Almost Love: A Past-Life Destiny

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CHAPTER 1: 7 Flights, One Fate

“Sometimes a simple flight can affect the life journey of more than one traveler.”

All Malis needed was a special cut of beef off a flight from Lowell, Massachusetts. Not love. Not destiny. Not a man. Just steak. She thought it was only about steak. She didn’t know it carried the beginning of her story, a moment she would later wonder had already happened once before in another lifetime. Seven people would land in Phnom Penh, but only one carried the meat and it was him. She hadn’t expected to be at the airport that afternoon. Her sister, Chhorvy, had a way of roping her into errands, this time, to meet a traveler flying in from the U.S. for a reunion with friends. The December sun leaned over Phnom Penh, laying gold across the city. Winter meant mild skies and a soft breeze. Joggers circled Wat Botum Park. Aunties danced beside grandmothers selling lotus pods. Motorbikes hummed, monks strolled, tourists lifted phones to the sky. At the center, the Royal Palace shimmered, its spires catching the light like a crown.

Malis, however, had little interest in the view. Or the weather. Or the men whose sunglasses slid down their noses at the arrivals gate. She was only there because Chhorvy had begged. “Come with me, and let’s welcome the man who’s bringing the meat,” Chhorvy had said over dinner, as casually as one might ask for a lime. As she stood outside the arrivals hall, waiting, a sudden breeze curled through the crowd, warm, sweet, like honey and distant flowers. For a heartbeat, the noise thinned. A flicker passed

through her: not memory, not dream, but a tug. Recognition without a source. She shook her head. Nonsense. Just the airport air. But fate has a taste for irony.

A few weeks earlier, their Phnom Penh home had smelled of amok, grilled jerky, and red wine mischief. Plates clinked, laughter echoed, the mood chaotic. Chhorvy, always dramatic, poured wine and sliced salami. She was the lead singer of a U.S. based band, home on break. Between bites and laughter, she had declared she would make steak with both her signature Kampot pepper sauce and a daring fermented fish paste twist, prohok. “World class beef, ancient flavor,” she had said, winking. “I need that steak from Lowell.” So she called Rotha, her longtime friend from Lowell. Together they had organized countless events for the city’s sizable Khmer community: food festivals, fundraisers stitched together with their banter. Now Rotha was among the party of friends converging on Cambodia. “It’s time you found a husband,” Chhorvy declared one evening, wagging her fork at Malis. “She has a list,” a friend chimed in. “A very long list,” another added. Laughter rose as Malis rolled her eyes. It came from love, and a little wine-fueled boldness. She lifted her glass higher, half-teasing, half-honest. ‘I just want someone real,’ she said. Then, quieter: ‘Until something worth breaking the spell comes along.’