***On the Bus***

It is 6:45 AM and it's freezing outside, next to me is the same old lady with the green winter hat that I see each morning as we wait for the bus to arrive. I'm probably going to be late for school, again, but honestly... I don't care.  
  
7:00 AM and the bus just arrived, the cold weather of January is making my ears hurt and after letting the old lady go ahead of me, I jumped on to the bus as quickly as possible. As it is every morning, the bus was full, as I made my way to the middle.  
  
Just as the door was closing, I heard a faint "hold on, hold on," being shouted to the bus driver. In that moment as I caught the eyes of the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, I felt something strike across my chest.  
  
"Thank you for waiting" she said with the cutest smile; the dimples on her cheeks gave off a pure sense of innocence. I was completely mesmerized, out of nowhere she took me out of my trance by simply saying "excuse me." I moved aside and mumbled out a faint, ‘sure, of course.’  
  
There she was, standing right next to me, and I didn't know what do to, she was just beautiful, looking outside the window as if she was analyzing life, I was wondering what she was thinking, maybe she has a busy day ahead of her and was just getting ready for it, or maybe just admiring the view, watching how everyone went about their lives.  
  
Is 7 20 am and I know in the next 15 min I will have to stop.  
  
Should I talk to her?? ‘Hi my name is...’ I almost say but she is going to think I'm a creep, maybe I should just go and give her a complement, tell her she is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Yeah like that will be better. All through the journey, I keep fantasizing about how would it be being with her, making her laugh, cooking with her, watching a romantic movie and just hugging her very tight. I keep thinking about how amazing it would have been playing with that beautiful black hair while she falls asleep on my legs, just how perfect it would have been.  
  
My hands are sweating and I don't have the courage to talk to her, every few seconds I will peak at her for a really quick second because I don't want her to think I'm staring at her, I have never been very popular with the girls and I don't think this will be the exception. I look at the clock and I realize in 5 minutes, I will arrive at my destination. All of a sudden, I hear; "excuse me." it was said in my direction so I turn. It’s her; she was trying to talk to me. I was shocked she was talking to me, I didn't know what to say even though I wanted to say a thousand things, maybe this is my shot. My confidence is suddenly high.

"Yes?” I said  
"This is my stop" she said  
"Of course" I said and moved so she can pass...  
  
Those 3 seconds that she passed by me were like slow motion. I just stood and watched her back, the back of probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, disappearing through the door of the bus.

***In the Forest***

We just arrived to our cabin, I'm just bringing the bags inside our house and like always mom and dad are arguing about the pettiest things. My little brother is running around the house mesmerized since this is the first time he’s been to the cabin. It's been a couple of years since we came here, so there is a lot cleaning to do.  
  
I don't know why I am here. To me this is just a boring old cabin and I can't even play video games since this TV is too old.  
  
"Can you come and help us clean? The dust is not going to remove itself” my mom yells from the kitchen.

"Or at least go out and bring some wood inside for the fire place, it looks like it’s going to be a cold night.” My dad adds.  
  
I look at the clock in the kitchen and is 3:15 pm, my brother is screaming because he is hungry and there is nothing ready, mom is yelling at dad and asking him why he is sending me to go out and bring some wood instead of helping inside the house and dad is insisting that I should go and bring some wood inside.  
  
I decided to go out and bring the wood so I can stop the chaos. Outside the cabin feels very peaceful, the leaves are dancing with the melody of the breeze makes the most relaxing sound.  
  
It's been probably like 5 minutes and I'm just sitting here, enjoying this unique peace that you definitely don't get in the city. Our cabin is in the top of a mountain, the closest thing to civilization is a gold mine 20 minutes away, but since there hasn't been any gold found on this mountain, that town is pretty much abandoned at this point, I believe it’s just an old lady living there that refused to leave her house.  
  
"I better start picking up wood before they yell at me" when I was about stand up I heard a voice, it sounded far but I knew it was not.  
  
I keep looking around trying to find that voice, it was a woman’s voice and it sounds like she is crying.  
  
After a few seconds looking around I see someone, there is this girl sitting on a tree stump. I start walking towards her to check if she was ok.  
  
"Excuse me, are you ok?" I gently asked her while touching her shoulder, and when she turned around I was stunned. "Yah, I'm sorry I thought I was alone" she said.  
  
Her red hair was moving with the breeze and blew away from her face to let me see the deepest blue eyes you could ever see.  
  
“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bother you, but do you mind if I ask why you are crying?”  
  
“It’s my dad, he is upset because he could not find anything and he got drunk and came home.” She said.  
  
“Anything? What is he looking for?”  
  
“Is just... I don't want to talk about it, but I haven't seen you before, are you from here?”  
  
“O I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to bother you with my questions, but no, we are from LA, my family and I have an old Cabin in this mountain, so we come here time to time.”  
  
In the moment I said that, her eyes got wide open.  
  
“So you are coming from the big city? O wow that’s really exciting, I've never left this old town so I dream one day been able to go there.”  
  
I was surprised by her reaction, honestly is just a city, full of buildings and people, even though on the daily, I don't find it very interesting, I'm sure missing it today.  
  
“Can you tell me all about it?? How is living in the city?? Are there a lot of stores there? O I bet there must be very pretty outfits with all the colors out there.”  
  
Seeing her excitement I started telling her everything, about my friends, where I live, my school, and everything else. As I was talking to her I was just lost in the moment. Her Beauty and the way she looked at me was hypnotic, I felt like in a fairytale where there was no time, her deep blue eyes full of wonder and curiosity made me feel so important and made her look so innocent that just gave me this feel of protecting her, I just didn't want to let go her side, it was pure joy that I was feeling while she was sitting right next to me.  
  
After hours and hours of talking I realized I haven't Brought the wood to my house.  
  
“I'm sorry I have to go, my parents are probably really worried because I left hours ago, or... would you like to come and meet my parents?”  
  
She showed a timid smile and when she was about to answer I heard my dad.  
  
“Hey are you ok?”  
  
I quickly turned around and said.  
  
“Yes Dad I am so sorry I just lost track of time talking to...”  
  
I turned back again and started saying  
  
“Sorry all this time and I didn't even ask for your.”  
  
But No one was there...  
  
“Son, we saw you from the window sitting by yourself all this time.”  
  
“All this time? But I've been here for like 4 hours.”  
  
“4 hours?? You’ve only been here for 10 min.” he said.  
  
I just couldn't believe what he was telling me, so I ran into the house to check my phone it was only 3:25...  
  
My head was spinning, I know I'm not crazy, I spent the last 4 hours talking to that girl with the red hair, I know I did, and I didn't even asked for her name, the most beautiful girl I've ever seen  
  
“Are you ok?”  
  
My mom asked me.  
  
“Yah, I'm just... really tired.”  
  
“ok, she said. O by the way, your little brother found a secret compartment.”  
  
“A secret compartment?”  
  
“Yeah, when we were cleaning he found out one table on the wall was loose, he removed it and we found out a little box inside, you want to come and check it out?” She said  
  
“Sure.”  
  
When I got to the table, I saw this old box sitting there, I'm still a little confused on what happened, but I didn't really want to talk about it since I know No one is going to believe me and they will probably think that  I'm crazy.  
  
I opened the box and my eyes opened as wide as it can be... there was a picture of a Family, The Dad, Mom and holding her hand was this Gorgeous girl... it was her, my beautiful red hair girl... I turned the Picture and it said March 1888.  
  
“Wow, this probably was their house.” my dad said  
  
Looking at that picture I realized that I wasn't crazy, that what I experienced really happened and that none of it was an illusion, I put my head up and look outside the window, and there she was looking back at me and with a smile on her face, she said "Thank you" before turning around and disappearing in the trees.  
  
“You are welcome.”

***That Night***

It is 9 45 PM, tomorrow I have an important day at work, but I’m wide awake, looking at the window I see the leaves moving with the breeze. Is quiet, almost uncomfortable quiet, took a sip of water and close my eyes trying to force myself to fall asleep.

10:15 PM, still up, just trying to figure out if I am cold or hot. Rumbling in my sheets, trying to get comfortable in a fight that I am apparently losing. But then turn around and there you are…

10:45 PM. I remember the first day I saw you in that cafeteria, you looked so peacefully reading your book, your beautiful red hair partially covering your face, and your lips moving slowly as you kept reading, made you look straight out of a fairytale. In that day, the cafeteria became my favorite place. At the beginning I couldn’t gather the bravery to talk to you, so I went and sat down on my little table at the corner at 9 50 am, because I knew at 10 am, you will be crossing that door, order your regular cup of coffee and with all the excitement, keep reading your book.

It is 11 PM and a timid smile was placed on my face. I remember the first time I decided to say something to you, to this day I believe it has been one of the most brave things I’ve ever done.

Andrew: I am sorry, I don’t mean to bother you, but I’ve seen you reading this book so passionately that I always wonder, what kind of book is she reading?

You looked at me so surprised and a little annoyed like I just took you out of your trance while you were reading your book.

Andrew: I am sorry I am Andrew by the way.

Anna: I’m Anna…

Andrew: Nice to meet you Anna, listen I don’t want to bother you so I will be on my…

Anna: It’s about a couple that couldn’t be together due to different social status.

And that was the beginning of everything, slowly we started talking more and more, days became months and months became years until we finally got married.

It’s 11:30 PM, and I am overjoyed thinking about you. I remember your face when we bought our first house, you were so excited. I remember how excited I used to get to go home every day after work just to see you sitting next to the window reading a book, I could tell no one loves reading books more than you do. Those deep blue eyes used to get lost in the sea of the pages of your books, then you’d raise your head, give me a smile and come to welcome me with a kiss. Every night was an adventure cooking dinner with you. It was the definition of happiness.

It’s 12:00 AM, and I felt a single tear running down in my face. I am still wide awake and a pain in my chest hit me like a hammer. In that moment I remember getting home for the first time and not seeing those deep blue eyes reading. There were you, just looking out the window, your eyes looked so lost in the moment, I looked at you and a small smile crossed my face. I observed you and your always beautiful silhouette looked much thinner. You gave me a look, gave me a shy smile, and went back to look at the window.

Those nights of cooking together were gone, and now is just me cooking for both of us. It’s been a month since we were at the doctor and they gave us the news, I remained positive, reassuring you that we will fight this together, but I couldn’t stop myself from seeing how your eyes had started to let go of life. Those books that you loved so much started to collect dust. That corner next to the window now hasn’t seen you anymore; your energy has been leaving your body day after day. I still try to talk to you and tell you how my day went, trying to make your life as normal as I could, so you won’t always have to think about this horrible demon that is consuming you slowly.

It’s 12: 45 AM, I need to go to sleep, I have an Important day tomorrow at the office, but there you are, looking at me with those beautiful eyes that still hypnotize me every time I look at them. You hate wearing those turbans on your head. Your beautiful red hair is long gone, but I don’t really care, to me you still the most beautiful woman. I fix your pillow and keep reading one of your favorite books to you while holding your hand. Sometimes you don’t even want me to come to the hospital anymore and you yell at me because I still do, because I don’t care that you look much thinner and with no hair, to me you still my red haired beautiful wife, because to me you still the most beautiful woman, because to me you are still the love of my life.

It’s 1 AM in the morning, and I feel numb, I remember everyone just coming talking to me looking at me with pity in their eyes, everyone just talking, some people just laughing like it was a normal gathering. I remember seeing you in your casket thinking that even on your last day you looked so beautiful. Why you? I kept asking myself, I can’t really process the thought that I will get home and I won’t see you sitting in your corner again. That those books now will be only a painful reminder that you are not coming back, and the life of our beautiful house is gone, because that day, that last day, everyone thought you were gone, my soul and happiness left it with you.

***The Encounter at the Beach***

This is all I need it – I thought while walking next to the sea, the breeze playing with my hair while I do my best to feel the sand in my feet. Maria, my girlfriend, has been threatening to leave me if I don’t propose to her soon, I just don’t feel ready for it, I don’t know if it is because I am not in fully in love with her or maybe the pressure she puts on me makes not really want to ask her at all. And on top of it, her dad is my boss so things have been a little tense in the office as well. But right now, I feel peace, no work, no Maria, only me and the sound of the waves hitting the shore.

While walking with my mind blank, I felt someone stroking my chest, I looked down and it was the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Her black hair dancing with the air, and her eyes locking with mine.

“Help me… please help me.”

In that second, I was still mesmerized by her beauty so her words didn’t really register. Once I was out of the trance, I asked her:

“Help you? Are you ok?”

I noticed the tears in her eyes. I didn’t know how to react since I knew she needed help, but at the same time I couldn’t resist how beautiful she was, it’s like this was coming directly out of a movie where I was one of the main characters.

While I’m still holding her, all of a sudden I feel a burning sensation in my chest, still holding her I notice blood dropping to her mouth, I slowly look at my chest and I notice a red tint on my shirt, I look over her and there was someone running away with a gun in hand. Still holding her I noticed that I start to faint, but I don’t care, I feel so at peace still holding her, that I am just ignoring the pain, she’s still looking at me holding me tight, a stranger that she didn’t even know his name, just wanted to be held.

Now, while both of us start falling, feeling the sand, hearing people yelling and screaming for help, I just felt peace, felt that this was the best way to go, that these few seconds I spent with this unknown lady has been the best seconds I ever spent. Seeing her eyes slowly closing, feeling more and more how my own eyes want to close, I mutter with my last breath, Thank you.

***LETTER FROM KATIE***

Every evening, I would find myself standing by the window, watching the sun set and glancing across the street. She lived a few yards away, and I'd never been able to say more to her than the normal “hi” when I see her on our way to school. I run through my head a thousand ways how to ask her out on a date, but in the end, I have never been able to do it. Katie is easily the most beautiful girl I’ve ever known, and I am not lying when I say that every morning, when I see her, her blond hair looks like it is radiating a golden light with the sun.

At school, she is always with this big smile on her face, and she carries this bubbly personality so well, that makes it so easy to love her. Now, when we are at school, it’s like we are in two different universes and we don’t even cross paths, she is with her group of friends, and I am with mine. But when we are out of school, she becomes the only thing I can think of, and I am the only one lucky enough to be her neighbor.

I had a window in my room where I would sit and look longingly into her room. I used to daydream a lot about what it would be like to be with her, talking all day, being able to play with that gorgeous hair she has, to be able to watch one another from our windows. However, my tongue feels heavy each time I attempt to approach her and my heart pounds from nervousness.

One day however, we literary bumped into each other at the store.

“Sam, isn’t it? We live across from each other, right?”

She asked.

“Yeah, and you are Katie, right?”

This was actually the first time I had the guts to talk to her. I felt like I was in a space where it was only us, and I just didn’t want to say something that made me look awkward or weird.

“So, do you already have a date for prom?” I asked her

“Not yet, but I don’t really know if I am going to go, I don’t think anyone would like to ask me out”.

That was my opportunity, I wanted to ask her, to tell her that it would be a dream come true to take her to the prom, but instead I chickened out, and only said.

“Well, I am sure someone will.”

“Thanks” she said.

Then, turned around and left…

One night, while I was in a deep sleep, I heard a scream so loud that it woke me up. I got up and looked outside my window. There was a huge commotion coming from her house. Her mother was on the front lawn screaming and her father was trying to shut her up. He grabbed from her hair and dragged her back into the house. I ran downstairs to tell my parents, and I saw my parents watching from the window.

“Do you guys know what’s going on?” I asked them.

“No but isn’t that the house of your friend?” my mom asked me.

“Well, she is not really my friend (I wish we were at least that) but yah.”

In that moment we saw the police arriving, and after some back and forth, they took her dad away. I just kept thinking about her and how awful she must be feeling right now; I just hoped she was ok.

The next morning, while I was getting into my car to go to school, I saw Katie running trying to catch the bus, so I offered to give her a ride. She agreed, and while she was getting inside, I couldn't help but notice the bruise under layers of makeup on her eye. I wanted to reach out and say something, but the words felt like a bitter pill lodged in my throat. She tried a few times to smile and pretend that the bruise under her eye is a mistake. ‘I fell’ she said after she caught me watching her for the fifth time.

That ride to the school was very quiet. I tried to make conversation, but all her answers were short, she was in the car with me but she had mentally checked out. Her eyes were lost, just looking out the window of my 2002 Honda Civic, I wanted to tell her that she can count on me that I will make sure she is safe and nothing is going to happen to her… but I just couldn’t. I decided to stay quiet and keep driving, letting the silence being her best healer.

After a week, Katie still wasn’t her bubbly self. She smiled a lot and went to all her practices but I could see that she really wasn’t happy underneath. To make things worse, summer was close, and I had to go to my grandparents’ house to visit them. I usually go every summer but this summer I didn’t want to leave Katie alone with her family. Who knows how long that has been going on and no one knew about it. I tried to take my mind off it, but somehow, she was all I could think of. I knew that I had to say something about how I feel. She has to know she can count on me whenever she needs it, and if she ever feels afraid, I am here for her. She deserved better than the suffering her family caused her, I had to tell her.

While staying at my grandparents’ house, I kept writing letters to her, practicing the words that had been trapped inside of me for so long. I wrote a new one everyday because the old one somehow felt stupid the next day. I counted the days a lot, praying and hoping that the days will pass by quickly.

When I was finally going back home, I was feeling so anxious, I finally decided I was going to tell Katie how I felt. My father picked me up at the airport and we have the same regular conversation after not seeing each other in a while, “how are your grandparents?”, “How was your vacation”, “What did you do up there” blah blah blah…. I convinced myself to stay calm and wait until the next day to talk to her, it was late, and I am not going to knock at her door at 10 PM. But when we were about to arrive at my house and I looked out of the window at her house, I felt like someone had just stabbed me in my chest. Her house was all off, it looked empty, and upfront was a sign… “FOR SALE”.

I entered my home with a defeated feeling, like I had just lost in a huge battle and felt my energy leave my body. I asked my dad, “what happened to the neighbors?”, - “I don’t really know, one day I saw a moving truck up front of their house, they packed and left, now that you mention it, the girl left you something, hold on” my dad answered. My mother came to say hi, hugged me and pulled me to the couch, and then she gave me an envelope with Katie’s name on it. She wrote me a letter? With sweaty hands and feeling so anxious, I slowly opened the letter and started reading.

*Hi Sam, first, I noticed I never said thank you for giving me a ride to school… or did I? I don’t remember but thank you if I didn’t ♥.Thank you for not judging me and asking me a million questions when you saw my face, I needed to be alone and quiet in that moment and you respected that. I need to confess something, I always looked at your house from my window, you have such a beautiful family, full of love, and sometimes I wonder how it feels to be part of something like that. I also noticed you sometimes looked at my house, and I always wonder, what you could possibly be looking for here. This is just an empty house. Maybe you caught me looking at your house and you were on to me. I don’t really know, but sometimes when our eyes meet and we stare at each other it made me feel a rush of excitement that I can’t really explain. I regret not talking to you and spending more time with you, but again you have such a perfect life, that I don’t think I can bring any value to it, and now, it will always be to me a “what if” kind of question.*

*My dad came one day and told us we have to move, didn’t explain much, just said that we have to pack, and we need to move as soon as possible, I just hope we are not in big trouble again… but that’s a story for another day. I don’t really know why I wrote you this letter, but I felt I had to do it, and say goodbye to you, take care of yourself and your family, and I really hope one day we will see each other again...*

*Katie♥*

My eyes clouded over with tears as I read her words. Even though I was ultimately unable to declare my love, for some reason, I had offered a ray of hope to her existence and that filled me with so much joy. I will never forget Katie Blanchard and I will be waiting until we see each other again.

***FIRE AND LIGHT***

The first time I met Light, I saw the light. I had just been brought on as a new producer for Riff Records and I had just finished setting up my office and wanted to pop into a few of the label’s studio to get a feel of some of the artistes on the label. I went into a few and I loved everything I heard so I was optimistic for the rest. Getting into her booth though, I heard a mess. It was a cacophony, a dissonance and it made my skin crawl. The voice was smooth but the producer has her on some dull beat that made it sound like her voice was everywhere.

“Nah, kill the beat right now.” I said to the producer working with her in the studio.

“What are you doing man?” he shot right back – after he killed the beat.

I looked into the booth and met the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. Green eyes with thick lashes and full red lips. I’m mesmerized at the sight of the beautiful siren right in front of me, so innocent and untainted by the musical curse. I pressed the bottom so I could talk to her in the booth.

“Nothing to worry about princess, I’ve got this.” She looks at the producer who nods at her and then turns to me.

“Who is she?” I ask.

“She’s a new artiste the label is trying to push.” He said.

“Can I have her?” I ask and he looks at me like I’m weird.

“I don’t mean it like that. I’m the new producer the label brought on and I was wondering if I could work with her as my first artiste.”

He shrugs, stands up and leaves. I turn back to the girl; she’s looking confused as to why her producer left in the middle of a session. I press the button again so I can talk to her.

“Hi, my name is Poser, short for Grand Composer, my real name is Jason though, so you can call me Jason if you like. I loved you voice and I just had to beg your former producer to let me have a crack at it. I hope that’s alright with you.”

She smiles and it’s like that sun opened in the booth. What a beautiful girl.

“I’m Camille but I go by Light.” She says.

“Light.” I repeated like an idiot.

That was the beginning of a spectacular duo the world would come to know as Fire and Light. I didn’t work exclusively with her nor did she work exclusively with me and that’s how the world knew. My name was always in the credits of all her hit songs, no exception. The fans said every of her song I touch is fire so they called me Fire. She brought out the creative in me and I pushed her to be the star that I know she is.

We didn’t start dating though till after two years. I sat with the rest of the label, my hands holding hers under the table as we held our breath waiting to hear the announcement for the award of song of the year. Immediately the host called Light’s name, we hugged and I kissed her hard before she broke the kiss and ran up the stage to receive her award. Only when she left did I understand my mistake. I really shouldn’t have done that and the cameras that were now closing in on my face reminded me that I just made a colossal mistake.

The journey has been amazing, filled with late-night studio sessions, creative clashes, and moments of sheer musical brilliance. Together, we had forged a sound that was uniquely ours, a masterpiece that was a genre of its own. As a music producer, my job was to bring out the best in artists, to capture their essence and share it with the world. But with Light, it was different. Our connection went beyond the music; it was personal, intimate. She gave her speech and the crowd erupted in cheers.

That night my doorbell rang and when I opened it, Light was at the door smiling at me.

“You shouldn’t be here Light, especially after that kiss.” I said

“I’m actually here about that kiss, my phones been blowing up. What gives dude?” she said.

“I’m sorry, I apologize, it won’t happen again.” I said.

She scoffed and pulled me down for another kiss and the magic that was Fire and Light became a movement. We kept the relationship private and when we were outside we continued as producer and artiste. Once in a while, someone would ask about the kiss we shared on the award night but we just smile and laugh it off.

Light grew more famous and soon she started getting more recognition. She moved from a B-list artiste to an A-list artiste and I remained by her side, loving and encouraging her to be the better version of herself. Even though we’re both busy, we make sure our calendar is free two nights a week so we can me and just be. It was on such a night that she broke big news to me. News that threatened to break my heart but our love waxed strong.

"I've been given an opportunity Jason, a chance to take our music to places we've only dreamed of." She said, her eyes searching mine for understanding.

I smile at her and urge her to tell me what it is. for some reason she doesn’t want to tell me what her news is.

“What is this opportunity babe?” I asked her.

“T-Jay global wants to sign me.”

I hugged her and laughed in joy.

“This is huge baby. Congratulations. Why were you hesitant in telling me about it?”

“I know it’s big news, it’s just that they said I’ll have to stop working with you though. I’m to work exclusively with their top producer Kim.”

“Why would they say that?” I ask, a bit confused. I’ve worked with some of T-Jay Global artistes before and they liked me music.

“They asked if I’m seeing anyone and I answered honestly, they said they don’t like it when their artiste is dating a producer. They say it gets messy.” She says and I understand where they are coming from.

“It’s a huge deal and will make you bigger than you ever imagined. I’m in.” I say.

“Really? You’re not angry I won’t be working with you anymore?” she asks.

“Of course not. I’m proud of you.”

She reached for my hand, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"You mean the world to me, and this won't change that. Thank you babe for understanding. I love you so much.”

I kiss her forehead as she leans back into my body.

“I love you to babe.”

I smile as she smiles knowing that as long as we love each other, we can do anything and we will keep being strong.

***LOVE IN NEW PLACES***

My mother always said my quest for new things was going to be the end of me. I didn’t believe her; I thought that she was just being jealous of the adventurous spirit I share with my father. When I told her that I was looking for a new apartment because my old one feels – well old, she rolled her eyes and said she wouldn’t help me move this time and went on her spiel about how it was time to put down roots.

So regardless of what she said, I packed up and moved into a quaint apartment on the third floor of a building that looked like it was their when Christopher Columbus came to America and that I would probably still be then when I have grandchildren. It was exciting to move into a place with this much history and that thought of all new things ill experience in this apartment kept me up at night.

On move in day, I called my mother in the morning to ask if she would come with me. She sighed and said she would come over after her shift at the salon. I smiled after I dropped the call. My mother might act tough and hard but she’s a big softie and she will always be there for me. After putting all my little things in about 6 boxes, I loaded them into my car and set off for my new apartment.

The drive over was short and soon I was go there and started bringing out the boxes in my car. I kept them on the floor first then started taking them one by one to the elevator. The last box was saved for last because it is the heaviest box. My prized ornaments and awards are in the box.

I lift the box up and I’m struggling with it. Putting it in my car was taxing but it somehow feels heavier now. The box slips and almost falls when a big hand grabs it from under. I feel the electricity when our hands touch and it sends a shiver down my spine. I look up and meet the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen on a man. He is definitely 6 foot something judging from the strain on my necking because I’m looking up.

“I’ve got it.” he says, flashing his pearly white teeth in a smile.

I sigh; I hope mum can see the importance of a new apartment now. He has a five o’clock shadow beard and his eyes crinkled when he smiled. He also has the smoothest voice ever, when he talked I felt like I could listen to him talk for ever.

“Thanks, I don’t know why it’s so heavy.” I say.

“It’s not a problem, I’m Jake. I stay in apartment 4b.”

“I’m Lily, I’m moving into 3b.”

“Oh really, you’re directly below me.”

We laugh then get into the elevator up. After all my stuff was inside, Jake helped me arrange the living room area and bought pizza while we sat on my couch and waited for the cable people to come.

He is the first neighbor I’m meeting and I hope all the other neighbors will be like him too. His easygoing nature and sense of humor made the initial anxiety of meeting new people disappear. I might like adventures and stories but I don’t do well with new people, even though I love people.

We quickly became confidantes, sharing stories of our pasts and dreams for the future over cups of coffee and pizza dates in my sitting room. Jake is also a musician. He lives in the apartment directly above mine so once in awhile I hear sweet soft music waft through. I ask him about his music a couple of times and he just smiles and doesn’t talk about it.

One day, while music was playing upstairs, I went up stairs and knocked on his door. He rolled his eyes when he opened the door and saw me.

“Roll your eyes all you want mister, I’m going to hear you sing today.”

He let me in and led me to the sitting room where he has a piano. He sat on the chair then looked at me.

“Please don’t say anything, just listen.”

I nod and he starts playing a beautiful tune. I’m lost in the beauty of it all and all too soon, he stops playing. While he was playing I realized I was falling in love. Moving here was definitely a good idea.

***LET ME LOVE YOU***

The last year of college is usually the toughest. It’s the time when you're stuck wondering what your life will be like after college. What if things don’t go exactly as you planned? There are so many things to think about. I'm a baseball player with teams ready to sign me the second I shake the VC. I should be free of those worries, but any accident can cause me to lose my dreams. The future is all I am thinking about as I sit in the elective class I signed up for to make up for the course load I need to graduate.

The professor is running late, and the teaching assistant is just sitting in his chair, looking smug. I tried to leave, but he informed me that Professor Reynolds will only teach the students she meets on her first day, so I huffed and sat back on the chair and started thinking about my future. The doors open, and a woman walks in with such a cascade of auburn curls that she drops her handbag on the podium and puts it in a ponytail. This is Professor Reynolds? She doesn’t look old enough to be a professor. Sure, she's definitely older than me, but not what I was expecting a professor to look like.

Professor Reynolds is easily the prettiest woman I have seen all year and im not even trying to exaggerate. She has a small oval face, doe eyes and lips set in a firm line. She looks formidable and also like a dream, words cannot describe how enchanted I am just looking at her. She has an air of sophistication that cannot be mistaken for anything other than old money.

She clears her throat, apologizes for being late, and I fall in love right then. Her voice is light and smooth, and I just want to hear it for the rest of my life. I don’t pay attention to a single word she says; I just watch her. Suddenly, I'm not thinking about my future. I could have a shoulder injury right now, and she’ll still be all that matters.

After the class, I join the queue of about 12 students who want to talk to her. She answered everyone's questions accordingly and referred others to her teaching assistant. When it got to my turn, she looked at me expectantly, but I just wanted to see her up close.

“Any day now, Mr…?”

“Grant, Thomas Grant. I'm sorry; I just wanted to ask if your office doors are open to academic questions and confusion."

She looked at me suspiciously and told me that it was. I smiled back and left to go plan how to make this woman fall in love with me like I had fallen for her. I've never been one to be captivated easily; girls in school actually think I'm the hardest Jock to get, so what was it about the professor that I was so drawn to? Her words painted vivid pictures of the both of us in my mind, and the way she moved her hand when she spoke, it was as if I could watch her forever. As the weeks passed, my infatuation for the professor began to morph into something deeper—a love that makes me want to sing and tell everyone that I am in love.

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I found myself in Professor Reynolds' office more frequently. I always had a question to ask, probably because I wasn’t paying attention to the main lecture. She threatened to pass me on to her teaching assistant a lot, but she never did, which made me hopeful. Soon, our conversations slowly evolved from academic discussions to more personal topics, dreams, and fears. I opened up to her about my constant fear of a last-minute injury, and she linked me up with a sports therapist she knew. One who is incredibly hard to book and only works with top athletes.

One chilly autumn afternoon, as golden leaves danced in the breeze outside, I decided today was the day I would tell her how I felt. As I sit on the other side and watch her explain an assignment to me, I imagine her reaction. Surely she will hate this, but how will she react?

“Professor Reynolds? Can I tell you something?” I ask, and she lifts her head and gives me the look that means she is ready to hear my nonsense.

“I love you.” I finally say, and she watches me with her eyes half closed, her face not betraying a single emotion.

“Get out," she says finally.

I try to say something, but what can I say? So I stand and leave. I don’t come to her office after the next class; I stop staring at her in class. I decide to leave flowers and chocolate threats at her door instead. I do it for about a week before she sends me a text summoning me to her office. When I enter, her hands are folded, and she is glaring.

“This has to stop, Grant.”

“Why? You’re not married.” She rolls her eyes.

“But I am your professor, and the school frowns at this.”

“They don’t have to know; we’ll be discrete.”

“No, please stop this. I don’t need this right now. This will just fuel all the people who want to discredit me. An affair with a student? I will never live it down.” She says.

I consider her words and realize just how stressed she looks, and I know that that is not what I want my love to do to her. I love her and that means that the last thing I want to do is hurt her. if loving me will cost her something she worked so hard for then I’ll have to stop, for now.

“Fine, I’ll lay off you. But the second I get my degree, the deal is off. I will court you properly. And then the only reason I want to hear from you then is that you don’t like me.”

"I'm also 10 years older than you are.” She says this, and I glare at her.

“I don’t care; you shouldn’t either. As long as we like each other, we’ll be fine.”

I leave her with those little words. I attend her class like nothing happened and count down the days till I can properly court her because I know my feelings are not going anywhere. When the day of graduation came, a sense of both liberation and melancholy filled the air. As I took my degree, my eyes met hers, and I winked at her. She smiled and winked back. Ok, I'm taking that as a go-ahead. I'm coming for you, baby.

***Sands of Love***

I hate being on holiday. I’m a hamster. Always running, taking no breaks and always on the edge of a burn out. My chief at the hospital had to draft out the letter and apply for the leave for me. I did it for all of a week people I got sick of the rest. The minute I saw that some doctors were going on a month long trip to an Arabic country, I signed up and bought a ticket.

The moment I stepped onto the sun-soaked tarmac of Abu Dhabi and I switched on my phone, it didn’t stop buzzing. My chief had called me 20 times; I sent him a text about the trip at the airport and switched it off. I roll my eyes and laugh before joining the other doctors to pick our stuff. The air is hot and heavy with the scent of desert and the promise of adventure, greeted me like a warm embrace. My heart raced with a mix of excitement and trepidation. This is the first time I’m leaving the United States, of course I’m scared.

The drive to the camp was so beautiful, the city is a peaceful one and the colors and building are so full of history and life. This could be fun, I shouldn’t worry too much and I should call Chief and tell him not to worry either. Our medical camp was set up on the outskirts of the city, amidst golden dunes that stretched as far as the eye could see.

The chief of this expedition informs us that left of the desert is a small village that needs our help and we are going to be the Sheikh today after we unpack and rest. Sheikh Khaled Al-Mansour was the first thing my eye saw when we reached his impressive home. Gold was predominant in the decoration of his home but it was him that held my attention. Tall and regal, he seemed to emerge from the very fabric of the desert, his traditional white robe billowing in the warm breeze. His eyes, a deep shade of brown, held a gaze that was both commanding and gentle. As a doctor, I was trained to maintain a professional distance, but there was an inexplicable magnetic pull between us from the start.

Sheikh Khaled watched us approach with an air of authority, his presence commanding the attention of everyone around him. He introduced himself as the local ruler, expressing gratitude for our presence and admiration for the work we were about doing. His eyes lingered on mine, and in that brief moment, I felt a connection that I knew will not end how I envisioned the end of this trip.

As the days progressed, Sheikh Khaled became a frequent visitor to the medical camp. He took a keen interest in our operations, ensuring that we had everything we needed to provide the best care possible. The more I got to know him, the more I realized that beneath the layers of tradition and responsibility, there was a man who genuinely cared about the well-being of his people.

One evening, I got a letter from Sheikh Khaled inviting me to his palace for a traditional Arabic dinner. I was hesitant at first, torn between the professionalism ingrained in me and the curiosity that stirred within. I knew this visit isn’t going to be a professional one. He would have invited the Chief too. Rejecting his invitation would be seen as an insult to his person so ii definitely have to go.

Once again, I am amazed at the beauty of his palace with intricately designed arches, mosaic tiles, and the scent of exotic spices lingering in the air. Sheikh Khaled met me at the front with a smile and then led me through the grand corridors, sharing stories of his family, the history of his people, and the challenges they faced. I listened closely, with fascination and a lot of interest. Soon we stopped at a large door and when the guards pulled it open, I saw the most beautiful dining hall I have ever seen. As we sat down to dinner, a feast of aromatic dishes laid out before us, I couldn't help but marvel at the richness of the culture that surrounded me. he put out a couple of American dishes but I already know my interest is in the local delicacies.

Over the course of the evening, Sheikh Khaled and I talked about any and everything. He spoke passionately about his vision for a progressive society that honored tradition while embracing modernity. I, in turn, shared my experiences as a doctor and my Chief’s frustration with my schedule. Sheikh Khaled's charm began get to me the longer we talked. I almost lied to myself and said it was the wine but I know better. He was a man of contradictions—sensitive yet strong, rooted in tradition yet forward-thinking. His eyes, which always looked tough and commanding when he is in public, now softened with warmth that drew me in.

After the dinner, Sheikh Khaled continued to shower me with gestures of kindness and extravagance. He arranged excursions to explore the beauty of the desert, traditional music and dance performances, and even a hot air balloon ride that allowed us to witness the sunrise from the skies on the days I was free. I was falling for this man, hard.

One evening, Sheikh Khaled took me to a secluded spot where a traditional Bedouin tent had been set up. He looked vulnerable and when he started talking I realized why. I would be leaving soon and he didn’t want me to go. He laid his heart bare, acknowledging the difficulty of our situation. He spoke of the societal expectations that bound him, the responsibilities he carried as a ruler so he was forever bound to Abu Dhabi. He couldn’t leave but he needed me to stay.

I went home that night thinking heavily about it. I have a life in America, but I have found love and a home here. The Sheikh taught me work life balance, I’ve had more fun here than I my entire life. The only person that I have in America is the chief. He is the only one that would miss me if I don’t come back. I’ve not felt the need to work like a donkey since I came here. Probably because the crippling sense of loneliness didn’t have me on chokehold here.

I made my decision the day we were supposed to leave. I called the Chief and told him I wasn’t coming back. We cried together because we would miss each other and he is my only family. He wished me well and I got a ride to the balance.

Khaled was surprised when the guards told him an American is looking for him. He expected me to leave with the rest of my team. He lifted me up and spun me before he kissed me. I don’t know what the future will bring, but in this moment I know I made the right decision.

***Love and Other Recipes***

Being a father is the single most difficult task known to man, being a single father is that but raised to the power of seventy. Life had become a delicate balancing act for me, one wrong moved will tip the scales and everything will come tumbling down. Between managing my construction company and making sure my son, Neville, didn’t get into any unnecessary trouble there was little time left for my personal life and I am completely fine with that. I still miss my wife and even though she’s been gone six years now, it still feels fresh.

One Saturday morning, Neville and I decided to explore the local bakery that had recently opened in our neighborhood. He said all of his friends have been there and claim it is the next best thing after Jesus. The scent of warm bread wafted through the air, guiding us to a quaint little shop with a sign that read, ‘Baker's Haven.’ If it tastes anything like it smells then Neville’s friends just might be right.

The shop is big. There are three aisles that you just walk through and look at all the beautiful pastries behind glass. Smart thinking there, I saw a few people trying to touch them. As Neville and I marveled at the array of treats, a friendly voice called out from behind us.

"Hello there! Welcome to Baker's Haven. I'm Lily, the baker. How can I help you today?"

I look up to meet the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen, Tasha forgive me. I keep staring like an idiot till Neville clears his throat.

I flush in embarrassment and stretch my hand out to her.

“Billy Shay, nice to meet you.”

Lily tales my hand with a smile before going ahead to talk about all the different pastries and the flavors and spices she played with the get the specific taste that we will experience when we buy. She made a few suggestions and gave us samples. I found myself captivated not only by the way she talks with so much passion but by her delightful pastries as well.

Over the next few weeks, Neville and I became regulars at Baker's Haven. Lily's treats had become a staple in our home. I try not to stare too much or be very obvious with my interest in her but sometimes I lose myself and Neville has to snap me out of it. The three of us eventually developed a friendship during our visits. Lily will always give us samples first even though we weren’t new customers anymore and she’ll let us try new experiments before she starts selling them.

One evening, after a particularly busy day at work, I found myself in need of some relaxation so I put on a football game and kick back with a beer. Neville comes up to me and sits close.

“Dad do you like Lily?” he asks and I’m startled.

“What? Why would you think that? I respect her as a friend but that’s it.”

He thinks it over, nods and leaves. I scratch my head and sigh in relief once he leaves. I just lied to my son, but I don’t ever want him to think I’ve forgotten about his mom and I want to move on. I didn’t think it was possible to move on but here I am, already seriously attracted to another woman. I have to protect Neville at all cost and if dating another woman will hurt him then I won’t do it.

The next week, Neville tells me that he invited Lily over for dinner.

“She says she eats alone and I don’t think anyone should eat alone.” he said when I asked him what he was thinking.

The idea of inviting Lily over both excited and terrified me. I was out of practice when it came to dating – not that I planned to date her – and the thought of preparing a meal for her was daunting. But Neville, ever the optimist, insisted on helping.

"We can make it a team effort, Dad. I'll help you plan and cook the meal, it’ll be fun."

I reluctantly agreed, earnestly hoping this doesn’t blow up in my face and ruin everything. With Neville as my culinary partner in crime, we spent the next few days planning a menu and perfecting our cooking skills. I hadn't seen Neville so excited in a long time, and his enthusiasm was contagious.

The evening of the dinner, our small apartment became a temporary culinary sanctuary. Neville and I chopped vegetables, marinated meat, and tried to follow the recipes we had found online while working side by side. We grew closer over shared mishaps and flour-splattered aprons, as laughter echoed throughout the kitchen. Neville found some decorations in the attic and decided he’s going to transform the house.

As the doorbell rang, signaling Lily's arrival, my nerves flared up. Neville's energy and Lily's infectious smile put me at ease. The food was really good considering the foolery Neville and I got into. We talked and laughed all through. Lily appreciated the effort we had put into the meal, and Neville reveled in the success of our teamwork. Every once in a while, I would look at her and marvel at how absolutely beautiful she looks.

As the night drew to a close lily thanked us and we promised to invite her again. Just as she was leaving, Neville shocks the both of us.

“Do you want to go out with my dad? He likes you but he doesn’t know how to tell you.”

Lily and I both flush and tell him we will think about it.

Our first formal date was a simple dinner at a small restaurant, and it signaled the start of an amazing adventure. The food was nice, the music, beautiful, all was right with the world. Lily and I discovered common interests, aspirations, and friendship. The mastermind, Neville, grinned proudly at having had a part in this relationship's development when I came back and told him the date went well.

Weeks became months, and Lily merged into our lives with ease. Neville welcomed her into our small family with open arms, and she embraced the joys and challenges of being involved with a single parent. Whether it was going on a family hike, having a movie night, or just lounging around in Baker's Haven on a lazy Sunday morning, our weekends were full of fun.

The relationship that Lily, Neville, and I had became stronger. We became a unit and it was totally beautiful. Soon I asked her to marry me and we had our honeymoon was in Japan because we wanted somewhere we can bring Neville to and he is currently on an anime binge.

***THE MERMAID***

Is 4 30 am, and my alarm when off. To be honest I hate working on that old boat, but the pay is really good. One day I'll be the owner of my own ship and No one will tell me what to do, but for now, this is all I can do.

It's 5 30 am and we are ready to sail, as much as I dislike this job, I’ll never get tired of seeing the sky full of stars at this time, I honestly believe there is nothing more magical. Today John and Andrew are not coming, honestly they are always missing work and I don't get why they still haven't been fired. O well, that's not my business at the end of the day, so like always, it’s only going to be Ron, George, and myself.

It's been slow lately finding crab, and we haven't had a good day in a couple of weeks, you can tell George is getting really irritated and he keeps saying if this keep going this way, we are going to have to close business because he can't afford to keep paying us like this. Today we were not supposed to work, there is a storm coming and we heard in the radio that it could be a really big one, but George keeps saying "we can’t afford to miss work days" so here we are.

It's 8 30 am, and the sky is really cloudy and is getting darker, I have a bad feeling, we keep telling George to turn around, that it is not worth the risk, but he keeps saying, "it's fine, a couple drops of water is not going to stop us". This is not looking good, and at this point, I don't really know what to do.

The Storm started, and it's really really bad, we are doing all we can to keep the ship afloat, but the truth is, I know any second the boat is going to give in, I knew today I should have stayed home. Out of nowhere I heard a loud BOOM! And everyone went pitch dark.

I don't feel any pain or anything at all, am I dead? I don't know, but I just feel two hands holding me, "wake up" I heard...

I open my eyes and I see her. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I felt like her deep black eyes were reading my soul and I saw her beautiful golden hair like it was floating in the air.

-Where am I? I asked.

- You are safe. She said

The weird part is that I knew she was talking to me, but I didn't see her lips moving, it’s like I could hear her in my head, but she was not really talking to me.

In that moment I looked down and I saw that she didn't have any feet, but a fish tale.

I thought it was strange, but odd enough I wasn't scared, I was just so happy that she was holding me.

- Are you a mermaid? I asked her

- Well, that's how you guys call us, we don't call ourselves that way. She replied.

I was just hypnotized with her Beauty, her hands around me made me feel like this is what happiness was all about, I just didn't care about anything else in that moment.

- You know I always prayed to find someone like you, always had a dream to meet a human, and ask you how was life outside the sea, you are the answer to all my prayers.

Those words stroke me and made me feel so loved and wanted in that moment. I never felt this way before.

We spoke for hours, I told her how life was outside of the sea, about everything and anything, and she like a little girl, full of curiosity just listened. It was just magical; she was just holding my hand just listening. After that she told me everything and anything about them, how they live and where they live, she showed me how they communicate writing in others mermaids hands, and she made a little heart in the palm of my hand using her finger, they developed this way to communicate. She made me promise that I would never say anything, since her world is very scared of humans; I promised her that it is a secret that I'll take to my grave.

After hours talking, I saw her crying, I asked her what is wrong, and she told me that our lives are so different and I have to go, I felt like a knife is being stabbed into my chest, I didn't want to go, I wanted to stay with her, but I understand, she is a mermaid, and I'm a human, we just can't be together.

In that moment, she looked at me with those deep dark eyes that I feel can read my soul and holding my face, she gave me a kiss. It’s the sweetest most beautiful kiss I ever got, and with that I start losing consciousness...

The flavor of the sand in my mouth made me wake up. It's dark, I see my watch and is 6 30 pm, I'm on the shore, alone. I sat down, feeling confused and trying to figure it out what just happened. I don't really know if everything was just a dream, or it really happened. But something came to my head and with desperation I checked the palm of my hand, and there it was the little heart that she drew. I looked one more time at the sea, and with a smile and a tear I said.

Good bye.