

LONDON  
*on my* Mind

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**PUSH**

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# Chapter 1

The jet engines roared as the little light turned on over my head. I tried to look out the window, but the shade was almost all the way down and the person sitting by the window was asleep. How anyone can sleep with all the noise and turbulence of the plane constantly reminding them that they're miles off the ground, I'll never know.

My grandma used to tell all kinds of stories about airplane travel in the late 1900s, and it had always seemed so glamorous.

But there was nothing glamorous about flying.

The seat was too small, and I spent a good part of the trip with my stomach squished by the tight seat belt until a flight attendant noticed how uncomfortable I was and offered me an extender. Seriously, why don't they inform fat people they have extenders at the beginning of the flight?

I'd picked the aisle seat because I didn't want to bother anyone when I had to get up—I have a tiny bladder, so it was bound to happen. But I'd forgotten that sitting at the end of the row meant people would inevitably bother *me*.

Plus, the bathroom was small, and I barely managed to keep my balance squatting over the toilet, trying to keep the pee from running down my leg.

When the wheels finally touched down, making the plane bounce and the bags rattle in the overhead compartments, my heart almost jumped out of my mouth. All I could think about was getting home and taking a shower.

Except I wasn't going home. And I wouldn't be going home for a long time.

I forced myself to file that thought in the Things I Can't Think About or I'll Freak Out folder, then pulled on my backpack as I waited for the line of passengers to start moving down the aisle. I waited while sitting, obviously, even though sleepyhead over by the window and the woman between us—who had spent so much of the flight typing on her laptop that I could still hear the clickety-clack of her keyboard—were already standing, leaning on the seats in front of them, as if every second they waited cost ten years of their lives.

Now would be a good time to turn my phone off airplane mode and let my grandparents know I'd arrived safely. They were probably anxious, waiting to hear from me. But I didn't even take the phone out of my bag. I still couldn't bring myself to talk to them.

When the line started moving, I waited for the aisle to clear before standing up, instead of trying to squeeze between

the passengers. I could feel two pairs of eyes glaring at me.

Personally, I wasn't in any rush to get off the plane. As bad as the last twelve hours had been, I knew they were a lot better than what was waiting for me outside.

Unfortunately, as the line shrank, I had no choice but to follow the last passengers toward the metal staircase that would bring us down to the tarmac, where we'd have to take a shuttle bus. In that moment, frozen by the cold wind of the gray city before me, even though it was the end of spring, I had a shocking realization:

I hated London.

Never in my life did I think I'd say that. But there's a first time for everything, right?

To be clear, I've always loved England, and ever since I became a One Direction fan, I've dreamed of visiting the United Kingdom. (I know, I'm a walking cliché—I also love reading fanfiction while drinking coffee at Starbucks and wearing my hair in a messy bun.) I loved the cold. I loved the fact that the city had a café on every corner. Every time I thought about going to London, my chest tingled with excitement. And even if One Direction was on an indefinite hiatus, I still dreamed they would announce a comeback conveniently during my visit, with one of those huge shows at Wembley Stadium and, who knows, maybe even a meet-and-greet. If I was lucky, I might even run into Harry and Louis (my favorites) just walking around!

But now the city represented my new life. Everything from my daily routine to the most important things had stayed behind in Brazil: my friends, school, grandparents, my mom—or, to be precise, the *memory* of my mom. The couch we used to lounge on, watching telenovelas. The corner of the table where she always sat to talk with clients and take orders. Her bed, which I climbed into all those nights when I couldn't sleep. Everything that reminded me of her had stayed behind with the life I loved.

Of all the bad things about my move to London, though, the worst was the irritating little man waving at me through the sliding doors of the arrivals gate: Roberto, my dad.

I hadn't seen him in over ten years, but there was no mistaking him. Roberto's exaggerated gestures were just like mine; our thick, curly brown hair differed only in length (his was shorter, while mine came down to my shoulders); and the smile he gave me was the same one I saw in the mirror.

Not that I felt like smiling just then. He didn't seem to care about that when I stopped beside him, pushing a cart with my bags.

"Wow, Dayana! Look how you've grown!" Roberto held me by the shoulders to admire me, as if who I'd become was all thanks to him. "Gosh, I can't even believe you're here!"

He was so excited, all his sentences ended like this! Full of exclamation points!

That two-faced dirtbag seemed to have forgotten that he'd abandoned my mom and me ten years earlier to seek his fortune abroad. Which meant that, at seventeen, I'd spent more of my life not seeing that man's face than I'd spent with him.

Of course, he hadn't disappeared completely—my mom would never have let him live it up in Europe while she struggled to raise her daughter alone. He sent money when things weren't "too difficult" and called on special occasions, like Christmas and my birthday.

But that was it.

Just that.

Nothing like fatherly love.

A small, vengeful part of me was glad he was being forced to fulfill his parental role after so many years of neglect. But mostly I was consumed by the painful losses that just kept piling up. How was I supposed to live with this man and look him in the eye every day? The man who had abandoned me when I was still a child and started a new family in a different country? The man who greeted me with a smile at the airport, as if we were really father and daughter and not two strangers?

I didn't reciprocate his enthusiasm. I clenched my jaw and squeezed the cart's handle harder.

"Yeah, I can't believe I'm here, either," I replied through gritted teeth, but he didn't hear the bitterness in my voice,

or pretended not to. He just grabbed my backpack, took the cart, and walked me to the parking lot, talking about how excited he was to see me and how he couldn't wait to show me around London.

So that was it, then? After ten years of neglect, he had nothing to say? No apology? No *I'm sorry for everything that happened?* No *Your mom died, but I'm here for you now?*

All these questions started to bubble up inside me as if I were a bottomless pit of hatred and anger. I wanted to turn into a volcano and spew my rage everywhere, without worrying over who might be in the line of fire. I'm proud to say that I managed to hold it together for the whole car ride. At least until we parked in front of a small white row house.

That was when I found myself face-to-face with two smiling women—a mother and daughter standing in the doorway, looking at me full of fake anticipation, as if I were in London for vacation. As if we were one big happy family.

“Hiii, querida,” Lauren said, switching between Portuguese and English.

I was barely up the front steps when Lauren's shrill voice hit me and I was pulled in for a hug. She led me inside with one arm around my shoulder while her daughter, Georgia, who still hadn't said a word, followed close behind.

“It's so great you're here! We're so excited to have you! You're going to love Londres!”

Roberto came up behind us, dragging my heavy bags.



From the backyard, a bark announced the presence of Ruffles, probably the only creature in this house that I would get along with. I'd seen the Scottish terrier in some of our (very rare) video calls, and my dad mentioned him now and again, but I'd totally forgotten he existed as I wallowed in self-pity at the thought of the move.

"This is your room."

Roberto put my bags in the bedroom next to the living room, but I didn't have a chance to follow him and take refuge there because I was still trapped by Lauren's arm, forced to listen to her chatter about how perfect London was.

I had talked to Lauren a few times on the phone. My mom and I used to laugh at the pretentious way she mixed English and Portuguese, and we'd make fun of the false note in her voice when she talked to me like we were best friends. As if I hadn't heard her pushy whispers on the other end of the line when my dad took the phone to ask if I needed anything. Anything material, of course, because that was all he could offer me.

Because Lauren was so obviously fake, our inside joke back home was to call her "Lauriane"—the Brazilian version of her name.

I should have been amused to meet Lauren in person. I should have been holding back laughter at her endless monologue. I should have been taking mental note of all the

things I would tell my mom on the phone later so we could giggle about her together.

But I didn't do any of that.

First, because I didn't think this was funny at all.

Second, because there wouldn't be a phone call to my mom later—or ever.

So no one can blame me for exploding all of a sudden, when Lauren, like an insensitive, crap-spewing fire hose, started talking about the trips she was planning for us, including to Disneyland Paris.

“Could you just shut up?!” I yelled so loud it scratched my throat.

I twisted out of her grip and stood facing her.

My dad had just come back into the living room, and his footsteps stopped dead, along with every other sound in the house. Even Ruffles stopped barking, leaving the room in total silence. Everyone looked at me in surprise.

“I don't want to go to Disneyland! I don't want to live in London! I don't want anything to do with this crappy family!”

I almost stomped my foot at the end—that's how frustrated I was—but I didn't want to seem like a spoiled little girl, so I controlled myself.

“Dayana! Watch how you talk to Lauren!” my dad said, serious for the first time since I'd met him at the airport.

I turned to him and was struck by the stern expression on

his face. But even his intimidating gaze wasn't enough to stop me.

"I'll talk however I want! Who do you think you are to boss me around? You have no right to tell me what to do."

I saw the exact moment when he broke. His posture stopped being so threatening; his eyes darted from me to Lauren, and then to his stepdaughter, who had been silently watching the whole argument with raised eyebrows. He opened his mouth to respond but then closed it without saying anything. And that gave me the strength to continue:

"You abandoned us, you disappeared from my life, you never wanted to know a single thing about your own daughter, and now that I'm o-bli-ga-ted"—I spoke slowly and clearly—"to come here, you want to act like a father? Give me a break!"

"I . . . You don't . . ." he stammered.

Before either of us could say anything more, Lauren cut in:

"We won't allow this kind of behavior in this house, Dayana."

Her face was serious, her voice harsh. She ruled with a firm hand, just like my mom did. But she was a cheap imitation of the person I loved most in the world, the person who was no longer in my life. Maybe that's why, against all reasonable expectations, I started laughing. I laughed loud and hard, to the point that tears ran down my cheeks. I laughed so much I had to bend over, holding my bruised stomach.

Eventually, the laughter died from my lips and the tears stopped flowing. Instead of replying to Lauren, I just looked her up and down and then turned to Roberto.

“So that’s how it’s gonna be? The whole family teaming up against the intruder?”

“Dayana, let’s not talk about this right now,” he pleaded, visibly frustrated.

I didn’t know how to read the expression on his face. He seemed wounded, but that was impossible: He didn’t have the right to feel hurt. My mom and I did.

Not him.

Never.

Since I didn’t want to keep looking at the pain in his face, I stomped to my new room and slammed the door so hard the walls shook. My legs were wobbly, as if I were back on the plane, miles up in the air, far away from solid ground.

*The sound of the keys jingling to the rhythm of our steps was like music to my ears. My mom and I headed down the hallway to our hotel room. I skipped ahead, eager and smiling, turning back only to say, "Come on!"*

*Behind us, my dad carried all our suitcases, leaving us free to walk down the hall as if we were two fancy ladies. My mom must have somehow charmed him into taking the bags, but I was too excited to notice.*

*Mom caught my eye and gestured toward Roberto, then gave me a little smile.*

*"You see, Day?" Dad said. "You're Superman's daughter." I giggled.*

*"He looks more like the Hulk to me!" Mom exclaimed. We both laughed. Dad glared at us.*

*"Hey, I can hear you! You better be careful with the Hulk."*

*The key slotted into the lock of our hotel room. I could barely wait for Mom to open the door before pushing past her and running inside.*

*"Wow, look at this bed, Mommy!"*

*I leaped onto the bed and started jumping before my parents had time to stop me. As I soared toward the ceiling, I turned to face my parents—but instead of disapproval, I saw only tenderness in my mother's eyes.*

*"How is it?" she asked. "Good for jumping?"*

*“The BEST!” I said, panting.*

*Dad appeared in the doorway, dropping our bags all at once.*

*“Careful with my suitcase!” Mom scolded.*

*“You’re the ones who should be careful—the Hulk has arrived!”*

*He spread his arms wide, his hands in the shape of claws, and started chasing us, grunting, as we ran shrieking around the room.*

*Laughing like a happy family.*