconciliation, rekindled the demons of jealousy in Julien's mind. He felt his blood boil, a wave of possessiveness washing over him at the thought that Liliane might have found comfort in the arms of another man.

"Liliane," he began, his voice a husky rasp as he held her gaze, "I know that Thomas is important to you. But he is not me. I am the one who loves you, who has always loved you, even in the darkest of times. Never forget that."

A silence pregnant with unspoken emotion followed Julien's heartfelt declaration. Liliane, her breath catching in her throat, stared at him, searching his face as if trying to unravel secrets hidden deep within his soul. The fading light of dusk, muted and ethereal, cast an almost mystical aura upon the scene, accentuating the lines etched on her young face and the stark contrast between the rough austerity of his military uniform and the rustic simplicity of her linen dress.

"Easy for you to say, Julien," she finally murmured, her voice tinged with infinite sadness. "You speak of love, of promises... but can you truly comprehend what I endured during your absence? The deafening silence, the gnawing doubt, the loneliness that tightened its grip on me with each passing night..."

She broke off, her voice choked with emotion. A lone tear escaped, tracing a shimmering path down her cheek in the uncertain light. Julien, his heart constricting with remorse, reached out to brush it away, but she flinched, the movement barely perceptible yet speaking volumes of the distance that now separated them.

"I believed you had forgotten me, Julien," she resumed, her voice little more than a whisper. "That the allure of military life had ensnared you, imprisoned you in its web, and that you had turned the page on our story, on our shared dreams."

For a moment, her gaze drifted towards the horizon as if reliving the agony of abandonment, the throbbing ache of uncertainty. Unable to bear the sight of her pain, Julien drew her into his arms, holding her with a desperation that bordered on despair.

"No, Liliane, never!" he exclaimed, his heart pounding against his ribs. "Not a single moment, not a single day of my absence passed without me thinking of you. Your memory was my only solace, my lifeline amidst the rigors of military life, the relentless discipline."

He buried his face in her silken hair, inhaling her delicate scent of wildflowers and freshly cut hay, a scent that evoked the sweetness of their nascent love, the promise of a simple and genuine happiness.

"But then, why the silence, Julien?" she asked, lifting her head to meet his gaze, her eyes filled with a mixture of hope and reproach. "Why didn't you write? Why didn't you let me hear from you? Each day that passed without news tore at my heart, confirming my fear that you had forgotten me."

"I was a fool, Liliane, a complete idiot!" he confessed, his voice raw with remorse. "The misplaced pride of a young soldier, the fear of appearing weak in your eyes... I convinced myself that protecting you meant keeping my distance, sparing you the anguish of waiting and uncertainty."

He shook his head, burdened by the weight of his mistakes, the stupidity of his past choices.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," he continued, "but I realize now the extent of my folly. I inflicted upon you the worst kind of suffering: that of silence, of unjustified absence."

Liliane gently disentangled herself from his embrace, as if to better gauge the distance that still separated them. Her eyes, a mirror to her wounded soul, searched his face, seeking a sign, a word that would soothe the turmoil within her.

"I want to believe you, Julien," she murmured, her voice filled with an infinite sadness. "But it's too late, things have changed. Time has slipped through our fingers like fine sand, taking with it our certainties, our dreams of a shared future."

With a weary gesture, she indicated the farmhouse that stood before them, bathed in the golden light of dusk. The fields stretched out as far as the eye could see, rippling in the gentle breeze like a sea of green and gold. The intoxicating scent of freshly cut hay hung in the air, mingled with the warm, animalistic smells of the stable.

"Look around you, Julien," she continued, her voice tinged with a heart-wrenching melancholy. "This land, this is my life now. This is where I found my path, my reason for being. And Thomas... Thomas is part of this world, he understands it, he respects it."

A heavy silence fell upon them, as weighty as the storm clouds gathering on the horizon. Julien, his heart shattered, understood that words had lost their power, that the abyss that separated them had become insurmountable.

He straightened, his body suddenly heavy, as if her confession had drained him of his last ounce of strength. He took one last look at her beloved face, etching every detail, every nuance of expression into his memory, as if to ward off oblivion.

Then, without a word, without a backward glance, he turned and walked away with slow, heavy steps, swallowed by the falling night. The piercing cry of an owl shattered the silence, as if to mark the end of a love story broken by time, distance, and the weight of impossible choices.

## Chapter 9: The Weight of Silence

The silence of the countryside, once a source of peace for Julien, now echoed like a painful reminder of his regrets. Each step along the dusty road that led to his family farm was an ordeal, each blade of grass crushed beneath his boots a brutal reminder of his flight. The day before, he had left Liliane by the riverbank, leaving behind not a promise of a future, but the ghostly specter of their lost love.

The sun was already setting, setting the horizon ablaze with hues of orange and violet. A light breeze rustled the branches of the weeping willows that lined the road, their silvery leaves dancing as if to echo his sadness. The familiar scent of damp earth and freshly cut hay filled the air, but instead of soothing his bruised heart, it only fueled the fire of his regret.

In front of the house, his mother, Anabelle, was busy in the vegetable garden. Her hunched figure, like that of a reed bending in the wind, tugged at his heartstrings. Guilt washed over him, mingled with a newfound tenderness, deeper and more profound, for this woman who had always loved him unconditionally.

He approached slowly, hesitating for a moment before calling out to her. The sound of his voice, husky with suppressed emotion, made her start. She turned, her face etched with time and worry, then a hesitant smile lit up her tired features.

"Julien! What in the...?"

She didn't have time to finish her sentence. He rushed towards her, pulling her into an embrace with a strength he didn't know he possessed. She stiffened for a moment, surprised by this uncharacteristic display of affection from her usually reserved son. Then, she returned his embrace, holding him close as she had when he was just a little boy seeking refuge in her skirts.

"My boy," she murmured, her voice trembling with emotion. "You've come back."

He lifted his head, seeking her gaze. Words crowded his throat, heavy and painful like stones. He wanted to tell her everything, to confess his mistakes, his despair, the gaping wound that Liliane had left in his heart. But the words remained stuck, blocked by an invisible force.

"Mom, I... I need..."

He broke off, unable to continue. How could he explain the inexplicable, put into words the chaos that reigned within his soul? His mother, with the instinctive wisdom of women who have known the pangs of heartache, seemed to understand. She took his hand, squeezing it gently.

"Come, my dear boy, come and sit down. We'll have some tea, and you can tell me all about it."

She led him to the wooden table set under the old apple tree, her own personal haven, where she liked to rest after a long day of toil. Around them, the garden came alive with the last songs of birds, a melancholy hymn to the dying day. The air was soft, laden with the scent of hollyhocks and the fresh mint that grew profusely near the well.

The sun had disappeared below the horizon, giving way to a night sky tinged with midnight blue where the first stars were already twinkling. The soft, subdued light filtering through the branches of the apple tree enveloped the table in an aura of peace and intimacy. Anabelle poured steaming tea into two chipped porcelain cups, souvenirs of a bygone era when life had seemed simpler, sweeter.

Julien sipped his tea, his gaze lost in the dance of the flames licking the crackling logs in the hearth. Each sip was a balm on his burning heart, each wave of warmth a futile attempt to dispel the icy chill that had taken hold of his soul.

"So, my boy," began Anabelle, her voice soft, as if not wanting to break the fragile equilibrium of this moment suspended in time. "What brings you home so unexpectedly?"

He lifted his head, fixing his steel-gray eyes on hers, eyes that reflected both pain and confusion. "Liliane..."

The young woman's name hung in the peaceful garden air for a fleeting moment, heavy with unspoken words and regrets. Julien closed his eyes, allowing the still vivid memories of their encounter by the river the previous day to resurface. Liliane's timid smile, the flicker of hope that had briefly ignited in her eyes before being extinguished by his silence, her heart-wrenching confession... each image was a poisoned arrow piercing his heart.

"She doesn't love me anymore, Mom," he murmured, his voice cracking with emotion. "She... she's changed."

Anabelle listened in silence, her heart clenched by her son's distress. She had watched Julien and Liliane grow up, witnessed the birth of their love, pure and innocent as the morning dew. She had hoped, with all her motherly heart, that their bond would withstand the trials of time and distance. But life, with cruel irony, had decided otherwise.

"Tell me everything, my darling," she breathed, taking his hand. "Don't keep this pain bottled up inside you. Talking helps, even if words can't heal everything."

And so, under the benevolent gaze of the stars and the melancholic chirping of crickets, Julien confided in his mother. He told her of his years of absence, the silence he had imposed on their love, the misplaced pride that had prevented him from fighting for Liliane. He confessed his fear, the panic-stricken terror that had gripped him when he realized he was losing her, pushing her into the arms of another.

Anabelle listened without interrupting, letting his words flow like a torrent carrying with it pain, guilt, and bitterness. She understood her son's suffering, the deep wound inflicted by disappointed love. But she also detected something else in his voice, a hint of anger, of thinly veiled jealousy.

"This other... this Thomas," Julien uttered, his voice hoarse with a tinge of bitterness. "Who is he, exactly?"

Anabelle sighed, easily guessing the jealousy that gnawed at her son. "Thomas is a veterinarian," she explained patiently. "He settled in the village a few months ago, just after you left for the base. He takes care of the farm animals, and..." She hesitated for a moment, choosing her words carefully. "And he has been a great support for Liliane during your absence."

A grimace of pain crossed Julien's face. He had imagined this scenario many times in his solitude, but the reality of these words, spoken by his own mother, was far crueler than he had imagined. He already saw himself as a ghostly and distant figure, erased by the warm and reassuring presence of this stranger.

"What kind of support?" he asked, his voice barely audible.

Anabelle looked at him with compassion. "Julien, my dear, you know Liliane is a strong, independent young woman. But your departure was a trial for her, far more than you seem to think. The solitude of the farm, the weight of responsibilities... she needed a shoulder to lean on, a friendly presence."

"And Thomas was there," he finished harshly, understanding the implication of his mother's words.

Anabelle nodded sadly. "Yes, Thomas was there. He knew how to listen to her, advise her, support her in difficult times. He gets along well with your brothers, he often helps on the farm... He has become a precious friend to the whole family."

A heavy silence, thick with unspoken words, fell between them. Julien stared at the bottom of his empty cup, as if searching for an answer, a solution to the chaos that had seized his heart. Jealousy gnawed at him, acidic and burning, mixed with a profound sense of injustice.

He who had sacrificed his love, his youth, on the altar of duty and ambition, returned empty-handed, dispossessed not only of the woman he loved but also of the place he thought he occupied in the heart of his family. He felt like a stranger in his own home, an intruder in a life that had continued without him, adapting to his absence, filling the void he had left behind.

"Mom," he finally murmured, his throat tight with emotion. "Do you think... do you think there's still a chance for Liliane and me?"

Anabelle sighed, understanding her son's despair. She would have liked to reassure him, to offer him a false hope, but she knew that the truth was far more complex, far more painful.

"I don't know, my darling," she replied sincerely. "Liliane has suffered greatly from your silence, your absence. She has learned to live without you, to find comfort with other people. Only time and actions will tell if it is possible to rebuild what has been broken."

Julien's gaze was lost in the starry night, searching in vain for a shooting star to which to cling his shattered dreams. He felt fatigue overcome him, heavy and burdensome like a leaden cloak. The conversation with his mother, far from relieving him, had only rekindled the pain, making it even more acute.

He rose painfully, swaying slightly. Anabelle got up in turn, supporting him with a tender gesture.

"Go and get some rest, Julien," she said softly. "Tomorrow is another day. You will have time to think, to talk to Liliane, to find your place here, among your loved ones."

He nodded silently, unable to utter a word. He kissed his mother on the cheek, a fleeting and desperate kiss, then headed towards the house, his shoulders slumped under the weight of despair.

The room he had shared with his brothers during his childhood awaited him, frozen in time like a tomb of memories. The familiar smell of beeswax and lavender still hung in the air, mingled with the more distant, more poignant aroma of lost childhood. He collapsed on the bed without even bothering to undress.

Outside, the wind had risen, blowing in gusts against the wooden shutters. The garden rustled with a thousand strange murmurs, as if nature itself was mourning the end of an impossible love.

Sleep, usually a safe haven, eluded him like a hunted animal. The cool sheets smelled of the familiar laundry detergent his mother had always used, but the scent, instead of comforting him, seemed to repel him, further emphasizing his feeling of estrangement. He tossed and turned, haunted by his mother's words, by the searing image of Liliane finding solace in the arms of another.

Dawn was barely breaking when Julien left the house, unable to bear the stifling atmosphere of the childhood room any longer. The cool morning air hit him as he stepped outside, biting his face with an icy sting. He inhaled deeply, taking in the damp smell of earth and wet grass, searching in vain for an ounce of peace in this nature that had always been familiar to him.

He wandered aimlessly, hands buried in the pockets of his fatigues, across the fields bathed in a milky light. Each step was torture, each blade of grass silvered with dew a sharp reminder of his loss. He saw Liliane again, so often by his side in this bucolic landscape, her radiant smile illuminating her youthful face, her blonde hair flying in the wind like the wings of a free bird.

The echo of her crystalline laughter still resonated in his ears, a cruel reminder of a happiness gone forever. He stopped at the edge of the field, where the ground sloped gently down to the river. It was there that he had seen her again for the first time, after all those years of absence, his heart pounding, his throat tight with emotion. She had appeared at the bend in the path, a graceful silhouette standing out against the backdrop of the flamboyant sky. For a moment, time had stood still, the whole world had been reduced to this image, to the promise of a long-awaited reunion. But the illusion had vanished as quickly as it had arisen, giving way to a reality far crueler, far more painful.

The river water, usually clear and joyful, seemed dark and menacing today, reflecting the storm raging in his soul. He sat down on the bank, letting his fingers glide through the icy current. A family of ducks passed in front of him, gliding on the water with insolent ease, indifferent to his grief.

A soft, familiar voice drew him from his thoughts. He looked up, his heart pounding.

Liliane. It was really her, standing a few meters away, her face etched with a newfound gravity. A flicker of illusory hope rekindled in Julien's heart. For a fleeting moment, he forgot the pain of the previous day, the cruel words, the menacing shadow of this Thomas.

She approached slowly, hesitantly, as if walking on eggshells. Her usually bright face, framed by her blonde hair like ripe wheat, seemed drawn, marked by a fatigue that Julien did not recognize. The intense blue of her eyes, once sparkling with joie de vivre, was now veiled with an indefinable sadness.

“Julien,” she began, her voice barely audible, broken with emotion. “We need to talk.”

He straightened up suddenly, as if propelled by an invisible spring. Liliane's proximity disturbed him, awakening within him a confused mixture of desire and fear. He wanted to hold her in his arms, to feel the warmth of her body against his again, but the fear of rejection, of the confirmation of his fears, held him captive in a painful immobility.

"I'm listening," he responded simply, his voice rough, betraying the tension that held him captive.

Liliane settled onto a flat rock at the water's edge, her hand automatically smoothing the faded blue cotton of her skirt. Silence descended once more, heavy and oppressive, hanging in the air like a threat. The melodious song of a mockingbird, perched on the branch of a weeping willow, seemed to taunt them with their distress.

"What I have to say isn't easy, Julien," she began finally, her gaze fixed on the turbulent current of the river. "I need you to listen to me until the end, without interrupting. Even if... even if what you hear causes you pain."

Julien felt a shiver crawl down his spine, despite the warm sun beating down on the river. Liliane's grave tone, her averted gaze, everything about her hinted at a deep sorrow he had never perceived before. The carefree lightness that usually cloaked her seemed to have vanished, replaced by a gravity that rooted him to the spot.

"For months, years even, I waited for a sign from you, Julien. A call, a letter, even just a word to tell me that you still thought of me, that I mattered to you. But there was only silence, a deafening silence that screamed your absence, growing louder with each passing day."

Her voice cracked, and she paused for a moment, as if to catch her breath, or perhaps to restrain the tears threatening to spill. Julien remained silent, petrified by guilt, unable to find the words that might soothe the pain he read in her eyes.

"You had chosen your path, the army, ambition... And I, I was just Liliane, the country girl, not good enough for a soldier destined for a grand future. That's what I told myself, every night, to try to understand, to keep from going mad."

She lifted her head, finally meeting his gaze with blue eyes blurred by unshed tears. "You broke my heart, Julien. Silently, without even realizing it. And while you were climbing the ranks of your glorious career, I was rebuilding myself piece by piece, with only my tears for company."

A choked sob escaped her lips, and she covered her face with her hands, unable to hold back the tide of emotions any longer. Julien, his heart in tatters, moved towards her, reaching out to comfort her, but she recoiled sharply, as if his touch burned.

"Don't touch me!" The raw cry tore through the peaceful silence of the river, echoing across the shimmering water like a volley of stones hurled into a sacred sanctuary. Liliane drew back, arms crossed over her chest as if to ward off an attack, her face contorted with a pain that transcended words.

Julien froze, his hand outstretched in a gesture of solace that had suddenly become obsolete. Liliane's stinging rejection struck him with full force, icing over the little warmth that remained in his wounded heart. He felt with a new clarity the chasm that separated them, a gaping abyss carved by years of silence and unspoken words.

"Liliane..." he began, his voice hoarse, rough with an emotion he struggled to control. But she raised a trembling hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"No, Julien. Enough talk. You've had years to speak, to explain, to justify yourself. But you chose silence, the headlong flight, leaving behind a void that took me months to fill."

Each word was a dagger thrust, plunged with surgical precision into the remnants of his illusions. He watched her, powerless, as she rose to her feet, moving a few steps away, putting a physical distance between them that only mirrored the abyss that had opened in their hearts.

"You think you can come back like this, after all this time, and everything will be as it was before? As if nothing had happened?" Liliane's voice was barely a whisper, but each syllable vibrated with an intensity that pierced him to the core.

"That's not what..." he tried again, but she cut short his stumbling explanations with a weary wave of her hand.

"It doesn't matter what you wanted. The damage is done, Julien. And believe me, it runs deep. You speak of your sacrifices, your ambition... Did you ever stop to consider mine?"

She turned to him, her face ravaged by a pain he did not recognize, her eyes clouded with a smoldering anger that chilled him to the bone. For the first time, he saw Liliane not as the sweet, loving girl he had left behind, but as a wounded woman, forged by hardship and solitude.

"I sacrificed my dreams, Julien, my hopes, a part of myself, just to keep you alive in my heart. Every day, I fought against the silence, against forgetting, against the urge to let everything go and disappear myself."

Her voice broke again, but she brushed away her tears with an angry gesture, refusing to grant him this victory, this ounce of pity that would release him from her past hold.

"And all that time, you were out there, in your world of discipline and glory, too busy climbing the ladder to remember the promise you made on the banks of this very river, an eternity ago..."

A long, trembling sigh escaped Liliane's lips, a breath tinged with a weariness that weighed heavy on Julien's shoulders. He watched her, powerless against the storm of emotions that swept across her face, each choked back tear, each tremor in her voice, echoing like a clap of thunder in the bucolic silence of the countryside. He wanted to shout, to scream his despair in the face of this silent accusation, but the words remained stuck in his throat, prisoners of a guilt that was slowly suffocating him.

"Then, one day, Thomas arrived."

The name fell into the peaceful air like a sentence, chilling the blood in Julien's veins. He guessed what was coming, already knew it deep down, but hearing it spoken by Liliane, in that voice filled with heart-wrenching melancholy, drew a muffled groan from his lips. He closed his eyes for a moment, seeking in vain to escape the evidence, the reality that was unfolding before him with the painful precision of a photograph developed in a darkroom.

"He didn't promise me the moon and the stars, or speak of an eternal love he couldn't keep. He was just there, present, listening, understanding my silences better than anyone else."

Each of Liliane's words was a pebble thrown into the still water of his resurfacing hopes, creating concentric waves that crashed against the fragile edges of his wounded heart. He watched her, helpless and mute, as she depicted the birth of a bond that pushed him further away with each passing day, back into the meandering paths of his forgotten past.

"He helped me to hold my head high again, to find pleasure in the simple things, in the everyday life that I could no longer bear." Her hand made a vague gesture towards the fields that stretched out before them, as if to encompass the entire universe she had built far from him, brick by brick, with her strength and determination as mortar.

"Thomas became a friend, a confidant, a pillar I could lean on when everything threatened to crumble."

The sun, as if to emphasize the inevitability of the situation, chose that precise moment to disappear below the horizon, plunging the countryside into a twilight that seemed to reflect the growing doubt in Julien's heart. The air grew cooler, and a slight shiver ran down the young man's spine, but it was no longer just the coolness of the evening.

"Where are you going with this, Liliane?" The question escaped him, a raspy murmur tinged with apprehension. He already knew the answer, felt it vibrating in the air like a diffuse threat, but he still clung to a tenacious hope, however tenuous.

A heavy silence, resembling the twilight descending upon the countryside, settled between them. Julien, hands clenched on his knees, could only manage a barely audible "Well?" betraying the anxiety gnawing at him. Liliane, her face etched with infinite sadness, finally tore her gaze from the river's incessant flow to meet his.

"Julien," she began, her voice soft, almost caressing, in cruel contrast to the harshness of her words, "don't you see? Thomas has become an integral part of my life, a stable and reassuring presence in a world that seemed to be crumbling around me. He's simply there, without artifice, without empty promises, and yet..."

She left her sentence unfinished, the unspoken words weighing even heavier than any confession. Julien, his breath shallow, guessed what came next, the sentence he had dreaded since the beginning of this agonizing conversation.

"I don't know what I feel for him, Julien," she finally admitted, her voice choked with emotion. "It's not a fiery love like the one we shared, no. It's different... softer, deeper, like an undeniable truth that imposed itself upon me unexpectedly. And now, here you are, back in my life, with your cumbersome past and your promises of an uncertain future, and everything is thrown into turmoil..."

She stood abruptly, unable to remain still before him any longer. For a fleeting moment, she seemed about to flee, to melt into the twilight landscape as if to escape the searing truth that lay between them. Then, with visible effort, she regained control of her emotions, forcing herself to meet his gaze directly.

"I can't give you what you expect, Julien," she uttered, her voice striving for firmness but still betraying her turmoil. "Not now, anyway. I need time to understand what I truly want, what I need. And you, too, need time... to remember who you are, where you come from, and above all, where you want to go."

Without a backward glance, she turned on her heel and walked away with quick steps, disappearing into the labyrinth of forest paths that snaked between the fields. Julien, petrified by pain and incomprehension, watched her leave, incapable of the slightest gesture. Liliane's words echoed in his head like a haunting refrain: "You need time..."

Twilight had given way to night, and the first stars were already twinkling in the inky sky. The wind had picked up, blowing in gusts through the tree branches and swirling dead leaves at his feet. Julien, alone by the riverbank, felt as lost, as uprooted as a dead leaf swept away by the autumn wind. He had sacrificed everything for his ambitions, for a future mapped out along the straight path of reason. But at what cost? Had he followed the wrong path, guided by ill-fated stars?

The question lingered, as heavy, as menacing as the stormy sky gathering on the horizon.

## Chapter 10: Excellence and Emptiness

The military base was bathed in a pale light, a reflection of the morning sun struggling to pierce the autumn mist. Julien's footsteps echoed on the tarmac, punctuating his jumbled thoughts. The familiar roar of helicopter engines, once a source of excitement, now seemed strangely distant. He felt as if he were moving through a muffled world, as if an invisible membrane separated him from the reality around him.

Liliane's letter, crumpled in his pocket, burned his skin like smoldering embers. Each word, engraved in his mind, rekindled the agonizing pain of their separation. The silence he had imposed, which he believed to be protective, had transformed into an insurmountable wall, separating him from the one he loved.

He reached the hangar dedicated to the maintenance of transport helicopters. The acrid smell of fuel and hot oil instantly brought him back to his routine, a routine that suddenly seemed utterly meaningless. His colleagues, in gray jumpsuits emblazoned with the Canadian Army emblem, were bustling around an imposing aircraft, their voices echoing in the enclosed space.

"Julien! You're late this morning!" boomed a familiar voice, tinged with a lilting Québécois accent.

It was David, his partner since his arrival at CFB Borden. Tall and sturdy, with a thick red beard and piercing blue eyes, he embodied joviality and quiet strength. Julien envied his ability to look on the bright side, to never be discouraged, even in the most difficult situations.

"Yeah, sorry... I had trouble getting up," muttered Julien, forcing a smile.

David, his eyes sharp, guessed that his friend was hiding something. He knew him well enough to detect the slightest nuance in his voice, the slightest change in his demeanor.

Usually so enthusiastic and focused on his work, Julien had seemed absent lately, as if elsewhere.

"Say, old man, you seem down in the dumps! Is it Liliane who's got your spirits down like this?"

David's frankness, often disarming, had the merit of being direct. Julien hesitated for a moment, torn between the need to confide and the fear of exposing his vulnerability. He lowered his eyes, staring at his dusty combat boots.

"She wrote to me..." he finally confessed, his voice hoarse.

David raised a questioning eyebrow, encouraging his friend to continue. Julien took a deep breath and, in a rush, told him about his encounter with Liliane, the reproaches, the pain, the menacing shadow of this stranger who had taken his place.

When the story ended, a heavy silence fell upon them. The hangar, usually alive with the clang of tools and animated conversations, seemed suddenly plunged into a cathedral-like hush. David listened intently, his usually jovial face hardening as his friend confided in him.

"And now, what are you going to do?" he finally asked, his voice grave.

The question, seemingly simple, echoed in Julien's mind, mirroring his own doubts. He didn't have the answer. The only certainty that resided within him was the agonizing pain of loss, the fear of seeing the one who had illuminated his life disappear forever.

His gaze lost in the maze of wires and circuit boards that made up the helicopter's innards, Julien felt incapable of formulating an answer. How could he summarize the chaos that reigned within him, the frenetic waltz of guilt, desire, and despair? David,

accustomed to his friend's pregnant silences, didn't try to force any further confessions. He simply placed a friendly hand on his shoulder, a silent gesture of support that spoke volumes.

"Listen, Julien," David said after a long moment, "I can't tell you what to do, no one can. But one thing is certain: running away from your problems won't make them disappear. You have to face the situation, even if it's painful."

David's words, simple but full of common sense, resonated within Julien like an undeniable truth. He had spent months hiding behind the wall of his silence, hoping that distance and time would heal the wounds of the past. In vain. Liliane's letter had brutally brought him back to reality, to the realization of his mistakes and the urgency to act.

"I know," sighed Julien, his voice laced with infinite weariness. "But how? I feel like I've ruined everything, like I'm a stranger in her life now."

"You won't know until you try," insisted David. "Take some leave, go see her, talk to her. Tell her how you feel, without holding back, without excuses. The rest is up to her."

The thought of facing Liliane, of reading the truth in her eyes, terrified Julien. What if she didn't love him anymore? What if it was too late to pick up the pieces of their broken love? Fear, paralyzing, held him in its grip. But deep down, a faint glimmer of hope persisted, fueled by the memory of their shared laughter, their whispered promises by the river, the indefinable bond that had united them from their very first encounter.

"You're right," murmured Julien, more to convince himself than out of true conviction. "I'm going to request leave today. I have to see her, talk to her."

A gleam of approval lit up David's eyes. He knew his friend had turned a corner, that he had finally decided to take his destiny into his own hands. The road ahead promised to be difficult, fraught with obstacles and uncertainties. But at least Julien was back on track, guided by the only compass worth following: that of the heart.

A newfound energy seemed to course through Julien's veins. Fear, though still present, had given way to a steely resolve. He felt ready to face the tempest brewing on the horizon of his heart, convinced that even the most devastating downpour could not compare to the slow agony of silence and doubt.

Without delay, he made his way to the office of Captain Martel, the officer responsible for personnel assignments. The man, a grizzled veteran built like an oak with a gaze as sharp as a knife's edge, greeted him with his customary coldness. Julien, usually stoic in the face of his superior's austerity, felt a wave of impatience wash over him. Every second lost brought him closer to the unknown, to the shadow of Thomas creeping into his dearest memories.

"Captain," Julien began, his voice firm, "I request a special leave of absence, sir. An urgent matter requires my attention in my hometown."

Captain Martel's eyebrow rose, clearly disinclined to grant a favor to a young recruit.

"An urgent matter, you say? And this matter couldn't possibly wait until your service is complete?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. It's a personal matter of the utmost importance," Julien insisted, choosing his words carefully to avoid revealing anything of his private life while emphasizing the urgency of the situation.

Captain Martel scrutinized Julien's face, as if trying to penetrate his innermost thoughts. The silence stretched, punctuated by the insistent ticking of the clock on the wall. Julien met his superior's gaze unflinchingly, his jaw set, his heart pounding in his chest.

Finally, Captain Martel slumped back in his chair, a weary sigh escaping his lips.

"Very well, Julien. You seem intent on this leave. I'll grant it, but be warned: I won't tolerate any deviation. You return to base the moment your leave is over, understood?"

"Yes, Captain. Thank you, sir," Julien choked out, barely able to disguise his relief.

He left the office with a brisk step, his heart lighter despite the uncertainty that awaited him. He had his leave; the road lay open. It remained to be seen whether, at the end of that road, he would find Liliane or the ghost of their lost love.

The crisp morning air whipped at Julien's face as he drove north towards Saint-Albert. Leaving behind the military base and its oppressive atmosphere, he plunged into the Quebec countryside awash in the vibrant hues of autumn. Each mile that passed drew him closer to Liliane, but also closer to the truth, whatever it may be. Uncertainty gnawed at him, his heart torn between the faint hope of reconciliation and the paralyzing fear of definitive rejection.

As the familiar landscape of his childhood unfolded through the windshield, Julien recalled happy moments shared with Liliane. Their laughter still echoed in his memories, like whispers of a lost happiness. He saw again her radiant smile, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and the way she would twirl a strand of her blonde hair around her finger when she was deep in thought.

Images of their last encounter came to taint his thoughts. The sadness etched on Liliane's face, her words laced with reproaches and doubts, haunted him like a recurring nightmare. Had he been so blinded by his ambition that he failed to see the pain he was inflicting upon the one he loved? Had he shattered something irreparable with his silence and absence?

The closer he got to Saint-Albert, the more apprehension tightened its grip on him. His hands, clenched on the steering wheel, were slick with perspiration. He realized he had

no plan, no strategy. He had embarked on this journey armed only with his desperate desire to see Liliane again, to look into her eyes and tell her...what? Could he erase months of silence with mere words?

Reaching the outskirts of the village, he slowed down, hesitant. Should he go directly to Liliane's house? The thought terrified him. What if Thomas was there? Jealousy, a silent and tenacious beast, gnawed at his insides.

Finally, as if guided by an invisible hand, he turned onto the dirt road that led to the riverbank, their sanctuary, the scene of their promises for the future.

The autumn sun, filtering through the trees, bathed the clearing in a golden light, illuminating the vibrant colors of the fallen leaves. The air, crisp and invigorating, was filled with the damp scent of earth and the subtle fragrance of the last wildflowers. The gentle lapping of water against the rocks, a familiar and reassuring melody, accompanied Julien's silence as he lost himself in thought.

In the distance, a familiar figure materialized on the path that bordered the river. A graceful and familiar silhouette, one that his heart recognized even before his mind had time to process the scene. She walked with slow steps, her head bowed, as if absorbed in her thoughts. Her blonde hair, which he loved to see blowing in the wind, was gathered in a loose braid that cascaded over her shoulder. She wore simple faded jeans and a thick woolen sweater that accentuated her slender frame.

A wave of conflicting emotions washed over Julien: intense joy at finding her, panic at the reaction he was about to provoke, and a gnawing remorse for having let distance come between them. He hesitated for a moment, his breath catching in his throat, wondering if he should call out to her, make his presence known, or remain there, an invisible spectator to her solitude.

Before he could make a decision, Liliane lifted her head and saw him. Time seemed to stand still. The smile she had worn only moments before vanished, replaced by an

unreadable expression – a mixture of surprise, astonishment, and an emotion Julien couldn't decipher.

“Julien?” she murmured, her voice distant and unreal, like an echo from the depths of his soul.

There was no more escaping, no more hiding. Liliane's gaze, intense and questioning, drew him in like a magnet, compelling him to emerge from his hiding place and face the reality of his presence and the consequences of his absence.

Slowly, he walked towards her, each footstep echoing in the heavy silence of the clearing like a countdown to the fateful moment when their eyes would meet again after months of silence and waiting.

Julien's heart pounded in his chest, mimicking the quickened pace of his steps on the leaf-strewn ground. Each meter that separated him from Liliane was torture, a cruel reminder of lost time, unspoken words, and missed gestures. He sensed her tension, her graceful body frozen in a fragile stillness, like a deer caught in the harsh glare of a winter twilight.

For a fleeting moment, he was tempted to turn back, to escape once more and let the forest swallow his regrets. But the flickering light in Liliane's eyes, a mixture of pain and hope, held him captive to a spell he no longer wished to break.

"Liliane," he breathed, her name a fragile caress in the heavy silence of the clearing.

His voice, hoarse with emotion, shattered the spell that seemed to hold them immobile. Liliane flinched, as if startled awake from a dream, and her gaze, after darting away for a moment, finally settled on him.

"Julien," she murmured, his name a barely audible whisper, as if afraid to break the illusion of his presence.

The chasm that separated them, carved by months of silence and misunderstanding, seemed insurmountable. Yet something still vibrated between them, a tenuous link woven from shared memories and buried feelings.

"May I come closer?" he asked, his voice laced with a humility he had never allowed himself before.

Silence descended once more, heavy with unspoken words and apprehension. Liliane's gaze, a mirror to her conflicting emotions, flickered between him and the ground littered with dead leaves.

Finally, without a word, she took a step back, a minuscule gesture that to Julien carried the weight of an invitation.

Liliane's silence, more eloquent than any words, opened a hesitant path for Julien. He moved forward, each step measured, as if afraid of upsetting the precarious balance of this suspended moment.

The air grew thick, charged with a palpable tension. The river, once witness to their shared laughter, continued its impassive course, indifferent to the drama unfolding on its banks.

Julien stopped a few paces from Liliane, respecting the invisible distance she had established. He studied her, searching for a trace of the vibrant young woman he had known in the beloved features of her face. Time, and hardship, had etched their passage on her, lending her a strength and a gravity he had not known before.

Her eyes, once bright and carefree, seemed larger now, darkened by a melancholy that twisted at his heart. The few meters that separated them had become an impassable gulf, carved by months of silence and regret.

"Liliane, I..." he began, his voice rough with emotion. The words crowded on his tongue, incoherent, incapable of expressing the depths of his despair.

How could he find the right words, the ones that could wipe the slate clean, repair the damage caused by his silence? He cursed himself for waiting so long, for letting distance and doubt poison what they had.

Lillian stared at him, her face an impassive mask, arms crossed tightly over her chest as if to ward off a physical blow. The wait, the uncertainty etched in her blue eyes, pierced him like shards of ice.

"What is it, Julien?" she finally asked, her voice devoid of warmth, sharp as the glacial wind rising over the river. "You've finally decided to reappear in my life, unannounced, after all these months of absence?"

Each word was a poisoned arrow finding its mark with cruel precision. Julien absorbed the impact, utterly defenseless. He deserved her reproach, her cold fury that scorched him more effectively than any flame.

Guilt constricted Julien's throat, stealing his breath. He had hoped, naively perhaps, that an explanation, a sincere apology, would be enough to soothe Lillian's anger. But how could he erase months of silence, of unanswered letters, of broken promises? He had underestimated the depth of the wound he had inflicted, the strength of the resentment that had festered in his absence.

"Lillian, I know I was wrong," he managed, his voice hoarse with remorse. "I should have written, kept you informed, shared my daily life... But I was afraid."

He paused, hesitant to reveal the true reason for his silence, the cowardice that gnawed at him from the inside.

"Afraid of what, Julien?" Lillian challenged, her tone sharp as a riptide. "Afraid that the real world, the one where people have responsibilities and can't afford to disappear overnight, would frighten you away?"

The accuracy of her words made him flinch. Had he fled the reality of their nascent love, preferring to take refuge in the illusory safety of his military life?

"No, that's not it," he protested, taking a hesitant step toward her. "I was afraid... afraid of losing you, afraid that the distance would be stronger than our feelings."

Lillian retreated a step, reestablishing the distance between them. "That's funny, Julien, because I had the distinct impression that you had already made your decision, that you had already forgotten me."

Her voice, filled with an infinite sadness, tore at his heart. He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her close to reassure her, to prove to her that her words were merely figments of a mind tortured by doubt. But he simply lowered his eyes, unable to meet her accusing gaze.

"That's not true, Lillian, I never stopped thinking about you," he murmured, his voice heavy with remorse. "Every day, every night, your face haunted me, your laughter echoed in my ears like a bittersweet refrain. But I was a prisoner of my fear, of my inability to manage the distance, to find my place between my old world and the one I had chosen."

He finally raised his eyes to hers, pleading for forgiveness. "I made a mistake, Lillian, a huge mistake. And I'm willing to do anything to fix it, if you'll just give me another chance."

The wind picked up, gusting through the branches of the trees, as if to emphasize the gravity of his words. Lillian, impassive, seemed to weigh each of his words, scrutinizing their sincerity. Silence descended once more, heavier than before, inhabited by the rustling of dead leaves and the lapping of the river.

"A chance, Julien?" she finally repeated, her voice barely audible. "What if I told you that things have changed, that I am no longer the same person I was a few months ago?"

A glacial shiver ran down Julien's spine, despite the relative mildness of the autumn air. Lillian's words, laden with a newfound gravity, echoed like a death knell in his heart. He could sense what was coming, the sentence he had been dreading since his return, but to hear it articulated with such distance, such detachment, struck him like a brutal uppercut.

"What do you mean?" he managed to articulate, his voice reduced to a raspy whisper.

Lillian looked away, fixing her gaze on the incessant flow of the river as if searching for the words to express the unspeakable. A long silence stretched between them, punctuated by the rustling of the wind in the trees and the plaintive cry of a solitary bird.

"During your absence..." she finally began, her hesitant voice betraying her turmoil, "I wasn't alone, Julien."

With a sharp intake of breath, Julien felt his stomach clench painfully. The shadow of Thomas, the unknown man who had haunted his thoughts since Lillian's letter, took shape, menacingly, in the silence of the clearing.

"Thomas?" he choked out, the word heavy with an bitterness he didn't attempt to disguise.

Lillian turned to him, her deep blue eyes reflecting the sadness of the autumn sky. "Yes, Thomas," she confirmed, her voice soft and melodious, contrasting sharply with the violence of the emotions raging within Julien.

"He was there, simply put, when I needed someone. Present, listening, without empty promises or pretense. He helped me hold on, to rebuild the pieces of myself that you had shattered with your silence."

Each word was a knife twisting in Julien's heart, tearing him apart a little more with each syllable. He watched her, powerless, as she delivered the verdict of his failure, the chronicle of a love that had slowly died, eroded by absence and doubt.

"Don't judge me too quickly, Julien," Lillian continued, her voice filled with infinite sadness. "I'm not saying I love him, at least not in the same way I loved you. But he has become important to me, a reassuring presence in my life, and I can't erase him with a stroke of a pen, no matter how strong your return."

A painful lump formed in Julien's throat. He had hoped, with the fervor of a heart that refused to surrender, that his return would be enough to rekindle the flame of their love. But life had taken its course, and the void he had left had been filled by another presence, another voice, other laughter. Jealousy, acidic and burning, scorched his insides, but he pushed it down, refusing to let it cloud what little lucidity remained.

"I understand," he managed to articulate, his voice rough, betraying the echo of an internal battle. "I'm not expecting anything, Lillian. I just wanted to see you, talk to you, face the consequences of my actions."

A heavy silence, like the twilight descending upon the countryside, settled between them.

## Chapter 11: Letters Lost, Letters Found

The monotonous drone of helicopter engines undergoing maintenance provided the usual soundtrack to Julien's day. In the hangar of imposing dimensions, bathed in a cold, white light, he methodically set about checking a complex electronic circuit, his mind caught between the concentration required by his task and the emotional turmoil that had gripped him since Lillian's revelation.

Each precise movement, each meticulous check of the components, was now part of a familiar, almost soothing choreography. The ordered world of avionics, with its logical diagrams and rational solutions, stood in stark contrast to the chaos reigning in his heart. The image of Lillian, radiant with happiness beside another man, haunted his thoughts, reviving the throbbing pain of their breakup.

The gruff voice of Sergeant Leblanc, his immediate superior, broke into his thoughts. "Well, Julien, you seem to have your head in the clouds today! People are going to start thinking these printed circuits are giving you more trouble than usual."

A wry smile touched Julien's lips. "Sorry, Sergeant, I was just... preoccupied. It's this letter I received this morning, it's thrown me a bit."

Sergeant Leblanc's piercing gaze, hardened by years of service, scanned Julien's weary face. "Family troubles, Julien? Don't forget you can always count on us if you need to talk."

"Thanks, Sergeant, that's kind of you. It's just... let's just say it's complicated. I'll manage, don't worry."

Sergeant Leblanc nodded, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. He had seen enough young recruits pass through to recognize the symptoms of a heart in turmoil. "Alright, as you wish. But don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything at all."

Julien returned to his workstation, his mind awash in the aftermath of the conversation with Sergeant Leblanc and the unsettling questions it had stirred. The unusual solicitude from his superior, a man typically known for his strictness and unwavering adherence to protocol, had struck a chord within him.

A wave of loneliness washed over him. Until now, he had found solace in the discipline and anonymity of military life, escaping the complexity of emotions and the torment of his past. But Liliane's letter had shattered his carefully constructed walls, brutally thrusting him back into a reality he had tried to outrun.

He felt trapped in an impossible dilemma. On one hand lay the path he had forged within the military, promising a bright future and the respect of his peers. On the other, the yearning to find Liliane, to mend the fragments of their fractured love, even if it meant abandoning everything he had built.

An unexpected event disrupted the monotonous rhythm of his days. As he prepared to leave the hangar, a familiar voice echoed behind him. "Julien? Is that really you?"

He turned, his heart pounding in his chest. Standing before him was a soldier he hadn't seen since basic training, his face split into a wide grin.

"Marc! What are you doing here? I thought you were stationed at the Trenton base!"

Marc, a jovial and good-natured fellow, had shared his initial weeks of training. Bonded by shared trials and the camaraderie of the barracks, they had forged a sincere friendship.

"I was! But I was fortunate enough to be assigned to a new unit, and guess what? They transferred me here, to Borden! I just arrived, and someone mentioned you were working in this hangar. I told myself it had to be fate, that we could catch up!"

The genuine joy of seeing Marc again brought a balm to Julien's heart. The prospect of sharing his anxieties with a trusted friend, away from the scrutinizing eyes of his superiors, lifted a weight from his shoulders.

"Listen, Marc, it would be great to see you again. How about we grab a drink tonight, celebrate your new posting?"

"Sounds good to me, Julien! We definitely have some catching up to do! Say, the officers' mess, around 8 p.m.?"

With the rendezvous set, Julien returned to his dormitory, a glimmer of hope flickering in his eyes. Perhaps the evening spent with Marc would lend him some clarity, allowing him to unravel the tangle of his feelings and finally reach a decision.

Upon arriving at his locker, his gaze fell upon a rectangular package that hadn't been there the previous day. His name was inscribed by hand, in a script he knew all too well...

An icy shiver raced down Julien's spine. Blood drained from his face, leaving an unusual pallor that contrasted sharply with the tan he had acquired during outdoor exercises. His breath hitched, shallow and ragged, as if he had just scaled a mountain at breakneck speed. Those letters, once penned with such love on scented stationery, had never reached him. The weight of this revelation, heavier than any physical burden he had ever borne, made him sway on his feet. He gripped the metal edge of the locker, seeking a lifeline in a world that suddenly seemed to be tilting on its axis.

Mechanically, he picked up the package, his fingers numb with emotion. The feel of the paper, rough and worn with time, unleashed a new wave of confused sensations. An intoxicating mix of joy, hope, pain, and anger washed over him, leaving him breathless

and reeling. It was his life, his past, his love, resurfacing from this collection of forgotten letters.

He locked himself in the spartan sanctuary of his dormitory, tearing through the envelope with a childlike haste. Each letter, meticulously arranged in chronological order, told a story. His story. The story of a burgeoning, vibrant love, followed by an unbearable wait, a gradual disillusionment, a wound that refused to heal.

Liliane's letters painted a vivid picture of her daily life on the farm: the springtime births, the toil in the fields, the winter evenings spent by the fire. She spoke of her dreams, her plans, the simple and authentic life she had chosen to build, brick by brick, never losing her infectious optimism.

As he delved deeper into the letters, Julien felt his heart constrict. Liliane's writing, initially joyful and spontaneous, had gradually taken on a palpable melancholy. The short, playful sentences had given way to entire paragraphs where doubt, loneliness, and a thinly veiled sense of abandonment bled through.

One letter in particular, dated a few weeks after his enlistment, struck him more than the others. Liliane wrote of a summer afternoon spent by the river, their secret meeting place where they had pledged their undying love. She described the pain of his absence, the immense void his departure had carved into her life.

"I came here today, Julien, with the foolish hope of feeling your presence, of hearing your voice whisper sweet nothings in my ear. But there is only the silence of the wind in the weeping willows, a silence that echoes strangely like a reproach. I know you made a choice, Julien, a courageous one, but this choice comes at a price. And that price is our love, which pays a little more every day."

Tears welled up in Julien's eyes, hot and uncontrollable. With blinding clarity, he understood the depth of his cowardice. Blinded by his personal ambitions, he had sacrificed the most beautiful gift life had ever offered him: the unconditional love of an exceptional woman.

The truth settled upon him like an irrevocable sentence: he had to see her. Not to justify himself, nor to rekindle the embers of a love he had himself allowed to fade. But to apologize, to try to repair, at least partially, the damage caused by his silence and absence.

A newfound urgency took hold of him, sweeping aside his doubts and hesitations. He had to find her, look into her eyes, and tell her, with simple and sincere words, how blind he had been, how deeply he regretted his choice.

An idea sparked in his mind, igniting a flicker of hope in the mire of his thoughts. He had to get leave, and fast. Saint-Albert, his hometown, was only a few hours away. He could be there within the day, spend a few precious hours with Liliane, and return before curfew.

He rushed out of the dormitory, clutching the letters to his chest like a precious talisman. He had to find Captain Martel, his commanding officer, and convince him to grant this exceptional leave. The task promised to be arduous, as Captain Martel was known for his rigidity and his unwavering adherence to protocol.

Julien stood before Captain Martel's office, his heart pounding in his chest. He knocked timidly on the solid wooden door, engraved with a golden plaque displaying its occupant's rank and function.

"Enter!" boomed a deep voice from the other side.

Julien pushed the door open apprehensively, standing at attention before the imposing desk where Captain Martel sat. The man, in his fifties and well-built, sported an impeccably trimmed gray mustache and a piercing gaze that seemed to see right through you. He looked up from the stack of documents that occupied him, scrutinizing Julien with an almost predatory focus.

"Julien Moreau, if I'm not mistaken. What can I do for you?"

Julien took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. He had to measure every phrase, every inflection of his voice, if he wanted to stand a chance of convincing this gatekeeper.

"Captain Martel, I am requesting an exceptional leave of absence to travel to Saint-Albert today. It is a matter of urgency and personal importance, requiring my immediate presence."

Captain Martel arched a skeptical eyebrow, a wry smile playing on his lips. "A matter of urgency and personal importance, you say? I wasn't aware that young recruits like yourself had such pressing responsibilities outside of their military service."

Julien felt a wave of panic wash over him. He couldn't reveal the true reason for his request, lest he be seen as an irresponsible youth grappling with his first experience of love.

"I understand your skepticism, Captain, but I assure you this is not a whim on my part. It is imperative that I go there this very day. I implore you to make an exception; I would be eternally grateful."

Captain Martel fixed his gaze upon him, his impassive face betraying no emotion. Julien withstood his scrutiny with difficulty, feeling perspiration beading on his forehead and his hands growing clammy. The silence stretched, becoming almost unbearable.

"Very well, Moreau, granted," Captain Martel finally relented, his voice neutral, shattering the suspense with a single blow. "You have until 20:00 hours to attend to this 'urgent personal matter.' After which, I expect you back here for your report. And I will tolerate no delay, is that absolutely clear?"

“Yes, Captain! Thank you so much, Captain! You won't regret this!” exclaimed Julien, relief and elation washing over him.

“Go now, Moreau, and let me hear no more of this,” concluded Captain Martel, his eyes returning to the papers on his desk.

Julien saluted swiftly and hurried out of the office, his heart as light as a feather. He had his leave; he was going to see Liliane. Hope, fragile yet tenacious, bloomed anew within him, like a wildflower pushing through arid soil. He had taken the first step, perhaps the most difficult. Now, he had to face the unknown, armed only with the sincerity of his feelings.

Three hours later, Julien was speeding along the winding road that led to Saint-Albert. The familiar and soothing landscape flew by. Golden cornfields stretched as far as the eye could see, dotted with prosperous farms and woods adorned in the vibrant hues of autumn. The fresh, invigorating air of the countryside whipped at his face, as if trying to shake him from his stupor.

A mixture of apprehension and impatience washed over him as he neared his destination. He replayed Liliane's words from her letters in his mind, searching for clues, for signs that could guide him in this unexpected reunion.

He parked his car near the small wooden bridge that spanned the river, their secret meeting place where they had shared so many intimate moments. The memory of their stolen kisses, their whispered promises, still lingering in the cool evening air, brought a nostalgic smile to his lips.

With his heart pounding in his chest, he started down the small path that snaked along the river, bordered by weeping willows whose branches caressed the placid water. The setting sun painted the sky in warm, golden hues, creating a magical, surreal atmosphere.

Rounding a bend, he saw her. Sitting on their favorite rock, her gaze lost in the distance. She hadn't changed. Her long golden hair cascaded over her shoulders, her delicate features illuminated by a melancholic smile.

She seemed so close, so accessible, and yet an invisible chasm seemed to separate them, carved by months of silence and accumulated things left unsaid. Julien stopped short, his breath catching in his throat, hesitant to break the spell of the moment. He devoured her with his eyes, etching every detail of her face into his memory, as if to compensate for the long weeks of absence.

Liliane turned slowly, drawn by his presence. The smile faded from her face, replaced by an expression of surprise mingled with disbelief.

“Julien?” she murmured, her voice barely audible.

He took a few steps toward her, his heart pounding. “Yes, it's me, Liliane. I had to see you.”

She rose to her feet in one swift motion, her eyes filled with conflicting emotions. The joy of reunion shone through, but it was tinged with a certain reserve, an unusual distance that chilled Julien's heart.

“What are you doing here, Julien? How did you... I don't understand.”

“I received your letters, Liliane,” he choked out, unable to meet her gaze. “All of your letters.”

A heavy silence, laden with unspoken words, fell between them. The wind rustled the branches of the weeping willows, as if to underline the gravity of the situation. Liliane crossed her arms over her chest, her posture defensive.

“My letters?” she repeated, her voice icy. “And what difference does it make, now?”

Julien lifted his eyes to hers, his face etched with emotion. “It changes everything, Liliane. Or at least, I hope it can still change something.”

She didn't answer, simply stared at him with an intensity that unnerved him. Julien knew he had to take the plunge, say what was in his heart before it was too late.

“Liliane, I was a fool. A coward. I should never have left you without a word, let you believe that... that I had forgotten you.”

He paused, trying to control the tremor in his voice. “The truth is, I've never stopped thinking about you, Liliane. Not a single day. But I was afraid, you understand? Afraid of commitment, afraid of not being good enough, afraid of disappointing you.”

“So you preferred to run away, is that it?” Liliane cut him off, her voice laced with bitterness. “You preferred to wall yourself up in silence, leave me to deal with my grief and my questions alone?”

Julien lowered his head, unable to meet her accusing gaze. “Yes, you're right. I acted like a selfish, irresponsible child. And I owe you an apology, Liliane. A sincere and profound apology.”

He raised his eyes to hers, his face ravaged with remorse. “I know that my apologies cannot erase the pain I've caused you. But I needed you to know, Liliane. That I regret it, that I made a monumental mistake.”

Liliane remained silent, her face closed, unreadable. Julien felt doubt gnawing at him again. Had he already ruined everything? Was there still time to pick up the pieces of their shattered love?

"Liliane, say something, please," he begged, his voice choked with anguish. "I can't bear to see you like this, cold and distant. At least tell me if you hate me, if you want me to disappear from your life forever."

Liliane took a deep breath, as if to give herself courage. "I don't hate you, Julien," she finally said, her voice barely audible. "But I don't know who you are anymore."

She paused, her gaze lost in the distance. "You're not the boy I knew, Julien. The army has changed you, and I've changed too. We're not the same anymore."

Julien approached her, reaching out to caress her face. She recoiled slightly, as if his touch burned her.

"I know I've changed, Liliane," he murmured, his heart heavy. "But does that mean we have no chance at all? Does everything we shared count for nothing?"

Liliane remained silent for a long moment, her gaze fixed on the swift current of the river. Julien devoured her with his eyes, searching her features for a sign, a glimmer of hope to cling to.

"There's something you should know, Julien," she finally said, her voice heavy with apprehension. "While you were gone... I wasn't alone."

Julien felt his heart clench in his chest. He could anticipate what was coming next, the sentence that would strike him with full force, leaving him drained and devastated.

"I see," he managed to articulate, his voice hoarse, betraying the pain that washed over him. "And who is he?"

Liliane hesitated for a moment, as if gauging the impact of her next words. "His name is Thomas," she finally murmured. "He works at the neighboring farm. He... he's helped me a lot lately."

Julien closed his eyes, letting the reality of the situation wash over him. A name, an unknown face, now intruded upon their history, blurring the lines of a past he had believed he could reclaim.

A knot of bitterness and disbelief tightened his throat. Julien forced out a question, his voice barely a rasp. "For how long...?"

Liliane's features tightened with palpable tension as she nervously twirled a lock of her golden hair. "Thomas has been around for a while now, Julien. He was there for me when... when I needed it most."

A weight settled onto Julien's shoulders. This stranger, a blurred face yet already so present in Liliane's silences, had woven himself into their story, shattering the illusion of a past frozen in time. Bitterness twisted within him as he recognized his own naïveté. How could he have believed that life in Saint-Albert had simply stopped, that Liliane had waited patiently for him, a princess locked away in an ivory tower?

"What does he mean to you, Liliane?" he asked, his voice strangled by a growing sense of abandonment.

Liliane straightened, her azure blue eyes locking with his. A flicker of defiance crossed her features for a moment before giving way to a more unreadable expression. "Thomas is a good man, Julien. Reliable, solid, present. He doesn't make empty promises, he acts.

He reached out when I was on the verge of collapse, he brought back the smile that you had erased."

Each word, delivered with disarming sincerity, struck Julien like a lash. He measured the chasm that now separated them, a gulf carved by his own mistakes and filled by the reassuring presence of this stranger.

"I'm not asking for your apologies, Julien," Liliane continued, her voice softening with a hint of sadness. "You made your choices, and I respect them. But don't ask me to remain frozen in time, clinging to a past that no longer exists."

The sun, poised to vanish below the horizon, set the sky ablaze with hues of orange and violet. A gentle breeze arose, rustling the leaves of the weeping willows and stirring a few rebellious strands of Liliane's hair. The moment held a poignant, almost unreal beauty, as if to emphasize the brutality of the situation.

Julien felt lost, like a navigator who had lost his North Star. The world he had left behind, the one where Liliane waited patiently for him, had crumbled, replaced by an unfamiliar and threatening reality. He had to face his responsibilities, accept the consequences of his actions, even if it meant giving up the love of his life.

A painful lump formed in Julien's throat.

## Chapter 12: Open Horizons

Night had fallen upon the base, shrouding the barracks in a blanket of silence and darkness. Julien, stretched out on his narrow cot, stared at the low ceiling, haunted by Liliane's words and the specter of this man, Thomas, who had taken root in her life, in her heart. He thought back to their budding love, the shared laughter, the promises whispered beneath the starlit sky of Saint-Albert. It all seemed at once close at hand and infinitely distant, like a heartbreaking dream fading with the dawn.

He sat up abruptly, unable to bear the weight of inaction and guilt any longer. He had to act, to do something, anything to alleviate the suffocating feeling that pressed down on him. His eyes fell on the payphone at the end of the hall, the last link to the outside world, his only weapon against the silence that engulfed him.

Captain Martel answered on the third ring, his voice deep and authoritative, a stark contrast to the turmoil raging within Julien. The young man took a deep breath, striving to control the tremor in his voice, and made his request with desperate urgency.

"Leave? At this hour? That's impossible, Julien! You know very well..."

"Please, Captain, it's important, it's... vital."

Silence fell on the other end of the line, heavy with reproach and incomprehension. Julien felt his hopes dwindling with each passing second. He clutched the receiver tighter against his ear, as if to better capture the slightest glimmer of hope.

"Listen, Julien, I understand this is difficult for you, but..."

"No, Captain, you don't understand!"

The words escaped him, fueled by a raw sincerity that had no place in the coded world of the military. An icy silence greeted his outburst, and Julien instantly cursed his lack of restraint. He braced himself for a blunt refusal, a scathing reprimand. However, when Captain Martel's voice came again, the rigidity had softened, replaced by a kind of resigned compassion.

"Come see me tomorrow morning, first thing. We'll see what can be done."

The next morning, as dawn broke, Julien stood before Captain Martel's office, his heart pounding in his chest. The wait had been interminable, punctuated by the comings and goings of soldiers and the dull thud of boots on the concrete floor. The Captain received him without delay, his face impassive but not devoid of a certain empathy. He listened attentively to Julien's account of his missed reunion with Liliane, of the presence of this unexpected rival who had shattered his certainties.

"I can't grant you official leave, Julien," he finally declared, confirming the young man's fears. "Not under the current circumstances. But... I can help you in a personal capacity."

A flicker of hope rekindled in Julien's eyes. He sensed that Captain Martel was taking a risk by supporting him, by bending the strict rules of the army.

"I'm a few days behind schedule," the Captain continued, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "Let's just say you've been assigned a special mission... in civilian territory."

A few hours later, Julien found himself on a bus headed towards Saint-Albert, his heart pounding in his chest. He had no concrete plan, only the unshakeable conviction that he had to see Liliane, to speak with her, to confront the truth even if it meant seeing his last hopes crumble before his eyes. The landscape sped by, a familiar yet alien panorama, as if he were rediscovering a world he had left behind long ago.

The bus shuddered to a halt in the village square, deserted in the late afternoon autumn light. Julien inhaled deeply, the crisp, fresh air a stark contrast to the confined atmosphere of the military base. He hadn't told anyone of his arrival, yearning for a moment of reflection before facing Liliane. He began to walk aimlessly, guided by memory and a visceral need to find her.

He strolled along the river where they used to wander, pausing for a moment to contemplate the ceaseless flow of water, a symbol of passing time and missed opportunities. His heart pounded as he approached Liliane's farmhouse. A warm glow emanated from the kitchen windows, offering a glimpse into a scene of peaceful domesticity. Julien crept closer, hesitant to shatter the spell.

It was then, through the misted glass, that he saw her. Liliane was there, in her kitchen, but she wasn't alone. A man stood beside her, tall and sturdy, with brown hair and an open smile that contrasted with Liliane's usual seriousness. They laughed together, sharing a tender kiss on the corner of her lips.

Julien's world crumbled, his hopes reduced to dust by the unbearable sight. He needed no further explanation; the truth stood before him, raw and relentless as a knife to the heart.

An icy shiver ran down his spine, despite the gentle warmth emanating from the house. The spectacle of this stolen happiness, this intimacy he himself had abandoned, tore him apart. He retreated slowly, as if fearing that the slightest sound might betray his presence, might shatter the fragile equilibrium of this tableau that so eloquently denied him.

The walk back to the village seemed endless. Each step was torture, a litany of regrets and unanswered questions. The sky had clouded over, mirroring his desolate soul. A fine, icy rain began to fall, as if to remind him of the harshness of a reality he could no longer escape.

Arriving back at the deserted square, he noticed a familiar figure seated at a table outside a small cafe. Liliane, bundled in a thick wool coat, seemed lost in contemplation over a

steaming cup of coffee. A profound melancholy emanated from her, a diffuse sadness that resonated strangely with the greyness of the day.

Julien hesitated for a moment, torn between the urge to rush to her and the fear of disturbing her, of breaking the fragile enchantment of this stolen moment. He took a deep breath and approached, his steps slow and hesitant, as if walking on eggshells.

The sound of his footsteps on the wet pavement roused Liliane from her reverie. She looked up, and a flash of surprise illuminated her face. A timid smile, almost embarrassed, touched her lips, contrasting with the sadness in her eyes.

"Julien..." she murmured, her voice barely audible in the hushed silence of the cafe.

He approached the table and removed his military cap, releasing a stray lock of hair that fell across his forehead. He had aged, she realized, marked by months of a life they no longer shared. His features seemed harsher, his gaze imbued with a newfound seriousness. Yet beneath the soldier's carapace, she recognized the shy, passionate young man she had known, the one who used to look at her with stars in his eyes.

"May I?" he asked, gesturing to the empty chair across from her.

Liliane nodded, unable to utter a single word. A heavy silence fell between them, laden with unspoken words and painful memories.

"I saw you... at the farmhouse," Julien confessed, his voice rough. "With... with him."

Liliane didn't seem surprised by his confession. She looked away, her gaze fixed on the incessant dance of raindrops on the cafe window.

"That's Thomas," she said simply.

"Yes, I gathered that," Julien said, his throat suddenly dry. The name sounded strange to his ears, like a discordant note in the familiar melody of his past. He tried to picture this man, this Thomas, in their world, sharing Liliane's laughter, her complicity, her everyday life. Each mental image was a stab to the heart, a raw wound that rekindled the throbbing pain of his absence.

Liliane sat up a little straighter, her hazel eyes, usually so luminous, clouded with an unfathomable sadness. "He didn't know you were coming, Julien," she said softly, as if to ward off a misunderstanding, an injustice.

"It doesn't matter," he replied with a weary shrug. "I didn't come to stake a claim on your life, Liliane. I just wanted... to understand."

A long silence stretched between them, punctuated by the discreet patter of rain on the windows and the murmur of distant conversations inside the cafe. Julien observed Liliane with renewed attention, as if rediscovering her after a long absence. She had changed, undeniably. A new strength, a quiet confidence emanated from her, a maturity that hardship had etched into her delicate features. She was no longer the dreamy, carefree girl he had left behind. Life on the farm, solitude, and undoubtedly the love of this man had transformed her.

"Tell me about him," he finally asked, his voice raspy, betraying the effort this request cost him.

Liliane hesitated for a moment, weighing each word as if it carried the weight of a betrayal. "Thomas is... an old family friend. He took over the neighboring farm a few years ago. After you left... I was lost, Julien. The farm seemed immense, overwhelming. Thomas was there, he helped me hold on, to overcome the difficulties. He's patient, kind... and he understands life here, the land, the seasons."

Each of Liliane's words resonated in Julien's heart like a confession, a confirmation of the abyss that had opened up between them. He had dreamt of this return, clinging to the image of their love like a lifeline in the ocean of solitude and discipline of the army. But the reality was there, stubborn, relentless. Time, that invisible craftsman, had woven new bonds, new complicities, relegating their story to a past that was inexorably fading away.

"And you, Liliane?" he asked, his voice choked with emotion. "What do you feel for him?"

Liliane lifted her head, and their eyes met in a flash of pain and confusion. "I don't know, Julien," she confessed, her voice filled with a heartbreaking sincerity. "I thought that... that what we had was eternal, indestructible. But your silence, your absence... created a void, a wound that I tried to fill. Thomas brings me the stability, the security that I thought I had lost forever. But a part of me remains turned towards the past, towards what we experienced, towards the unknown of what we could have been."

A flash of anger crossed Julien's face, anger directed at himself, at his cowardice, at this silence he had thought was protective and which had turned into a destructive weapon. "You're right, Liliane," he said bitterly. "I was a coward, a fool. I ran away from my feelings, my fears, and in doing so, I lost you."

Liliane reached out and placed her hand over Julien's, a spontaneous gesture that surprised even herself. His skin was warm, rough in places, as if marked by manual labor and the passage of time. A strange current passed through her at the contact, a disturbing mix of familiarity and the unknown.

"Don't say that, Julien," she murmured, her soft voice a stark contrast to the turmoil raging within her. "Life is rarely just, rarely simple. We've made choices, some good, some regrettable, and we must live with the consequences of those choices."

She withdrew her hand, afraid that the comforting gesture might be misconstrued, that it might rekindle a flame she was no longer certain she wanted to fan.

"What will you do now?" she asked, seeking to fill the silence that descended once more between them.

"I don't know," Julien admitted, his gaze lost in contemplation of the low, heavy sky that seemed to press down on the village like a premonition. "I feel like I've reached the end of a path, but I have no sense of what direction to take next."

He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, considered it for a moment, then placed it back on the table. Liliane smiled faintly. Some habits died hard; the nervous gesture of reaching for a smoke before thinking better of it still lingered.

"I have a few days' leave," he resumed, as if speaking to himself. "Then... I'm supposed to return to base, begin specialized training, something prestigious, apparently."

He paused, catching his own weary reflection in the dark surface of his coffee.

"But I'm not sure of anything anymore, Liliane. Everything I thought I wanted, everything I was striving for, it all seems so meaningless now."

His eyes met hers, and a flicker of hope illuminated their somber depths. "What if we started over, Liliane? Just you and me. We could go far from here, forget the past, rebuild our lives somewhere new."

Liliane felt a pang in her heart. Julien's proposal, as unexpected as it was tempting, brought her to a crossroads. On one hand, the promise of rekindled love, the familiar warmth of their connection, the wild hope of happiness. On the other, the weight of the past, the specter of suffering and abandonment, the uncertainty of an unknown future.

"Julien, I... I can't answer you now," she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "I need time to think, to understand what I truly want."

"Time?" Julien echoed, a flicker of panic crossing his features. "How much time, Liliane? I already feel like I've lost years."

"I don't know," she confessed, tears welling in her eyes. "Don't force me to give you an answer I don't possess. Just... let me breathe."

A wave of sadness washed over Julien. It felt like they were back to square one, facing an insurmountable wall of uncertainty. Yet, a glimmer of hope persisted, faint but real. Liliane hadn't said no. She needed time, space to sort through her emotions, and he had to respect that, however difficult it might be.

"Alright, Liliane," he finally conceded, his voice heavy with resigned sorrow. "I won't pressure you. But promise me one thing."

Liliane lifted her head, her eyes questioning.

"Promise me you won't make a hasty decision, that you won't choose the easy way out for fear of hurting me. Think of yourself, what you truly desire, and let your heart guide you, not guilt or the weight of the past."

A sad smile touched Liliane's lips. "That's what I've always done, Julien," she murmured.

They remained seated for a while longer, facing each other, bound by an invisible thread, caught between the fragile hope of renewal and the fear of a final goodbye. The rain had stopped, giving way to an uncertain sky where gray clouds were beginning to thin,

revealing glimpses of azure. A metaphor for their situation, Julien thought, caught between shadow and light, hope and despair.

"I should go," Liliane said, rising to her feet. She seemed to hesitate, as if wanting to add something more, but the words remained stuck in her throat.

Julien stood up too, acutely aware that each second spent with her was stolen from the time slipping away from them. He looked at her one last time, imprinting every detail of her face in his memory: her hazel eyes, veiled with a sadness he desperately wished to erase, her soft mouth, which had whispered his name with so much love, her delicate hands, marked by work and time, yet retaining the warmth of his memory.

"I'll wait for you, Liliane," he said simply, knowing the words were both a promise and a confession of vulnerability.

Liliane didn't reply, offering only a sad smile and a slight nod. Then, she turned and walked away with slow steps, soon disappearing around the corner, leaving Julien alone with his doubts and fragile hopes.

Her departure left a chilling emptiness in the already cool early evening air. Julien remained motionless, watching her silhouette recede until it melted into the labyrinth of cobblestone streets. A feeling of powerlessness washed over him, heavy as lead in his chest. He had crossed miles, defied the restrictions of military life, only to find himself facing a dead end, a wall of uncertainty more insurmountable than the fences of the base.

The cafe, deserted at this late hour, echoed his loneliness. The acrid scent of stale tobacco and faded memories hung in the still air. He slumped back in his chair, body heavy, mind caught in a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts. Should he insist, try to win Liliane back at all costs? Or should he respect her need for space, risking losing her forever?

His gaze fell on the pack of cigarettes he had left on the table, a familiar temptation in moments of anguish. He picked it up automatically, turning it between his fingers,

hesitating for a moment before putting it back down. No, that wasn't the answer. Smoking would only mask the pain, not heal it.

He stood up abruptly, as if to shake himself from his torpor, and left the cafe without a backward glance. Night had fallen on Saint-Albert, draping the streets in a soft, melancholy darkness. Warm lights glowed from the windows of houses, testaments to an intimacy he envied. He wandered aimlessly, letting his feet guide him through the maze of alleys, seeking to outrun the anxiety gnawing at him.

He passed the church, its massive bell tower rising into the night like a finger pointing to a star-studded sky. A little further on, he recognized the bakery where Liliane used to buy her bread, its warm, sweet aroma lingering in the evening air. Every place, every detail, reminded him of her presence, her cheerfulness, her sweetness, and heightened the feeling of loss that gnawed at him.

Julien's steps, hesitant at first, grew firmer, guided by a sudden impulse, an irrepressible need to cling to something solid, something real in this ocean of uncertainty. He headed for the village exit, leaving behind the warm lights and promises of a happiness that might not be meant for him. The country road stretched before him, a straight, dark line winding through fields already numbed by autumn.

He walked without stopping, as if fleeing the remorse and confusion that inhabited him. The cold wind whipped at his face, blowing through his hastily cropped hair, tangible reminders of another life, another identity. He breathed deeply the crisp, damp air of the countryside, intoxicating himself with this feeling of newfound freedom, however precarious it might be.

In the distance, a soft, golden light caught his eye. He recognized the small barn that Liliane had shown him on one of their first outings, a secret place, hidden from prying eyes, where they liked to meet to escape the torpor of summer afternoons.

The wooden door, weathered by time, yielded to his hesitant push. The familiar smell of cut hay, damp earth, and worn leather enveloped him like a caress, awakening a

multitude of buried memories. The room was plunged in semi-darkness, illuminated only by the uncertain light of the moon filtering through the cracks in the wooden planks.

Julien moved forward cautiously, his footsteps echoing on the packed earth floor. He made out the old woolen blanket they used to spread on the hay to insulate themselves from the cold, the empty bottles that lay scattered in a corner, vestiges of their laughter and whispered secrets.