

Fantasy

The Map We Never Finished

By: Sara Ali



Sara Ali

I'm Sara Ali, an academic by profession but a writer by passion; who lives in her own world of words.

Emma stood at the back of the little church in Willowbrook, the smell of aged wood and wilting lilies heavy in the air. She wasn't ready to walk down the aisle—not like this. Not to Sophie's funeral.

The pastor's voice was steady but distant, a background hum against the pounding in her chest. People filled the pews, murmuring their condolences and sharing stories. But all Emma could see was the old oak tree outside the stained-glass window, its branches stretched out like it was trying to catch her before she fell apart.

Her fingers brushed against the yellowed map tucked in her coat pocket. It was creased, torn at the edges—a relic of a promise made when life was still infinite. Her knees buckled slightly as the memory hit her like a wave. They were twelve, barefoot and wild, sprawled under the oak tree with the summer sun painting their faces. Sophie was sprawled on her stomach, a stick in her hand as she scratched

lines into the dirt.

"This," Sophie declared, pointing to a crooked circle, "is Paris. We're going there first."

Emma frowned, her glasses slipping down her nose. "We can't even get to the next town without your brother's bike. How are we supposed to get to Paris?"

"Details, details," Sophie said with a wave of her hand. "We'll figure it out. Life's not about knowing all the answers, Em. It's about taking the leap."

Emma blinked back tears as the memory dissolved. She forced herself to focus on the present, clutching the map like a lifeline. She'd seen Sophie for the last time just two months ago. Sophie had called her out of the blue—voice a little raspy but still dripping with that Sophie charm.

"Emma, babe, pack your bags. We're hitting the road."

Emma had laughed, assuming it was another one of Sophie's impulsive ideas. "Sophie, I've got deadlines, meetings, and—"

"Excuses," Sophie interrupted.

"When was the last time you did something just because it made your soul happy? We've got places

to go and memories to make.”

Something in her tone—a hint of urgency beneath the playfulness—made Emma hesitate. That’s when Sophie dropped the bombshell.

“Stage four, Em. The clock’s ticking, and I’m not wasting what’s left waiting for life to come to me.”

The world had tilted. Sophie was dying. But instead of crumbling, Sophie had doubled down on living.

They hit the road within days, leaving behind the humdrum of adulthood for a whirlwind of spontaneity. In Paris, Sophie dared Emma to sing karaoke in a crowded bar. In Kyoto, Emma finally taught Sophie how to meditate—though Sophie spent most of the time giggling. And in a remote Icelandic village, under the kaleidoscope of the Northern Lights, they sat in silence, hands clasped, marveling at the universe’s enormity.

“You’ve always been my Northern Star,” Sophie whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “Even when we drifted, I could always find my way back to you.”

The clatter of chairs pulled Emma from her thoughts. The service was ending, and the crowd was beginning to file out. She stayed frozen, staring at

Sophie’s casket.

“Come on,” a familiar voice echoed in her mind. It was Sophie, cheeky and relentless. “You’re not done yet.”

Emma unfolded the map, now barely legible. Sophie’s scrawled handwriting from years ago glared back at her: “Dreams don’t expire. Neither do friendships.”

Her lips quirked into a sad smile. There were still places they hadn’t seen; dreams they hadn’t chased. Emma knew what Sophie would’ve said if she were here: “You’re still breathing, Em. So go live.”

Sliding the map back into her pocket, Emma walked out of the church, the December wind biting at her cheeks. Her grief was heavy, yes, but it was wrapped in something else—purpose.

The journey wasn’t over. It never would be. Sophie had made sure of that.

