

The Broken Path

by Bri Stoeber

The black dress fanned out across the ground in velvety waves as Ava knelt. The space around her spanned with lush grass, yet inches from her small bubble, the ground cracked and all forms of life wilted. Ava rested within the safe haven where beauty could still breathe and encompass her.

Her fingers glided along the silky fabric of her flowing black gown as she traced the tightly woven threads and nearly invisible stitching. The dress clung to her frame by two thin straps, one dangling loosely off the shoulder it had slid off. She marveled at the craftsmanship her dress had, paying no mind to where it came from or how she came to be wearing it. It felt familiar, something she knew intimately, though she was struck by the dark color. That was at odds with her familiar feeling.

A rustle brought Ava's head up from the outfit.

Vibrant yellow eyes greeted her surprised brown ones as a handsome black cat perched itself in front of her. She rested her hands on her lap, gazing at the creature and its flicking tail. For a moment, the two studied each other, sizing one another up to see their worth. Ava found curiosity spurring her thoughts while the cat's piercing eyes made her feel as though every secret she kept throughout her life was common knowledge for the small animal. The cat finally mewed and turned towards the edge of the grass.

"I suppose you want me to follow you?"

Another mew.

Ava slowly stood; her bare feet tickled by the grass blades beneath her. She swayed for a moment, feeling a sense of weightlessness swirl throughout her limbs. Her eyes shifted to the cat's unamused face, and she glanced to the emptiness beyond her. The hardened earth seemed uninviting

without shoes, but the moment the cat leaped out of the circle, a grassy path grew for the two to share as they made their way towards the unknown.

As the narrow path stretched across the surrounding desert expanse everything began to shimmer and morph into a house Ava vaguely recognized. The dirt wove itself into wooden floorboards as a countertop grew just on the edge of the grassy area. Three little girls sat on tall chairs facing the kitchen in the cozy home. The smallest of the sisters kicked her feet high above the ground. Her long hair was tucked behind her ears to keep out of the way of her bright brown eyes. A tiny black kitten swiped at her dangling feet. A smile crept on Ava's face as she watched the scene. It took the child so much time to pull herself onto those chairs, only for her sisters to bolt away at the first possible moment. She would then launch herself towards them, paying no mind as her mother shouted about twisting her tiny ankles. Ava watched wistfully as the girls drank steaming mugs of homemade hot chocolate before racing away in the manner Ava had predicted moments before, the kitten darting between their legs to keep up.

The moment the three sisters exited the room, the house began to melt around them. Ava turned quickly to catch one last glimpse of their tall, slender mother leaning against the counter, smiling as her children giggled in the next room. A sense of longing grew so powerfully in Ava, she felt as though her heart had melted with the house and its occupants.

An annoyed hiss pushed Ava forward as the cat led her once more through the desert on their grassy path. She felt stronger than she had in a long time as her young legs followed the feline. The air was sharp and cleared her head. Soon enough, the path began to gain a sense of familiarity; Ava had a feeling of *déjà vu*.

Small mirages kept flickering on either side of the grass. Ava caught sight of a playground where children once leaped and squealed. She could see the two older girls swinging fists clenched on chains, which gleamed a shimmering silver if the sun caught the metal just right. For the older

girls, the chains dazzled because of how high they swung, much higher than their younger sister ever dared. The brown-eyed little girl stood at the top of a slide instead, looking out at what she imagined was her kingdom. A moat guarded her and her sisters from monsters, and later they would have a ball where a handsome prince would sweep each one off their feet. At the young girl's feet, her faithful sidekick, the kitten, was fast asleep unaware of its owner's vivid imaginings. Her dreamy eyes didn't see the innocent looking boy who stood at the bottom of her tower.

Ava watched this boy gaze up with unending admiration for the youngest sister. The two couldn't have been older than seven, but Ava knew the look of young love. The boy was as smitten with this brown-eyed princess as she was with her imaginary prince. Before the girl could catch him, he darted off back to his home and Ava followed her guide.

The cat kept moving past all the decaying scenery until they reached a cliff. Ava peered down the rocky slope before turning back to her guide. Its eyes told her they needed to keep moving, but fear gripped her throat. She felt as though she had faced this before and failed to move on.

Without warning, the ground beneath her feet collapsed sending Ava sliding down the dirt towards the abyss below. She shut her eyes to block out the rest of the world, only to land softly on another ledge. Ava dared to crack one eyelid and peered at her surroundings. All around her laid broken toys and crushed objects. She stood and moved around careful to not cut her bare feet on jagged pieces of glass. The colorful shards stood out against the dull ground, and Ava was able to pick out a handful of toys among the wreckage. A ballerina was missing a foot to the right of the ledge while a princess's gown appeared to be torn to shreds, the tiara missing its center jewel. The playground from before stood rusted at the edge of the desolation. Ava knelt to the ground to pick up a stethoscope that sat on top of a textbook. It still shined, well cared for amidst the carnage of other childhood trinkets.

Something moved out of the corner of her eye and she quickly stood up forgetting the medical utensil that had originally caught her eye. Ava swiftly made her way past the bleak area to try and find what had captured her attention. She hardly traveled a few feet before a giant oak tree grew before her eyes. Its trunk stretched out of the ground like wooden taffy and leaves quickly blooming a shimmering emerald. When Ava reached the trunk, she was surprised to see the black cat sitting in front of her looking bored by the amount of time it took her to reach him.

Ava opened her mouth to defend herself against the cat's judgmental gaze only for the words to die in her throat. A young woman sat under the tree's shady branches pouring over a textbook. Her long hair was tucked behind her ears as her brown eyes flew across the page. A black cat, identical to her guide, was nestled to one side of her. As the young woman lost herself in her studies, Ava noticed the young boy, now a young man, watching her again. The same lovesick look plastered on his face as he observed the beautiful young woman.

Slowly, the boy inched around the tree closer to the woman. Her cat lethargically watched the boy move until he finally sat next to her. The young woman looked up, but instead of being startled, smiled warmly at him. Ava watched the young woman rest her head in the crook of the boy's neck and begin explaining the contents of the book to him. He listened intently to the young woman, a smile of pride glowing on his face.

Once this mirage disappeared, a dying garden with large, bald sunflowers, bowing their heads in mourning flickered into existence. Little weeds wrapped around rose bushes, strangling the once ruby flowers until they were crisp and brown. A pang jolted through Ava's heart at the loss of a once vibrant garden. She glanced down at her guide who seemed visibly distressed by the scene, the glossy black hairs on its back tinged with gray stood on end. In the corner of the garden, Ava watched the young woman bury her tearstained face into the young man's neck. It didn't take long for Ava to

notice the absence of the brown-eyed girl's constant companion. The scene gradually began to fade while walls rose around Ava and the cat next to her.

Millions of colors shined across the room as the setting sun hit the stained glass of the church just right. Ava felt tears spring to her eyes as she stood in the center of the aisle where the young man and woman held hands. The man looked impossibly handsome in his tuxedo while the woman was nothing short of radiant in her white dress. Ava couldn't help but note the looks of absolute admiration reflected in both their eyes.

Ava looked down at the familiar sensation of the cat nudging her shin. She looked back one last time to see the couple before walking out the church doors and following the grassy path on her journey. The dead landscape began to brighten, and Ava found the narrow path widening gradually at first then suddenly enough to make Ava's heart feel lighter than it had in years. The path sewing together and growing greener with each step.

In the distance, she saw the young man and woman begin to age. As the days shifted into years together, the man wore an array of business suits while the woman wore varying colors of scrubs. Ava gazed longingly as they went through their lives, each year she moved past, the setting around her got more beautiful. The lush grass that only covered a small circle or narrow path at the beginning of her journey now spanned as far as her eyes could see. Brilliantly colored flowers sprout around Ava and the visions.

To her left, the brown-eyed girl held a small bundle wrapped in a yellow, large eyes blinking up at her. Ava felt her heart swell at the tiny movements, her heart yearning for that sensation once more. To her right, a drastically different scene, one that came too soon after that joy. A long black dress, with shining black heels. The infant's blanket now black as well for the occasion, no longer swaddled in sunshine. Ava searched the crowd for the brown-eyed girl and her sister's mother, wanting a peak at the slender woman once more even though she knew the woman was both there

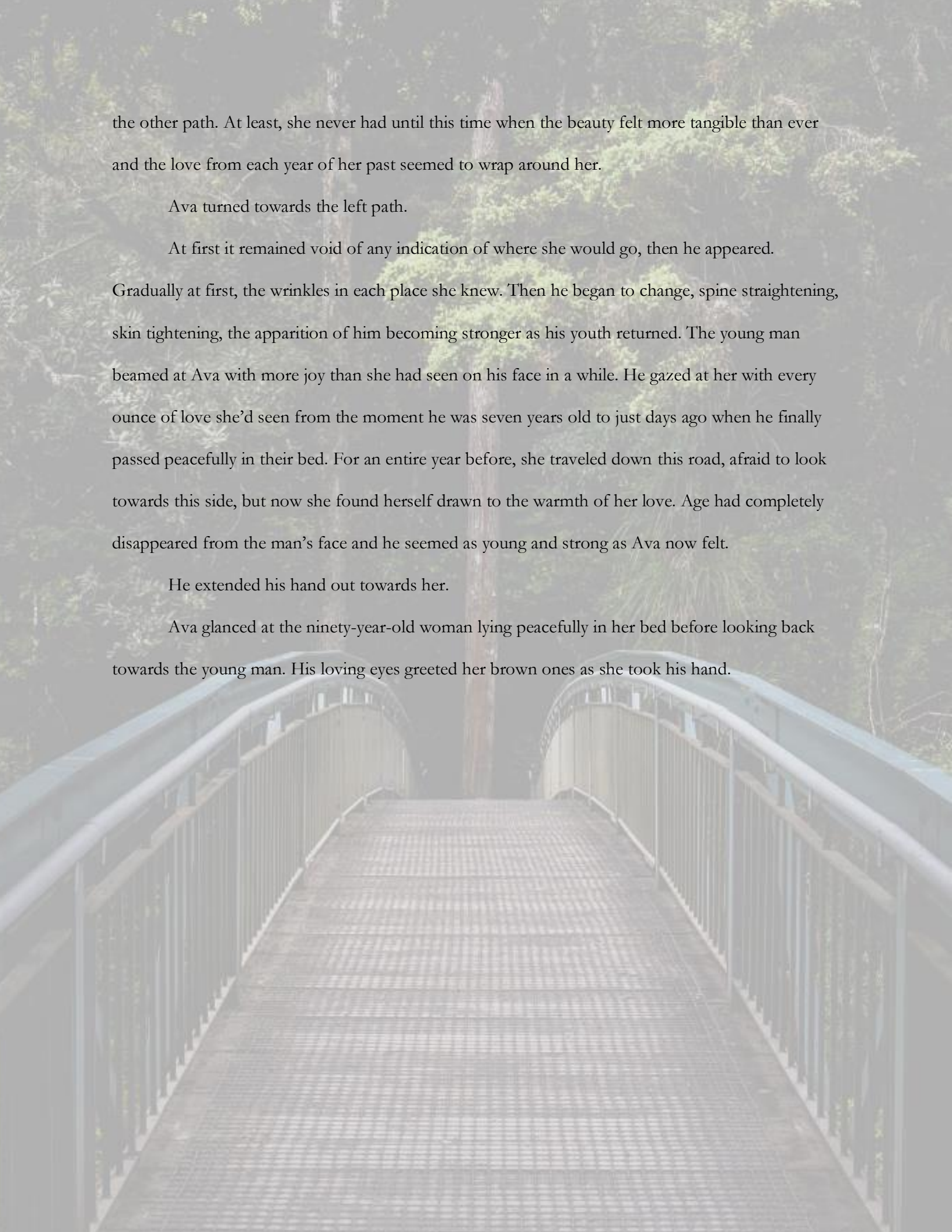
and far away. The cat pushed her away from the image before she could become entirely entranced by the scene, Ava had the distinct feeling she had before.

Instead, she continued watching more scenes erupt like flowers from the prairie of her life. Two children grew from infants to adults in their own right, while the young couple began to gray. Time pushing through the scenes both faster than Ava wanted and languishing in each moment. The brown-eyed girl's sisters visited with families of their own and Ava still could see the love-struck little boy peering through the deepening wrinkles in the man's face as she unconsciously followed the cat.

Abruptly, her guide stopped, and Ava's attention was pulled away from the couple. She looked down at the creature in confusion. The cat let out a single mew from its spot on the ground, the gray it faced moments ago had disappeared from its fur. Ava looked up to see they had come to a fork in the road.

Her guide sat exactly in between the two paths looking at her expectantly. She knew deep within her soul the cat would not lead her in either direction, she'd grown past its guidance. Ava looked at both the unmarked paths feeling a sense of foreboding at the decision, a true sense of fear since her journey began. The two looked similar, but Ava had a striking sense that they would lead to two drastically different outcomes.

She looked to the right to see an image forming of an old woman in her bed. The wrinkles on her face seemed impossibly deep but filled to the brim with happiness and love. Her silver hair was tucked gently behind her ears and she breathed easily in a peaceful slumber. Ava recognized this woman. She knew everything about the old woman, from her earliest memories down to the names of her wonderful grandchildren. Ava had chosen this path many times. Each time now stood clearly amongst her memories. She had picked that path each night, awaiting the coming morning and opportunity to make new memories with bated breath. She'd never even considered looking towards

A misty forest path with a bridge in the foreground. The path is paved with a grid pattern and leads into a dense forest. The bridge has a metal railing and a curved top. The background is a thick forest of tall trees, with a large tree trunk visible in the center. The overall atmosphere is serene and slightly mysterious.

the other path. At least, she never had until this time when the beauty felt more tangible than ever and the love from each year of her past seemed to wrap around her.

Ava turned towards the left path.

At first it remained void of any indication of where she would go, then he appeared. Gradually at first, the wrinkles in each place she knew. Then he began to change, spine straightening, skin tightening, the apparition of him becoming stronger as his youth returned. The young man beamed at Ava with more joy than she had seen on his face in a while. He gazed at her with every ounce of love she'd seen from the moment he was seven years old to just days ago when he finally passed peacefully in their bed. For an entire year before, she traveled down this road, afraid to look towards this side, but now she found herself drawn to the warmth of her love. Age had completely disappeared from the man's face and he seemed as young and strong as Ava now felt.

He extended his hand out towards her.

Ava glanced at the ninety-year-old woman lying peacefully in her bed before looking back towards the young man. His loving eyes greeted her brown ones as she took his hand.