



FRAGILE:
Handle With Care

Look at me. Not too shabby for an eighty-year-old man, huh? I'm feeling pretty good, although I can't seem to remember how I got here or how this bandage ended up on my forehead. I hope I get out of here soon; I'd like to go home. After all, today's our anniversary.

I lean closer to the mirror, turning my head to the side and touching the edge of the white medical tape holding the square gauze to my forehead. Let me just pull the tape up a little bit over here and see what this looks like. I hear a knock at the door. Better get back in bed.

I scurry out of the bathroom and run back to my hospital bed, jumping in with relative ease. There's a second knock, this time louder. "Come on in," I say, pulling the white cotton sheet up over my hospital gown.

An orderly in blue scrubs enters my room pushing a cart full of folded, white linen robes. He looks about sixty-five, with dark skin, gray hair, and a five-o'clock shadow. A pair of glasses and a photo ID card hang down around his neck.

"Noah Hartman?" he asks, putting on his reading glasses to check the name on the clipboard.

"The one and only."

He pushes a table on wheels over my lap and places a tray of food on it from beneath his cart. I sit up to take a look as he removes the lid, revealing a nicely prepared dinner.

"Mmmm, smells great." I'm hungry, so I take a bite. "Now *that's* good," I say, pointing at the food.

"I'm glad you like it. I made it myself," he says proudly in a deep, soothing voice, hanging the clipboard back up on the side of his cart.

"Hey, how'd you know what I wanted, anyway?"

"You filled out a meal card, remember?"

"No, not really..." I think to myself, trying to put the pieces back together. "The last thing I remember, I was standing in the ark... something important to tell her. But after that, everything's just a blank," I say, taking a sip of wine from the plastic cup. "So, you must be the cook here at the hospital."

"Who, me? Nah... I work second shift doing whatever's asked of me. Right now it's serving dinner and passing out these robes to the patients."

I try to hold back a sneeze, but it's no use, I sneeze anyway.

"Bless you."

"Thanks," I say, accepting a box of Kleenex from him. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"I get that all the time. Got one of those faces, I guess. But I have been known to volunteer at the Hartman Foundation from time to time. Maybe you've seen me there, although I doubt you'd ever recognize me if you saw me. I've got to tell you, Mr. Hartman, you've done a wonderful job down there."

"Eh, it was nothing, really. And please... call me Noah."

"*Nothing?* Don't be so modest. The Foundation has helped thousands of families in need. I wouldn't exactly call that *nothing*."

"Like I said, you do look familiar..." I say, staring at him. "So, what'd you say your name was again?"

"Josh... Josh Numen," he says, extending out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Josh."

"The pleasure's all mine," he says, smiling with warm eyes. I return the smile. "Oh... before I forget, I believe this is yours," he says, handing me a delicate photograph, being careful not to tear it. "Careful, it's a little soggy. They found it in one of your pockets. Don't know if it means anything to you."

Mesmerized, I stare at the old photograph, the impression of the sand dollar stamped in my mind like it happened yesterday. "My wife took this with one of those disposable underwater cameras forty years ago, back in ninety-six. See what I'm holding in the picture?" I say, turning it around. "Take a good look, because you'll never look at it again quite the same way. We were snorkeling on our honeymoon in the warm, tranquil water..."

A forty-five-foot catamaran dropped its anchor in a secluded, horseshoe-shaped cove. Steep cliffs rising up from a private, white sand beach painted the backdrop to this tropical island paradise situated in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean.

Noah was a good-looking thirty-eight-year-old man with dark hair, blue eyes, and a chiseled body. He was wearing navy Nautica trunks as he floated effortlessly on his stomach, snorkeling in the crystal clear turquoise water. Robin was a beautiful twenty-eight-year-old woman. Her red bikini showed off a silver bellybutton ring on a trim waist. Her long, red hair flowed freely on top of the water's surface as she took pictures of the sea life with an underwater camera. The clarity of the water was so pure that everything in sight seemed to be within reach, no matter how near or how far. Tropical colored fish in vivid colors glided freely all around them in the boundless sea. In awe of his surroundings, there was no other place on earth where Noah could experience such unsheltered freedom.

He tapped Robin on the shoulder and motioned with his hands, pointing out a lone object sitting undisturbed on the ocean floor below.

"It's a sand dollar. I'm sure you've seen one, probably even held one in your hand, huh, Josh?"

Noah kicked his fins and dove down about ten feet, picking up the sand dollar and resurfacing to get air through his snorkel. From beneath the water's surface, he proudly displayed his newfound prize to Robin.

"No two are exactly the same. Its simplistic design and imperfect form may appear somewhat... well, ordinary. Most people probably wouldn't think twice about it. So why should this seemingly insignificant object capture so much of my attention?"

BOOM ! The precious sand dollar in Noah's hand exploded. In what seemed like slow motion, the sand dollar disintegrated through his fingers into a thousand tiny grains of sand that evanesced into obscurity.

"Because for me, the sand dollar represents life, and how fragile life really is. What was once so very precious to me, suddenly and without warning, disintegrated and vanished before my eyes. Just like the sand dollar, life holds no promises. Seemingly solid and secure in our grasp, the blessings we have in our lives today are easily shattered tomorrow. The lesson learned: never take your loved ones for granted. And if you're ever lucky enough to find that one person in life who makes you love more than any other person could possibly make you love, you treat every day together as if it were your last. You cherish every moment."

"However, for me, this lesson came too late, for she was already gone, seemingly lost forever. And there was nothing I could do to put the pieces back together. I would spend my life wishing I could somehow travel back, back in time, to the day I first laid eyes on that precious beauty."

The precious beauty of Robin's young face was shadowed by sadness as she nervously searched Noah's worried eyes for reassurance.

"If only I'd known how fragile she really was. If only I'd known her hidden secret. I would have held onto her so differently... never letting go..."

Snapping out of it, my eyes drift back to the picture as I set it down on the table.

"Wow, she left quite an impression on you, didn't she?" Josh says, picking up the picture to look at it. "You must have really loved her."

"Yeah, I loved her, all right... never stopped, even after she was gone." But why bother Josh with all this? I'm sure he has better things to do than listen to an old man ramble on about the one who got away. "Hey, pass me the salt, will you?"

"So, what was it about her that made you love her so much?" Josh asks, handing me the shaker.

A compelling question for sure. I mull it over while I take another bite. I guess there's no avoiding the subject after all. Besides, I really do need to tell the story to someone. I

guess Josh is as good as any. "You mean besides the way she used to look at me... gazing deep into my eyes, my soul, as if I were the only other person on earth?"

"Yeah, besides that," Josh says, laughing, his kind eyes encouraging me to tell him all about her.

"I didn't know it at the time, but I guess you could say I was dead on arrival, so to speak. Then she came into my life and fixed what was broken, opened my eyes to what really matters, you know what I mean? She was full of life, a real free spirit. I gave up everything for her, and in return, she taught me how to live my own life and be free. Made me feel alive."

"Then what happened?"

"She disappeared... vanished into thin air."

"Sounds to me like a story of heartbreak and misfortune."

"Yeah, some people might call it that," I say, looking away. "But that's not what I'd call it. No... I prefer to call it something else," I say, looking back at him.

"What's that, Noah?"

"A story of undying love."