

the



story

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chapter 1

from date to dust

The story begins with a swipe from a flame logo app that led to a swipe of letters on mobile device keyboards that would lead to a swipe of a transit card onto the metro transit authority system that would lead to a date on the first day of the third month of the year two thousand and nineteen.

A date that would lay seed to a profoundly intense and deep connection, birth a naturally refreshing and genuine friendship, grow into a passionate and sexy romance, and bear fruit to a love, togetherness and future that is rich, sweet, strong, earthy, comforting, resilient, enduring and satisfying — such as the fruit from the palm tree of the same name.

He had no idea that this date would be the beginning of his forever, and neither would she know it would be the beginning of hers.

It took only moments into the evening—meeting her, seeing her, talking with her, listening to her, simply being in her presence—for him to realize how special she was. Her beauty, her words, her aura, her mannerisms, her energy... everything about her stood out.

The dinner reservations were not quite ready, so he and she called an audible and started the evening at a nearby bar, one called the popular nickname to her own middle name, then, then had tacos at the restaurant

whose name they weren't quite sure how to pronounce, and later at a third stop where cocktails were named with pictures. In that time, he realized how they were effortlessly able to connect in conversation and extend their time with each other, and he found himself thinking over and over, “damn, **I WANT YOU AROUND.**”

He felt so strongly about this feeling that he and she scheduled time together for the next day— making reservations for a movie neither of them knew of or seemed to have interest in actually watching. They even planned on booking flights and making hotel reservations to go on vacation together for the following month. Though it all seemed innocent, fun and flirty, there was a deep sense of intention behind it. The delight he felt when she enthusiastically agreed reassured him.

Any reservations either of them might have had about their chemistry were quickly cancelled by two lovely older women who had apparently taken an interest in him and her, politely interrupted to say how beautiful he and she were together.

What did these two strangers see in him and her while on their very first date? Maybe it was the natural togetherness they displayed? Maybe it was how picture perfect they looked with each other? Maybe it was their connection? The smiles through the playfulness they shared? The way they seemed to block out the noise of **LOUD PLACES** and just focus on each other? Maybe they sensed that she was his **ONLY ONE**? That he was her only one? Or maybe, as wise women who had experienced life, they knew what a real love and partnership and connection was when they saw one, and wanted to make sure he and she knew what they had together.

Whatever their reason, that comment brought smiles to his and her face — faces that would continue to smile together for days, weeks, months, and years to come — over chapters, seasons and volumes.

The date wound down, evening slipped into midnight, and then into that in-between time that's either very very late night or very very early morning, depending on if you asked him or her. They called a car to share to go their respective homes and decided to wait outside for its arrival. As they stepped out of the dimly lit cocktail bar, they were surprised by light snowfall that wasn't in the forecast. There were many things that night neither of them had forecasted, but he knew how special the moment was and wanted her to know it too.

He watched her standing outside, entranced as sparkling fluffy snowflakes landed on her, lightly dusting her hair and then quickly melting, allowing the moonlight to reflect off her, further illuminating her beauty. She was enchanting. He was mesmerized. She looked like a radiating **VISION OF LOVE** magically brought to life. Standing close together, waiting for their ride, he pulled her in for a kiss. She leaned into him, and he back into her. Her lips felt like warm snow—soft, comforting, like home. Their closeness felt picture-perfect. The feeling was **ELECTRIC**, unexpectedly igniting sparks that would build the steady fire of their future, their love and their togetherness.

They entered the cab, and in the back seat, they hugged, kissed, and cuddled. Little did they know that this activity, he and she would do over and over again would become a constant theme within their relationship, that they later coined with an acronym that would help represent, define and celebrate their connection. Something that solely belonged to them. He was happy. She was happy. They were happy together. It was likely in that moment that the happiness with her in the present blended with his excitement for the next time he and she would be together. He was pleased to be with her right then, but at the same time eager about the seeing her once more. This is something that he would feel and share with her over and over again. Something that solely belonged to her.

When the cab reached her stop, he and she said their goodbyes, promising to see each other again soon. In the short ride back to his place, all he could feel was “Damn, I think I found **YOU**,” over and over again. Something that solely belonged to him.

His and her connection would be magical, as if it were cast under an enchanting spell. A love spell conjured by an eagerly young fairy who was excited and overzealous of the opportunity that him and her would be their first tale to be told. The fairy used all that she thought was

needed — her magic dust, which had a strong resemblance to snowflakes, to say a few fantastical words while her shimmering wings illuminated as she flew around him and her, tapping her star encrusted wand lightly dusting their unassuming heads. It would only be over time that he and she would realize that it takes more than magic for “the ____ story” to be a fairy’s tale told. A forever tale told over many chapters, seasons and volumes.

His and her promise to see each soon happened, the very next day, which was met with fun and candor and honesty. It didn’t matter that the movie wasn’t good. He and she were good. He was happy. She was happy. They were happy together. They would always be happy when they were together.

Days flourished into weeks, and weeks into months. The time he and she spent together gradually increased, they were experiencing a budding connection. From their outings—lunches, dinners, movie theaters, museums, shows, trips, —to cozy days and nights in filled with cooking, binge-watching shows, relaxing, they were cultivating a togetherness. Through all the fun and endearing conversations, light heartened banter,

caring discussions, they learned about each another and their interactions blossomed. He and she would talk a lot.

The hugs were warm, with his arms wrapping perfectly around her body, squeezing her just so lightly while her head lays slightly tilted nestled against his chest. Her hair and his beard would often look intertwined, symbolizing the effortless and natural connection between them. Each squeeze felt like home, a place where they both found comfort. He and she would hug a lot.

The kisses were equal parts soft and passionate—a delicate balance between tenderness and intensity. His and her lips meet, a gentle introduction until their tongues entwined become a collision of desire and need of each other. Lips vs. Face. Tongue vs. Cheek. Pecks vs. Nose. Nibbles vs. Bites. He and she shared a furious flurry of combinations, a series of playful and intense matches in which each kiss sought to be victorious. He and she would kiss a lot.

The cuddles were consoling and relaxing, a physical manifestation of their bond. They held each other tightly standing up, sitting on couches or laying in bed, their bodies and hearts meshing as though they were meant to be in each other's arms. He and she cocooned in a firmly affectionate embrace bringing their souls in tune to mimic each other's breathing patterns and heartbeat. Whether face to face, big spoon or little spoon, they often slept together in these positions, hours on end and somehow remain in comfort. There was safety in the way they clung to one another, a silent promise in that position. She would share with him that the combination of his shoulders and arms were the perfect size for her to fit into. Her waking up in his arms was the perfect fit for him. He and she would cuddle a lot.

And the sex was loving and intense, a fiery expression of the chemistry and connection they shared. Every inch of their bodies was attuned to the other. Her body the cast, he was molded to fit perfectly inside her. They

used the tools bestowed upon them to explore the heights of satisfaction, pushing each other to the limits of pleasure, lost in the depth of their intimacy. He and she would sex a lot.

By their second month, he and she planned their first vacation together, both acknowledging that at this early point in their connection, the idea would be sort of, kind of, maybe, perhaps, a little bit, just a tad wild—a level of trust and spontaneity that bordered on madness, and yet, it was exciting and felt natural, even fated, neither he or she having any reservations about making reservations for a beautiful romantic getaway together.

The destination was to the beautiful island that laid claim to be the birthplace of her favorite pirate's favorite beverage. She would debut her vacation hair, beautifully twisted to allow for full engagement in all the things ahead of them – water activities, scandalous hair tugging, and fashioning his cap. She is so beautiful. This first of many trips was filled with sun, fun, food, drinks, a little bit of work, relaxation, exploration, dialogue, romance, laughter, beaches, hugs, kisses, cuddles, sex, smiles, music and dancing. He and she would garner the attention of strangers, from the airport to the resort, effortlessly making acquaintances with staff, locals and other travelers, something she thought was madness. He and she had an amazing time together, being in the same space felt easy, cool and they naturally synced throughout, with the only point of playful contention being her desire to unpack her clothing into the hotel's drawers, which he jokingly told her was madness. She would insist that it helped her feel settled, and he would be introduced to and adhere to the clever phrase to not yuck her yummy. This is where he would debut being her secret paparazzi capturing the many moments, in particular the image where she adorned his hat on her beautiful head while on the beach, wearing it in proclamation as it was now her own, she was his queen. It would also be place of their first selfie, captured by her on his mobile device, beautiful

smiles representing their happiness. This picture would be one of their most beloved photos together. He and she look so good together. He was hers. She was his. They solely belonged to each other.

There was mutual recognition that the instant level of comfort and chemistry that he and she were experiencing being together was special. The more he got to know her, and the more she got to know him, they both quickly realized this was a **ONE IN A MILLION** type of feeling neither of them had ever encountered before. This would feel amazing, but also a little bit scary, as if it could not be real or was too good to be true. Maybe, she wished upon a star or simply confided in her sibling, asking for her prince charming, and he would appear, arriving with all she had hoped for—even down to the foreign-engineered chariot she imagined. Maybe, he threw a coin in a wishing well or casually mentioned to his friend his hope for his dream bae, and she would show up with everything he needed—right down to the way she'd wear his hat as a crown of her own, her twisted hair flowing out just as he had pictured.

What mattered was believing in it, embracing it, getting swept away by it, living fully in the magic of it, leaning into the reality of it, working on it for growth, dealing with the challenges of it, and allowing it to breath and flourish. He and she needed to trust that this connection was true and that it was something they should not have any doubt that they both deserved, and to nurture the rare and beautiful thing they had found in each another, with each other, for each other and for themselves.

Every moment they spent, his feelings for her were reaffirmed. He also knew that is how she felt. But now, where would they go from here? Even though their relationship was **UNTITLED** and undefined at this point, they moved together in a rhythm with certainty which was theirs alone. It was as if they were at a fancy nightclub, intensely locking eyes across the crowded dance floor. Without any reservations, he walks over towards her,

extending his hand as an invitation for her to enter his life. Without any reservations, she reaches back to him with confidence and reassurance, entering his world while allowing him into hers, and in that moment, they both think to themselves, **SWEET / I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO DANCE**, and what a dance it would be.

She was special. He was special. They were special together. It was special. So special that it deserved a name, a title—something significant to them and for them. What better way to symbolize their blooming relationship than merging into one the name they called one other? His and her own celebrity couple mashup. It was obvious, simple yet meaningful. It was perfect. It was them. Now when he or she said it, it represented their togetherness, companionship, partnership and their time. He loved it. She loved it. It solely belonged to them.

chapter 2

what's he gonna do about it | what's she gonna do about it

She was very complimentary of him, always reminding him of how she felt. He was handsome. She would often tell him how much she thought he was. He knew she meant it by the way she looked at him, her gaze warm and genuine, as though seeing something special every time, and that always made him feel good. Long before it became a current trend amongst men, he wore a full, dark beard that accentuated his elf-like ears, accompanied by a crisp hairline his contemporaries had long since lost. He had little to no grey, leaving one to wonder—was it his age or a stress-free life that kept it that way? Would this make him even more attractive to her? Especially as he was ten years her senior, something she would often remind him of with a playful smile. He took her teasing in stride, always tossing back a playful remark about her youth. Despite his age, he carried a jovial silly spirit that kept his outlook youthful. She brought out that side of him, keeping their dynamic young, flirty, and full of fun.

He was smart. She loved his mind, or what she affectionately called his “big, beautiful brain.” His mind was full of imagination, wonder and wisdom. Whether discussing his “secret” time-travel adventures, sharing his reflections on the world, or offering her sound advice to use at work, she seemed to adore tapping into his thoughts. It was one of the things he was most proud of, as she genuinely wanted a glimpse into what made him think and feel the way he did. It always made him feel good.

He had style. She complimented his taste. With a background in fashion and a creative eye, he had a way of dressing that represented his demeanor: polished, sophisticated, versatile and timeless. There was a level of creativity she enjoyed and would take pleasure in having the fortune to participate in, as she would unknowingly become his muse. It always made him feel good.

He was no way an extrovert, or so he thought. He wasn't one that needed to command a room with volume, nor did he want to, but he had a noticeable presence that invited people to pay attention. Perhaps it was elfish ears, big beautiful brain, style or maybe his self-assurance—a confidence that was quiet, secure and authentic. He was generous with his time and resources, always ready to offer it to those who mattered to him. He happened to know of a cool trendy restaurant in the side lower east of the city for her and her friends to get a last minute reservation to. He happened to slip effortlessly into random conversations on topics that ranged from serious current events to pop culture. He happened to know the bouncer of a popular bar who would get him and her a table. He happened to frequently make friends with bartenders who later on in the night would give him and her drinks on the house. He happened to be well admired by his peers. He happened to be beloved by his friends. He happened to be respected by strangers. He seemed like a natural in any setting, moving through life with a graceful humility. All the things she saw in him, it seemed like everyone else saw as well. While never boastful, the way he vibed with people — her friends, his friends, family, strangers made an impression that left her feeling a mix of pride and intrigue.

He was a big kid at heart who navigated adulthood with balance and integrity —a gentleman, a provider, generous, kind, smart, responsible, silly, loving, and appropriately irresponsible. A mix of qualities that, he had been told, could be intimidating to some, though he found that notion curious and amusing. Would this be intimidating for her? For him, it was

simply who he was. For her, he was all she hoped, her prince charming in the foreign engineered chariot, her perfect incredible wonderful juman.

He was very complimentary of her, always reminding her of how he felt. She was beautiful. It was almost criminal how naturally beautiful she was in his eyes. He wondered if she knew how beautiful she was. He would tell her all the time, but his words felt too small to fully capture what she meant to him. *He would dedicate a chapter called “hugs. kisses. cuddles.” about her beauty.*

She was sophisticated. Despite being ten years his junior—a fact she was never shy to remind him of—she carried an air of wisdom, intelligence and maturity that was greatly impressive. Perhaps it was because she, like him, was the eldest child in her family, and life sometimes forces the oldest to learn quicker and grow up a bit faster. She had no idea how much he admired her ability to balance adult responsibility with a playful, childlike spirit. Together, they struck a steadiness that would carry their closeness. They knew how to be responsible, yet also how to embrace moments to be carefree and irresponsible. They could trust that, no matter what, one of them would always be there to ensure the other was fine, that they’d always have each other’s back. It was a togetherness built on understanding, on knowing when to be grounded and when to let go, when to be serious adults and when to have childlike fun.

She was awesomely dope, really and truly. She would jokingly refer to herself as a "grandma" based on her interests, but he didn’t think of her as such. She didn’t realize how much he adored her for embracing her true self and moving through the world with a quiet authenticity. Something he would notice right away with great endearment and respect. He wasn’t exactly sure if it was her love for knitting, her skills in baking from scratch,

her adoration of woodland creatures and plants, her minimalist fashion sense, her interest for building puzzles, her growing collection of books and antiques, her felines, or her fondness for all things vintage and old – but whatever it was that made her think she was a "grandma," he loved it all and couldn't get enough of her. She was utterly fascinating to him. She was so cool. Her habits, her hobbies, her quirks—each one a display of her being her own person. She was never one to conform to what was trendy or popular, and this peaceful uniqueness set her apart. Yet, she didn't seem to fully appreciate how special that was. He encouraged her to own it, to take pride in who she was and everything that made her her. She was not regular, and he told her that all the time. She reveled in the fact that she was her own woman, at the same time almost apologizing for being herself. In his eyes, that strength of individuality only made her shine more brightly, and he had a great admiration for her.

She was not an extrovert, but she moved with a wholesome grace in an understated manner that intrigued people, very demure socially, but her presence and confidence was especially evident in her professional life. Colleagues gravitated toward her not just because of her role, but because of the person she was. She made an immediate impact wherever she went, quickly earning the nickname "the people whisperer" from experienced peers who were both bewildered and impressed by her natural ability to connect with others. He knew this ability all too well—it was that same quiet magic spell that had been cast upon him. She was not regular, she was special. And yet, despite her gift, she would sometimes doubt herself, occasionally feeling the familiar quips of imposter syndrome. He would remind her that many of her closest friends are people she worked with. Anyone she met from his circle quickly fell for her, and he loved that about her. He was always proud, always happy for her, and never surprised when she received the highest praise. He took pride in knowing her, and he made it his mission to remind her how amazing of a person she was, and the

appreciation others felt for her was not just brief opinion—it was a constant fact. If he could, he joked that he would shrink her so he can bring her everywhere with him, like his personal tinkerbelle carrying around the magic she was. He wanted her around always. Ironically,

would she see herself small? He saw her for who she truly was and believed in her, probably even more than she believed in herself—perhaps more than anyone ever had believed in her. She was awesomely dope, really and truly. And he wanted nothing more than for her to see that same brilliance in herself that he saw in her.

She was smart, beautiful, sweet, thoughtful, kind, authentic, loving, responsible, fun, her own genuine person. A combination of qualities that anyone would take pride in having. For her, it was simply who she was. For him, she was all he ever needed, his dream bae wearing his hat, his gorgeous, brilliant, sophisticated, authentic juman.

He and she were great complements to one another, fitting together in ways that felt magical yet real—each balancing what the other lacked while enhancing what the other already was. And in being so complementary, they were also endlessly complimentary, always quick to uplift, brag, support, and remind one another how dope of a juman they were.

With her, everything to him felt different. She introduced him to a new way of thinking, seeing the world and living in it. He felt like he was walking through life with a new lens and in a new pair of shoes, and he and she would walk a lot. One occasion, walking through the park of prospect, she guided him past some of her favorite scenic routes, him recognizing how each one held a charm that she would find appeal in. One path led them to the underpass of a bridge, where without warning but not uncommon, he broke into a song, spontaneously crafting amusing lyrics inspired by

everything around them. His voice, far from polished, echoed off the brick walls with an unrestrained joy, filling the space. Her laughter, so sweet and genuine, spilled into the air, vibrating across the water, almost creating a melody of its own. He would join her in laughter, adding layers to the melody she already crafted. He and she would always make beautiful music together, in every sense of the word. They held hands, his and her fingers interlaced in their naturally comforting grip. Then, he would dramatically end scene, him looking at her and her looking at him with amusement, happiness and splendor as to delight they are able to bring to one another at any given moment. What a scene that was. They showed each other connections can be sweet, passionate, fun, honest, smart, easy and playful.

He felt so lucky to have her in his life, and he was happy to know that she felt the same. He really liked her. She really liked him. They both really liked each other. She was his absolute favorite. She was a joy. Such a great joy. She was the single greatest joy he met. She would become his new joy.

He had been on many first dates, very few second dates, and experienced even less of anything more. Yet, he was with her, so many dates, for so many days, weeks and months, so many experiences. He wanted more. It was special. She was special. They were special. So special that he and she had a name to represent togetherness, companionship, partnership and time. Although it was still new, he knew. He was not fond of water, but he felt ready to jump into it with her. He would tip his toe in, check the temperature and test it with her. She knew, it was new to her, all of it was, so it wasn't something she was ready to jump into, not at this time. He understood and would adjust himself, for his heart.

But now, he wondered what this meant for his **ONLY HEART**. He didn't think she would hurt him, but he had been hurt before. Hurt very bad. He had faced his share of **VULTURES**, as he was sure she had too, but he

would be worried about discussing it with her. A constant fear lingered in him—that his past hurt would sabotage his future – a future he knew he wanted to have her in, since the first day they met. She is his dream bae, would she be there for him, even if it wasn't right then at that time? Was he worried he would scare her away? He needed to close the door on his past. He needed to address his feelings, past wounds and trauma and not self-sabotage what he deserved and longed for.

She was still embracing her new time. Did she have some hesitations about him? What she unsure of him? Maybe she just was not ready. But how could this be true? He's the person she asked for. He's the one she would call her perfect juman. She would still be guarded, and in the future would protect herself, but protect it from what? From who? From him? From herself? Why would she be scared to fully welcome him? Was she scared he would disappear unexpectedly, or hurt her? She needed to address her feelings, past wounds and trauma and not self-sabotage what she deserved and longed for.

Even though he and she would tell themselves with confidence that they were “**MADE FOR ME,**” and was constantly reminded of it in their time together, she didn't realize how much she was protecting herself from him, and he did not realize how much he was guarding himself. He wasn't ready to expose that part of hurt of himself to her. If he did, would she be with in his future. She wasn't ready to fully let herself go and let him in, if she did, would it be enough. Why would they question themselves, knowing that the way things were going, they could be together **UNTIL THE END OF TIME**, literally through literature for chapters and seasons and volumes.

He knew, a step, a major step in addressing his fear while also addressing hers was to show her how serious and committed he was to him and her and their future together. It was to share with her the one thing he had

guarded most fiercely—the single greatest treasure birthed from his past. That was the actually key to his heart, to his home, and to his life. He was offering her access to the deepest parts of himself, trusting her with his most precious gift. His new joy would meet his first joy. He would hope that she recognizes how significant of a step this was for him toward her and their togetherness and their future.

His two joys would eventually meet. His joys would eat together, play together, cook together, sit together, swing together, celebrate together, talk together, paint together, game together, slime together, walk together, park together, snow together, lay together, watch shows together, sing together, laugh together, text together, smile together, be together. And together, they were absolutely priceless. She was so perfect with his first joy. His first joy so perfect with her. They liked each other. It was special. He was so fortunate - beyond measure.

He would want his new joy and himself to create their own joy, a beautiful joy together. Something that solely belonged to them.

chapter 3

phone, key, wallet, mask

They would spend even more time together, in ways and under circumstances no one could have predicted. It was as though the lockdown was orchestrated so they could have accelerated time to truly explore the depth of their companionship. Almost every day began with a version of a simple ask: **COME OVER**. And without hesitation, they planned to. They always chose to do so. It wasn't just a routine; it became their way of affirming what was slowly being built between them—an unspoken promise of presence, of togetherness.

One of his absolute all-time favorite feelings with her was the moment she texted him to say she was on her way to him. From that point, in anticipation he would unconsciously keep track of time, knowing how long it might take her to arrive because he knew her walking pace. Afterall, he and she did walk a lot. When she buzzed to alert him of her arrival, his excitement swelled. He would check the virtual doorman and see her standing in the building alcove, him able to preview her pretty, her beauty big even on the small screen—always one of his all-time favorite images to see. She looked picturesque, no matter the weather or the day, her hair up and out or hair cascading down in twist, hat on head to brave the cold or worn for style, coat hood over her head with scarf wrapped, backpack on shoulders or tote bag in tow or sometimes both to carry all the things she was bringing, the sight of her made his heart flutter. He would buzz her in,

already smiling, geeking, knowing that in just moments, she and he would be together again. He would let her inside, and their greeting ritual would unfold. She always brought with her a warming presence upon her entrance that would instantly make his apartment feel more like a home. She would make herself comfortable, usually by heading to the couch, her movements natural in the space she was in while in his space. He would join her there on the couch, often sitting to the right of her. He and she would look at each other, smiling, gazes soft and full of affection. With a great beam he would say “hey,” his voice carrying all the unspoken elation of having her there. She would look at him with her earnest, absolutely adorable eyes, her beautiful smile, an expression so sincere, cute and sweet, then with a slight wave of her hand, she would respond in her kind and welcoming voice, “hi.” From the initial text to the concluding wave of hand and those words, this simple, inconspicuous and quaint exchange would continue to be an absolute all-time favorite experience for him they would consistently share. She was his absolute all-time favorite.

It was like a combination of a honeymoon and a staycation in their own “hom-tel.” Their days were filled with the kind of intimacy that only comes from truly sharing your time and space with someone. They worked from home together, overhearing each other’s professional prowess, equally impressed, taking notes to use themselves. They would peek into their workspaces, silently stealing glances of each other that spoke volumes, which would be accompanied by giggles. He would break for lunch, she would make sure he ate. He would sneak in a nap. She would join him. They would go to the market to pick up food to cook, or take turns deciding what restaurant they would order from. They picked up their favorite wines and spirits and created their own special cocktails, always saying a toast prior to their first sip acknowledging each other with words of whimsy, rhyme and affirmation. Evenings were spent watching TV, playing games, and simply enjoying each other’s company. They observed

each other in ways that went beyond the surface—learning, discovering, and appreciating the little things. She went to bed with him. He woke up with her. He and she often making decisions in the am on whether they would be late for work or call out all together to spend more time together. Though they had always been close and had a strong **HOLD ON** each other, the confinement of the world outside only served to bring them even closer—not just in proximity but in their connection and companionship.

They spent hours talking, laughing, and discovering parts of each other neither had anticipated. He and she loved doing things together, but just as much, they enjoyed doing nothing at all—simply being in each other’s presence, cherishing the comfort of one another. Even when life pulled them apart, reminding them of obligations outside of each other, they stayed in close touch, communicating with such frequency it felt as if they were still side by side.

Already knowing the answer, he would sometimes ask her if she missed him. Her reply was consistent and always the same—a simple, genuine, authentic “yes.” She would bashfully ask if he missed her, and he would respond with playful ambiguity: “Sort of, kind of, maybe, perhaps, a little bit, just a tad”—all the while knowing he missed her more than words could say, so deeply. They were simply dope together, he and she were a rare blend of romance, playfulness and depth. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

Is this what they had to look forward to every day, for all the days, where in those moments, there was no one else but them? No outside noise, no distractions. Just their own world. This way of being together would extend far beyond the lockdown. How wonderful that this is what they had in store for their future.

So why not lock each other down? It was a question that lingered, even if never said out loud directly. Would this magic connection be real? Would it last as long as they both wanted?

This would eventually come into focus. She would visit home to the island of Rhode to spend time with her family. What was meant to be a few days stretched into weeks, and the weeks felt like months. This was the longest time he and she had spent apart since they'd first met, and he felt the absence deeply. The usual calls and texts grew less frequent. This wouldn't be the only time she did it. He noticed.

He called her to talk. He knew she didn't like to have these discussions. In her way, she said she had taken the extra time because she wanted to think about him and her and where they stood. He was surprised at the notion, but understood her feelings. He felt it challenging that she would make decisions about him and her, without having what he felt was a proper discussion with him about it prior. This would feel like a theme in their relationship, where she would make decisions about him and her without him. He thought she would and should just tell him how she feels when she felt it. He knew he should tell her how he felt as well, to say what he means to say. He listened and acknowledged the feelings she was feeling at that time, and assured her that he was there for her to be with her. Then asked if when she returned from the island of Rhode if he could take her out to celebrate her birthday. She agreed. And upon her return, the connection was still there, that familiar bond immediately finding its way back to them. It was a reminder of the quiet magic they shared, a union that could weather uncertainty and always feel like home.

Still, there were **NO PROMISES** made, no formal declarations in the present, but he and she knew there was presence in the future. They could feel it in the way they moved through their days, in the way they appreciated each other's presence. Maybe he believed they had forever.

Maybe she thought they had time and would wait until it felt perfect. But at this time, with everything feeling so right, they didn't need to rush. They had each other, and for now, that was enough. Though they didn't always speak it aloud, the understanding and feeling was there—this was something real, something lasting, something special.

Days became weeks, weeks became months, and soon months turned into a year, then two. Their lives became a patchwork of shared moments and quiet commitments, his becoming hers, hers becoming his, each other adding texture to it each day.

He had never imagined himself as someone who would live with pets, yet here he was—now a cat person. His lap had become a comfortable spot he welcomed her felines to lounge when he visited her.

She was a self-proclaimed minimalist, but his love for sneakers had an influence on her, where she found herself creating spaces in her closet for her growing tennis shoe collection.

Together, they would shop for plants, which she introduced him to and would give him tips to ensure they flourished under his care.

When she'd ask for something comfortable of his to slip into, he offered a cozy item, something that carried the warmth of him. Her favorite color being green, he secured an especially special sweatshirt for her that would become a staple in her wardrobe of his. His cozy became hers, to the point that she had her own drawer in his space, filled not only with his "borrowed" cozies but with her delicate pieces she had left behind over time and new comfies he would buy for her. His space would always be a safe space for her and her things.

He and she would have lighthearted yet intense discussions about how to divide up household chores and who would be responsible for what.

The treacherous task of washing dishes would be something she despised, a sentiment he wholeheartedly shared, so he and she agreed

the only solution would be to make sure a dishwasher is on hand, one that he and she would begrudgedly load together.

Laundry was another obstacle. He wasn't fond of it, but she found a certain serenity doing it, enjoying the process of sorting, loading, washing, unloading. So, she would take charge of that task, and he would happily join her in drying and for **FOLDIN CLOTHES**, following some of the meticulous, organized methods of a beloved star from one of their favorite streaming shows she introduced him to.

Food shopping would be a shared adventure. He and she would curate the grocery list together, and they would be off in search of the goods from the home of a trader. He loved watching her move through the aisles, observing the focus and dedication she brought to each task, like her favorite pirate on a treasure hunt. She crossed items off a neatly written list on paper, tapped notes in her phone or just leveraged her mental checklist as she directed him to load the bounty into the shopping cart, then they would return home and unload the coveted items together, a symbol of their triumphant conquest.

He wasn't a hiker, but he went on small hikes with her, for her. She wasn't a comic book person, but she watched superheroes with him, for him. He liked bourbon, so she'd drink. She liked smoke, so he'd puff. They would share each other's vocabulary and "ism's." He even found himself texting in the same manner she did.

These little touches—cozies, chores, kicks, kittens represented their presence in each other's home and influences into their lives. Their commitment to being a part of the other's world.

Whether they were indulging in her favorite peanut butter cup treats, playing video games, going to the spa, having house parties where he and she were the only guests, them moonlighting as djs curating playlists they'd sing along and dance all night to, embarking on one of their many trips together, they were constantly creating memories—moments they would look back on with fondness. They would even text each other animated versions of themselves that re-captured these moments. They had built a space rich with shared experiences, both big and small. He and she had plenty of common ground to enjoy things together, but their differences only enriched the journey. They introduced each other to new pleasures, new perspectives, new shows, new hobbies, and new music constantly learning from one another.

Their love for music would be an intimately understated but extraordinary link they shared with each other. He introduced her to the sounds of his era, sharing the stories behind artists and labels with an insight only someone who had lived through that time could offer. She shared her favorite songs growing up and the artists that influenced her teenage and young adult years. It would be particularly special when his and her tastes overlapped, whether it was the waspy guitarist from her hometown area they both admired, the young eclectic hip-hop artist from the coast that was west they both dreamed of seeing perform live together, or their mutual belief that the rapper from the big easy was the greatest of all time. Multi day music festivals in the carolina above its southern counterpart, concerts at huge arenas in their borough, smaller shows are parks in their city, or random intimate sessions at a local venue, their love for music pulsed through them.

He didn't have a musically gifted voice – which was never up for debate, but simply being in her company, especially waking up beside her felt like a blessing he wanted to sing about from the hilltops. She inspired him, and he would tap into what he considered to be his diverse musical background to string together words in his own melody, trying to capture how he felt about her, about him and her, and the beautiful moments they shared. His a.m. tunes were an affectionate blend of love, playfulness, romance and pure adornment for her, words used to make her smile, laugh and be seen. She was always gracious, listening with warmth and occasionally joining in adding her own special touch to the melodies. He and she were often delighted by how their spontaneous freestyles sometimes sounded remarkably good—unexpected harmony, music from the heart. He and she were simply dope. They made beautiful music together, in every sense of the word.

No one else made him feel the way she did, and no one made her feel the way he did. It was reminiscent of how they had felt when they **FIRST BEGAN**, but now it was so much more. The excitement of their early days still pulsed between them, but it had deepened into something far richer, far more profound.

He and she would have several layers of compatibility that balanced itself in its similarities and differences. Professionally, they were on similar trajectories, both thriving and achieving success in the same field of being resources to the humans. He and she understood the nuances of the work, the challenges of navigating corporate dynamics, and the underappreciated emotional labor that came with their roles. He and she spoke the same language. This gave them a unique ability to connect on a deeper level, affording each other the rare opportunity to communicate, console, and counsel that is so special, appreciated and valuable.

Financially, they were equally on the same playing field. He could take care of himself, and she could take care of herself, responsibly managing their lives with confidence and independence. Yet, their compatibility introduced a beautiful dynamic of giving and receiving. He and she treated each other with care and generosity, never keeping score. Whether it was small gestures or grand moments, they gave

freely, enjoying the ability to collectively share experiences without boundaries. He and she got matching platinum cards adorned by a gladiator that represented their shared spending powers, which was absolutely powerful. They could have conversations about money without shame or conflict. He and she would be able to build upon this as they had discussions about future financial plans, living a life of abundance not just in wealth, but together in richness being fortunate they were afforded the chance to afford, indulging in life's wonders, creating memories that reflected their dreams, desires, and growth.

Intellectually, he would be hard-pressed to think of anyone who could operate in the same sphere of brilliance as her. She was remarkable, a force of intelligence, brainpower and curiosity, and he admired the way her mind worked—so sharp, so thoughtful, so demure. She echoed his sentiment in return, often telling him how much she adored his big, beautiful brain. Their conversations were a constant source of stimulation, covering any and every topic imaginable, from the deeply philosophical to the utterly ordinary, the smart to the silly. There would be appreciation in the opinions they shared, and an even deeper embrace of their diversity of thought, finding appeal in their differences constantly learning from one another. He and she became unofficial mentors to each other, a dynamic built on trust and respect for each other's minds, guidance, and perspectives. He valued her insight and clarity, she leaned on his wisdom and creativity. Together, they were a force, each sharpening and supporting

the other, pushing each other to grow, think, and be bigger, the best versions of themselves.

Socially, they exhibited the same foundational values, and it showed in the way they moved together. He was her best friend, and she was his. Their companionship became a cornerstone of their bond, nurturing the magical connection through mutual enjoyment of shared activities, and the creation of new traditions. Whether it was planning adventures, laughing at inside jokes, him teaching her how to play card games, her teaching him about nature, or simply reveling in the comfort of each other's company, they built a world that felt complete. In the outside world, he and she knew each other's strengths instinctively and leaned on one another when those strengths needed to shine. He and she could be totally free with the other, knowing if they were not their so best self, it would be met with grace and without any judgement. Without a word, they would recognize the subtle or not so subtle cues, and understand what the other needed and would show up for them.

Although they certainly checked the boxes, his and her connection was more than just a compatibility checklist. While he and she undoubtedly looked great together on paper (and absolutely great together in person), their bond was beyond what was written on the surface. The ink of their connection would leave deep and clear impressions, beautifully absorbed by the material it was penned on, creating lasting imprints of the nuances etched, forming a wonderful texture that would be a signature of him and her and them. There was magic in how the enchantment of the relationship and the grounding reality of blended together, it all felt—natural, genuine, smooth, comfortable, real, secure all while stomachs were filled with butterflies, hearts fluttering and skipping a beat, breaths taken away, weak in the knees while floating on cloud nine. It was not orchestrated, it was not forced, it was not planned, it was not even intentional. It just simply was.

How lucky was she? How blessed was he? He liked her. She liked him. They really really liked each other. Finding her had been the hardest part. Finding him was no easy task. It was as if she wished upon a star for him, or he tossed a coin into a well for her. Now that he found his dream bae and she found her prince charming, didn't it feel as if everything was destined to fall into place? This wasn't just a fleeting feeling; it was magic, it was real, it was happening— it was the kind of connection that stories are written about. A togetherness that captured hearts of the audience, inspiring awe with each page that unfolded, a love destined to become the tale that others would one day remember and tell. A tale so enchanting that a once young, eager fairy, now wise and thoughtful would tell proudly, weaving its wonder through countless chapters, seasons, and volumes.

chapter 4

hugs. kisses. cuddles.

She is so beautiful to him. It was almost criminal how naturally beautiful she was. He wondered if she knew how beautiful she was. He would tell her all the time, even though his words felt too small to fully capture what she meant to him. *He hopes this chapter will.*

Many times, he would find himself watching her stunning face, cute, pretty, beautiful all at the same time, always completely swept away by her smile. It was the perfect harmony of her soft lips and pretty teeth, perched perfectly below her cute nose; a reflection of the moment of happiness she was experiencing, a moment he would take pride in helping to create. He loved hearing her infectious laugh — whether from a joke he made, with her often referring to him as silly, or if she was cracking herself up with her own humor, which he thought was so adorably hilarious. She was one of his favorite sounds to hear.

He had tried, often, to count all the freckles that dotted her face, but every attempt failed as he would lose track from getting lost in her pretty. The places where the freckles called home, her forehead with a slight glow, her cheeks with a gentle blush, her nose adorably cute, and her lips soft and tender—gave him the irresistible urge to kiss each one in a circular motion each time he saw her. And each time she knew she was seen by him, in anticipation, she would lean in, just slightly, meeting him halfway. It was a

greeting. It was their greeting. It was something they never discussed but became an unspoken routine that would unfold each time. It was his instinctive gesture of giving his affection, and her intimately delicate way of receiving it. It was a ritual that would become second nature to them. Then they would hug.

Her hair was bold, big, and powerful, defying gravity in its natural state, much like her own spirit. It was beautiful in the many forms and shapes it took. It required attention and care to tame—just as she did. Her skin was soft, almost sweet to the touch, a testament to how well she knew how to take care of herself. She was, in many ways, a product of her products, always choosing the best ingredients for her body. He took that as a sign that everything she used reflected her love for herself. He wanted to be a main ingredient in her life, an ultimate sign of her love.

When he saw her, she carried with her a subtle aroma. The fragrance she wore, quaint yet intoxicating, would only have an effect if you were allowed to get close to her. He was lucky she let him close. He would often ask what she was wearing, curious about the scent that followed her. With a slight, endearing embarrassment, she admitted that she wasn't wearing anything special—it's just water as she was fresh out of the shower. Even in her simplicity, she was remarkable. She didn't need perfumes or lotions to stand out; she naturally carried an essence he found irresistible. She was one of his favorite scents to smell.

Her eyes were captivating and hypnotic, eyelashes long, curly and feathery, eyebrows naturally shapely and bold, complementing each other creating a perfectly packaged window—one that invited him to take a glimpse into who she was deep inside. She would gaze back into his eyes, eyes she often described as kind, inviting, and deep—the same way she described his demeanor. There was something about the way she looked at him, piercing past the surface into the very core of who he was. When they intensely

looked at each other, you can hear their souls were communicating saying **“I CHOOSE YOU.”** Then they would kiss.

He loved looking at her, whether for a reason or no reason at all — and no reason would be a good enough reason in itself. He adored the moments when she modeled the clothing he had gifted her, each piece curated to match her crazy, sexy and cool. She was sophisticated elegance. She was sexy. She was his muse. He loved watching her put it on, how it fit on her fantastic figure, and enjoyed seeing her take it off. Often, she would catch him in those quiet moments when he couldn't tear his eyes away. She would look at him with a mixture of amusement and embarrassment, and affectionately call him a creep. And he would smirk, because if he was her creep, it was a title he wore with pride. She was one of his favorite sights to see. He reveled in those times when she would creep on him too, especially in the mornings after they had just woken up, still laying in bed together. The mutual creep-ness was re-assuring. Then they would cuddle.

He loved her body—the way every part of her was particularly created. Her arms, delicate yet strong, held him with a softness that made him feel completely at ease and secure. Her back and shoulders, smooth and resilient, was a source of strength, carrying her with such grace. Her hands, soft yet sure, were a perfect match for his when held and fingers would interlock, and was a warm sensual touch when she grasped his manhood. Her breasts were delicate and pretty, perfectly proportioned that added to her criminally natural beauty. He would love when she proudly wore clothing that showed her cleavage, in her subtle sexy way. Her belly, tender and feminine, a gentle suppleness he cherished. Her thighs, thick, strong, soft felt inviting under his touch, a fullness that carried itself through her lower body that he absolutely adored. Her ass, shapely with the perfect amount of curves when still, and bounce and jiggle when in movement was something he could not keep his eyes or hands off of. It would be met with

a palm squeeze, pinch, smack, kiss, nibble or a bite. She was the ideal height, whether standing next to him, sitting beside him, or laying next to him. There was never any awkwardness in his and her positioning with each other, they shared a natural alignment. He loved being beside her and being inside her.

In moments of discreet admiration, he would find himself singing in his mind that childhood song: “head, shoulders, knees, and toes”—every word a reminder of how he appreciated her completely, from head to toe. Each body part receiving a kiss as his silent devotion, each a reminder of how amazing she was to him. She was one of his favorite things to touch.

When he thought about how she made him feel, emotionally, physically, mentally, sexually, he couldn't help but think, unwaveringly and unapologetically, “I'm **STILL INTO YOU**,” he adored her. She was masterful with her words, and when he listened to her sweet voice, sharing how he made her feel, emotionally, physically, mentally, sexually, he couldn't help but be happy with how much she adored him. There was no doubt or denying the effect they had on each other.

chapter 5

hashtag plus

The sexual chemistry and energy between him and her was instant, intense and unparalleled. He embraced the role of learning her body, teaching himself how to make her feel amazing each time, every time, multiple times, all at the same time.

She was the subject, and he would be the devoted student, the prized pupil, studying her with great conviction that bordered on reverence. He paid careful attention to how she responded to every movement he made, every touch, each gesture—a lesson in understanding her. He would be dedicated to feel all her, hyper-attuned to know how parts of her body reacted to parts of his. The push and pull, back and forth, give and take that would trigger her beautiful thick thighs to shake, cause her toes to curl, make her back arch so he can go deeper, create flexibility so he can go deeper, her hands to grip anything with arms reach causing her fingernails to scratch against his skin and her teeth to bite down leaving marks. He would intently listen to the lovely sounds she made—each sigh, gasp, moan, word, scream—all of varying volumes, to understand what chords he stroke that caused her beautiful noise. Her facial expressions were a guide—each slight shift and twinkle of emotion. Her lips as they parted in delight, then biting of her lower lip in enjoyment, the way her brow furrowed slightly when anticipation overtook her, the soft flutter of her beautiful lashes when she closed her eyes in deep satisfaction, her eyes opening wide piercing him in disbelief of the intensity and pleasure she was feeling, a simple smile conveying how much gratification she was

experiencing physically and feeling emotionally. He would keep excellent notes, affectionately titled hashtag plus which he kept stored away in the mental catalogue of his big beautiful brain.

He loved how she tasted, especially when she danced on his face. It was a dance choreographed at the sole direction of the movement of his tongue between her beautiful thick thighs. Each time he licked, kissed, sucked, or nibbled would trigger a different dance move she'd perform for him. He had the best seat in the house. She has the best seat in the house. She was his favorite to taste.

He wanted every stroke, touch, caress, kiss, nibble, and bite to make her feel special and wanted. With each penetration, she felt like warm snow—soft, comforting, like home. Deserving of every sensual quake she felt when he was inside her, he found pleasure in her body trembling over and over and over as he repeatedly caused her to feel aftershocks increasing in magnitude each time, erupting over him.

Her touch made his heart race the moment she laid hands on him. He savored the feel of her warm hands, soft lips and the warmth inside her. All of her movements had an indelible impact on his body, whether she was whether on top, on bottom, sideways, backwards, upside down, right side up. The look in her eyes, showing how safe she felt in his arms and how much she trusted him with her body made him feel god-like. Her kisses, bites, nibbles, and scratches left him feeling weak but made him feel powerful.

She had a range - sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, sometimes gentle, sometimes aggressive - and the anticipation of not knowing which he would get made it even sexier. He and she would get even more pleasure when he would tell her to do the opposite. When she made noise, he would tell her to stop and be silent, which would turn her on so much. When she was quiet, he would ask her to tell him how she felt, and she would use her

words to express it which turned him on so much. The way their words spoke to each other was sensual. She follows his instructions, both verbal and non verbal cues. She would take his lead and was very good at it. She was a good girl. She was his good girl. She is so beautiful. Her faces were so beautiful, every facial expression reflecting how she felt. The way their bodies spoke to each other in harmony, a duet orchestrated by their everlasting connection allowing them to move together in concert to their own perfect tempo. They made beautiful music together, in every sense of the word. She is so sexy-every curve, every inch of her, every ounce of her. They consistently would become one, feeling each other's trembles, shivers, peaks, and love flow through them. It was especially special when they arrived at their destination together, counting down to a perfectly timed head-on collision where they both exploded with passion and somehow miraculously survived - barely, marked only by the scars of their intense loving.

And as their bodies lay crashed at the end, in a passionate wreckage, looking into each other's eyes and direction, seeing the pleasure they had given one another, and taking pride in being a victor against their partner, he and she would each think to themselves, "**SEX WITH ME** is so amazing." Their magnetic attraction would always lead them back together, her back into his arms, where she was the perfect fit, her head on his chest as they ask if each other is ok, answer always being yes, then both becoming consumed with feeling that they **WILL ALWAYS BE MY BABY** as they fall asleep. She was his favorite feeling to feel. It was hugs, kisses, and cuddles – hashtag plus.

But it was more than just physical, it was the connection he and she created together that would manifest itself amongst them emotionally and mentally. Him and her were a masterclass in love, sex, passion, energy and the magic you create by being wholly present with another. Her presence brought him to his senses, all of his senses, him and her just made sense.

INTERLUDE I: REFLECTIONS

Reflections - life is full of opportunities for them. He made it a point to embrace it with his family, with his friendships, and most importantly - with him and her.

He found himself in a house of glass mirrors, each reflection revealing a different version of his past, present, and future self. Some images he admired, memories and parts of himself he felt proud of, faces he recognized with warmth and respect. Other reflections, glimpses of himself that stirred embarrassment and disappointment, shadows of decisions he wished he could change. In the mirrors reflecting his future, he saw projections of nervousness and uncertainty but was hopeful and confident facing the unknown.

He wondered how much she reflected of him - how much she reflected of herself. Would she take a page out of one of her favorite character's stories, of a young curious, headstrong yet impulsive girl whose life started to come into focus after embracing the looking glass.

He wanted to be the best version of himself for her, for them. But even more, he needed to become the best version of himself for himself—to show up fully, honestly, and with purpose. It would take work, real effort, and he knew he would need to hold himself accountable for that growth. She would need to hold him accountable, to help him stay true to his own potential. He understood that he was, and would always be, a work in progress—and he was okay with that, because she would be by his side, witnessing and supporting his journey.

She would feel it too, that same pull to be her best self, to bring all of her light and strength to their love. She needed to be the fullest version of herself for him, for them, and for her own heart's journey. It would mean reflecting deeply, challenging herself, and having the courage to grow and

heal even when it felt hard. She would need to lean on him to remind her of her strength, to hold her accountable for her dreams, after all, he believed in her so much.

Studies show that trauma—whether from childhood, adolescence, past relationships, or life’s many challenges—can leave behind deep, often invisible scars. To cope with the pain, one develops defensive mechanisms that act as shields, protecting one from the vulnerability that once left them wounded. Over time, these defenses become ingrained, guiding how they approach connection, relationships, and even how they view themselves. Yet, while these behaviors initially serve to protect, they often transform into barriers, isolating a person from the very intimacy they desire.

Ironically, it is often within a genuinely healthy relationship that these hidden wounds finally come to the light. When someone steps into a healthy relationship where they experience true love, safety, and support—where they feel genuinely seen and valued—their long-standing defenses begin to unravel. The closeness and unconditional acceptance of a loving partner reflect back parts of themselves that are fragile or broken, bringing to light fears, insecurities, and unhealed pain that may have been buried for years.

For many, this experience can be confusing and overwhelming. The surfacing of old wounds can create the impression that the healthy relationship itself is the source of discomfort, leading one to mistakenly view the connection as unsettling or even negative. In truth, it is the safety and stability of this healthy relationship that acts as a mirror, reflecting back the unresolved issues that have always been there, often masked or dormant in less secure and inadequate connections. Confronting these wounds within the context of a

loving relationship is both challenging and necessary. It can feel as though the stability of the relationship is to blame for the emergence of pain and self-doubt, yet it is this very stability that allows the reflection needed for healing to begin. With the support of a partner who offers unwavering patience, compassion, and understanding, one can feel safe enough to examine these wounds without fear of judgment or abandonment. In this nurturing space, the individual can begin to replace those defense mechanisms with trust and vulnerability, discovering a sense of openness that they feared or may have previously thought impossible.

The same relationship that brings these hidden vulnerabilities to light also becomes the space where one can experience true healing. Together, the individuals create a sanctuary of growth and resilience, where self-protective walls are gradually replaced by genuine connection. Creating this safe and nurturing environment, the journey of self-repair becomes possible, as both partners support each other in transforming old scars into shared strength. In this journey, the love they share becomes not only a source of joy but also a profound, life-changing experience that nurtures each person's capacity for wholeness and deep connection.

Did he realize how much his actions and moves reflected how she would act and move? Did she recognize how much her efforts and behaviors would reflect how he would work and behave? They were each other's reflection, in everything they did, like a mirror.

Together, he and she would need to embrace the idea of being works in progress—each of them walking their own path, but forever intertwined, growing side by side, anchored by the love they shared.

Would he ask her about it? Would she talk to him about it?

People in glass mirrored houses do not **THROW STONES**.

chapter 6

it's about time - ing

Their connection was exponentially rare, infinitely different, almost uncalculatable — a once in a lifetime experience, a once in this timeline connection, a once in a forever love.

She was **ONE IN A MILLION** in his world, one in a million in all worlds. She would even be the one in a million version of herself across all the multiverses along all the multiple timelines. He knew he was that in her eyes as well, he was her perfect juman. She was his dream bae.

She was smart, so smart. The way she wielded her words, with a natural eloquence left him in awe. The way she thought about the world was curious, careful and captivating. He loved tapping into her brain and the conversations they'd have on any and every topic. He would learn so much from her.

She was sweet, so sweet. Her kindness wasn't just a gesture; it was how she genuinely lived. It radiated from her, a quiet strength wrapped in a gentle firmness, a grounding innocence that made him feel seen and cared for. He would learn so much from her.

She was nice, so nice. There was a warmth in her, an authentic softness that made her presence feel like home, like safety. Even his first joy would express to him how wonderfully kind she was when they were together. He would learn so much from her.

She was deep, so deep. There were layers to her that he had a constant fascination in exploring more, coming to parts of her mind, heart and soul. She would be open with parts and guarded with others. She would share with him what she felt comfortable with, but reluctant to share with him what caused discomfort or maybe challenging. He would look into every conversation, glance, in an attempt to understand her more. He would learn so much from her.

She was both deeply attached and fiercely independent, a complex combination that required a delicate balance to strike. But it was a challenge he was more than willing—and eager—to take on. He understood that her independence wasn't just a trait; it was part of her strength, a shield she carried to protect herself. He had no doubt that she could do it all herself, but wanted her to know with him there, she did not need to. He would remind her constantly that she is not alone, she is not by herself. Yet, beneath that shield, her attachment was just as deep, just as powerful. There were countless moments where she would express a longing for him, one that he would always be there when she called upon him. He would learn so much of her.

She was stubborn, so damn stubborn at times. She would often do things that went against her own interests and desires, all in an attempt to keep herself grounded, have some control, preparing for what she believed she needed to protect herself from. It was her way of bracing for the unknown, of holding herself steady even when her heart longed for something else. He observed the tension in her, and although he admired the strength in her determination, he hated that it meant she sometimes fought against her own happiness, that sometimes translated in her doing unkind or even mean things. He would learn so much about her.

She was fun, so fun. There was an effortless playfulness about her, that would make spontaneous adventures or the simplest of moments enjoyable. He would learn so much from her.

She was affectionate, so affectionate. Her touch was soft, yet it carried a weight of meaning. Every gesture, every glance, every embrace, every kiss, every hug, every cuddle left him feeling so special. He would learn so much from her.

He loved all parts of her. The crazy, the sexy and the cool. Her strengths, her weakness, her flaws and all. All of the above. He loved who she was as a person, and who he knew she'd be as a partner, as his partner, his dream bae. He knew all that made her who she was, was all that he wanted and needed. He was lucky, he knew it. He would want to learn more from her, of her and for her.

What a wonderful place, space and timeline they were co-existing in together. Something special bound their worlds together. He felt it. She felt it. It was easy for them to feel every day because it was real, deep, strong, powerful, peaceful and most of all, **UNCONDITIONAL**. But even though it was easy to feel, why was it equally hard to say. He'd been wanting to express it for a long time on several occasions but wasn't sure about the timing. It held weight— carried meaning that was as heavy as it was liberating. He would always let timing of things impact his actions, which led to what seemed like many inactions on his end. Should it come at a randomly inconspicuous moment to show the simpleness of it? Should it occur during a meticulously curated activity to emphasis the gravity of it?

Then came a time, shortly after her birthday. It didn't matter if it was the right or the wrong time. He knew it was time for him to be brave, although it was nothing for him to fear. Time to fully believe in what he and she had,

and to offer each other what they truly deserved. What he and she had long desired, quietly hoped for, and deeply felt for so long. The words were spoken. He said he loved her. She said she loved him. They loved each other in **EVERY KIND OF WAY** for a long time but never said it. He asked her to be his girlfriend. She said yes. With that, the weight that had been silently hanging between them lifted. A new door was unlocked, and with it, a new chapter of the story—one where they both stood, open to what was on the other side of that door, ready to turn to the next page of their tale together.

He was hers, and she was his. Their connection brought profound love, a connection so pure it seemed untouchable. Dream bae and prince charming, his hat as her crown as their foreign engineered chariot awaits.

He and she were in a whirlwind of fun, passion, excitement, romance and happiness. She reveled in the fact that he was finally hers. He marveled at the reality that she was finally his. They remained firmly grounded in the experiences that brought them there—the quiet exchanges, the meaningful glances, the shared laughter. The time and togetherness. As the world opened up, his and her worlds opened up together.

He and she attended their first big venue concert together to see one of their favorite artists, a musician whose festivals they would frequent together in the future. Music being an understated yet intimately impactful part of their connection, this night felt like kickoff to incredible moments they would create, a story written laughter, magic, fun and pure happiness with music as it's soundtrack. It began with a pregame at her house, their energy bubbling with anticipation. From there, they went to the taco spot he and she still couldn't quite figure out how to pronounce. At the venue, the concert became a backdrop of their captivating love on full display—captured by priceless selfies capturing their genuine affection, affinity and

adornment of each other. The way his hand naturally found hers, her lips instinctively drawn to his, him and her being connected reciting lyrics to each other of their favorite tunes, acting as each other's hype person. He and she were the

stars of the show and it was amazing. They made beautiful music together, in every sense of the word.

The night out ended where their first date had concluded, a full-circle moment that felt both serendipitous and intentional. He and she saw a bartender they befriended who would give them drinks. In their playfulness and spirited long night of indulging of wines and spirits, she would fall off the barstool, and he would pick her up. She was a little embarrassed, but there was nothing embarrassing about her in that moment, or ever. He would always be there to pick her up, as she would be for him. It was a top tier time of their togetherness.

She took him and his first joy to a pottery class, where they painted little knickknacks, and she helped his first joy select colors for her design, teaching and guiding her in a way that was gentle, kind, and incredibly special. He took her and his first joy to a factory of slime, where they played in fields of colorful, glitter-filled goo. Her childlike spirit came alive, especially in the room filled with shiny balloons where the laughter of his new joy and first joy filled the space, echoing the fun being had. His first joy would invite his new joy to go trick-or-treating, and together they sorted through the most prized pieces of candy collected that day. Her patience, her care, her playfulness —it made him feel lucky and blessed to see both of his joys together, bonding and creating experiences. She would be an amazing presence and figure in his first joy's life, so sharing these moments was a treasure.

He surprised her with a magical outing to a whimsical tea party, inspired by the characters of one of her favorite stories. They donned hats, crafted cocktails, and shared laughs as they participated in the lively and interactive show. She invited him to join her and her friends on the side of the city that was lower and to the east, where he managed to get a last-minute reservation at a trendy restaurant, one known for its music and vibes. Bowling followed, and she asked him how good he was at the game. He humbly admitted he hadn't bowled in a long time, but that night, he played two of his best games ever, winning the friendly competition. Later, she told him he won over her friends too.

He asked her to be his date to his sister's wedding. She said yes. He and she shopped for her dress together, and she chose one that was fabulous, perfectly suited to her style – a slight minimalist look with a bit of lace flair. To complete her outfit, he bought her a set of pearls, the elegant simplicity of each piece matching her own. As they dressed, she asked him to help clasp the necklace around her neck, and in that small, intimate moment, his hands adorning her with pearls, he imagined a lifetime of similar moments, a future where he would always be by her side, sharing these timeless gestures of love. The arrival at the wedding was like the soft launch of their togetherness. It was the introduction as him and her, him being hers and her being his. He and she looked so good together, the best looking pair at the wedding.

Every year since two thousand and fifteen he and his first joy would bring the new year in together, always just the two of them at their home, alone. This time would be different. She would join him and his first joy at their home to bring in the year twenty twenty-two together. As the countdown into the new year began, what was a yearly ritual now felt particularly special to him. This would be the first time ever he and his first joy had another, something even his first joy found special. This was a moment, a

new beginning, a milestone. It was him, his new joy and his first joy. It was all of them together.

As the night ended and first joy went to bed, he asked her to stay the night. She agreed. And when they finally came together in bed, their bodies flowed all night like the champagne bottles they'd popped earlier. She had to hold back, quieting the sounds that wanted to erupt as the fireworks of their connection exploded within her. Emotionally moved by this magical and significant moment between them, he restrained himself too, knowing often time the passion and intensity of their sex oftentimes moved his bed. He loved her so much, and she loved him so deeply.

It was real. It was true. It was magical. It was fun. It was him and her, together in a way that felt destined, as if this was how it was always meant to be. He and she just fit— naturally, seamlessly, perfectly. Each moment between him and her was the groundwork of something lasting— something that would belong solely to them. They were just getting started.

chapter 7

doubts of deserving

As beautiful as the connection, chemistry and love was, their newfound relationship seemed to carry an underlying fear and apprehension—reality.

“Is this really happening?” she often wondered, glowing ecstatically about the relationship coming to fruition, yet simultaneously hinting at her uncertainty of it actually being real. Though filled with happiness by the love and affection they shared coming together, there remained a quiet doubt—could her deepest desires and dreams have truly come to life? The simple answer—Yes, it did. As she embraced being in their relationship, he could sense her hesitation as to whether she belonged there. He noticed.

“**LOOK AT ME,**” he would say, gently trying to reassure her of her place in his heart. He did what he could—through his words, actions, touch and consistent presence—to show her she was wanted, secure in the place she occupied in his space, and more than deserving of the love and relationship they were building together. That he was a safe place for her to discuss her fears, wants, desires and needs with him without judgement.

Despite his reassurances, did she understand the source of her doubt? Did she feel undeserving of the love she had always yearned for? What was holding her back from fully accepting the life and partnership she was wanting to create with him? Was it something more she needed from him? Was it something more she needed from herself? Were these unanswered questions that weighed heavily on her, the foundations of the walls she had

built to protect her heart from the love she felt and the love she could fully embrace? Did she know that she needed to look within, to explore the roots of her own fears and insecurities? Only by confronting them could she find the strength to let go and truly accept him and the love she had long believed in but now hesitated to claim and lean into. He would be there to support her in the journey. She must not self-sabotage and block her blessings.

He had reached a level of happiness he had never experienced before—an intoxicating mix of amazement, vulnerability and joy. She was his joy. She loved him like no one else has. The thought of losing it or not being enough to sustain it terrified him. His mind would whisper, “**I DON’T TRUST MYSELF**,” and though he tried to suppress it, this doubt manifested itself in subtle ways—in his hesitations, his silences, and the way he sometimes seem to hold back. She noticed. She saw how he was at times reserved, even when he didn’t realize it. In response, she did what she could to make him feel secure—through her words, actions, her touch, and her unwavering presence. She created a space where he could feel comfortable, where vulnerability wasn’t a weakness but a gift they could share. She was there to listen and to help. She wanted him to know that she was his safe harbor, a place where he could anchor his fears and let go.

Despite her efforts, did he know the solution wasn’t found in her alone? Did he understand that he needed to confront the roots of his own fears and past? Why was he so afraid to fully let go to the love he had longed for? What was it about this powerful, fulfilling connection that made him question his vultures would kill it? These were the questions he needed to face—not just for her, but for himself. Did he know that until he understood why his fears lingered beneath the surface, that he would never be able to share himself wholly. She would be there to support and help in the journey. He must not self-sabotage and block his blessings.

In their moments of simply being together, those stretches of quiet comfort where no activity was required to feel connected, or if there were outside in the world, she would at times ask him if he was okay. He would smile and respond with a confident "yes," but she would ask again, her voice softer, almost searching. "Are you sure?" she would say, and though he found it innocent but curious, he would reaffirm his answer. "Yes, I'm sure," he'd reassure her, his voice steady and warm with a smile.

He would learn this pattern wasn't necessarily born out of doubt in him, but something deeper within her—a seed planted by childhood, rooted in a need for confirmation that things were okay, especially when she was involved. It was as though she sought reassurance and needed affirmations consistently.

For someone like him, who probably isn't the most outwardly expressive, something she pointed out to him, his love for her was intertwined by his steadiness and resolute presence with her. What she didn't fully grasp was that he was always okay, more that okay whenever he was with her. If he wasn't okay, he would be as soon as she was there. She brought a sense of peace and calm, a grounding presence that made the world feel a little less heavy.

She would never have to worry about her place in his space—it was hers, unconditionally and undeniably. And if she needed to hear it again and again to feel safe, he would gladly tell her, as often as she needed, "Yes, I'm okay. I'm Sure. Especially with you."

Though they trusted each other deeply and believed in the strength of their bond, did they know that neglecting their individual growth and not addressing past wounds could bring their momentum down to **ZERO**.

Love, no matter how magical, required continuous effort—not just in their relationship, but in themselves. Magic dust from a fairy

would not be enough. Without personal reflection and self-improvement, their connection risked losing its energy and depth.

Yet, they also knew that together, they had the potential for something extraordinary—**A SKY FULL OF STARS** that represented their love’s capacity to grow, overcome challenges, and shine even in the darkest moments. By working on themselves while nurturing their shared bond, did they realize how much their love would continue to thrive. What better person to do it with? What better time to do it? The bond is strong. Their relationship was growing. This rare connection and healthy relationship they shared afforded them the opportunity to grow as individuals and partners. They needed to seize it. They needed to avoid self-sabotage. They need to embrace it. He was her blessing. She was his blessing. They need not to block their blessings.

chapter 8

ride

They found themselves immersed in the bliss of their newly defined relationship. It wasn't just about how they connected with each other, but how this love radiated into every corner of their lives. He still did the things that made him him, and more. She continued doing what made her her, and more. What they had once excelled at individually now blossomed into something together, their strengths amplifying in each other's presence. They continued to **BE KIND**, maintaining a sense of youthfulness and fun in their time together. Every magical moment was met with an **ENCORE**, as if their relationship demanded a repeat performance, deeper and richer each time.

He and she found themselves lost in each other, completely consumed by the intensity of their connection. It was a love that grew with every interaction, a love that demanded more—more presence, more passion, more trust, more understanding, more vulnerability, more of the magic that had been sprinkled on them. They were not just falling in love; they would need to dive into it, surrendering to the wild, beautiful whirlwind it was destined to become.

It felt like a rocket, or so he thought. He was their co-pilot, she was their co-navigator, and together, the intensity of their connection launched them into new heights. They soared through the thrill of it all, side by side, holding on tightly to one another as they ascended. The higher they went,

the more effortless it seemed—their love climbing with a sense of boundless energy. Every moment felt smooth and perfect as they admired the breathtaking view below, the world expanding beneath their feet, their bond only growing stronger with each passing second.

But as exhilarating as it was, they would soon realize this wasn't just a rocket speeding into the unknown—a one-way journey into the vastness of space. This was a rollercoaster, a wild and unpredictable ride, cranking its way higher and higher with the same intensity but more grounded in reality. And just like any rollercoaster, it wasn't all uphill. There would be sudden drops, sharp turns, unexpected twists—moments that would test them, moments where gravity would shift and pull them in directions they weren't expecting.

With that, they would need to prepare for the realities that come with relationships. He and she held each other on a pedestal, and how could they not? Their connection and chemistry felt seemingly perfect, as though it had cast by a fairy's enchanting magic spell. He was prince charming and she was dream bae, and they were stars of their own wonderful fairy tale. He always seemed to know exactly what she needed without her asking, as if he could read her mind. And she had a way of reaching him, of connecting with him, making him feel good without him ever needing to explain how. He and she seemed to possess a kind of superpower, an intuition that made their connection naturally seamless and effortless.

This ease, this magic, their superpower had created a world between them where conflict or difficulties were relatively absent, where everything flowed flawlessly. However, life and love are not immune to the vulnerabilities of reality. One day, inevitably, he or she will falter, stumble, make a mistake, be human. A word unspoken, a need unmet, a mishap, or a milestone forgotten. And when it happened, it wouldn't mean their

connection was broken, or something was wrong, or that the magic was gone, or love was lost, it would just mean they are not perfect all the time, and that is perfectly fine. The pedestal that was built on the air of perfection would need to give way to something stronger and more stable, a purposeful foundation strengthened on effort, action, intention, understanding, grace, forgiveness and commitment.

In the anticipation of these turns, they should grip each other even tighter, bracing themselves for the inevitable. The thrill wasn't just in the climb, but in knowing that with every dip, every twist, they would face it together. Were they prepared for **THEM CHANGES**, and ready to weather whatever the ride threw at them. In those moments of uncertainty, as the world tilted and spun around them, all he and she need to whisper to each other are the words that hold them steady: **HOLD ON**.

Their love wasn't just about the highs—it was about holding on through the lows, trusting in the ride, and finding joy in every loop, dip, and turn. Her prince charming plus his dream bae may not equal him and her having a perfect relationship without it's ups and downs, and that would be perfectly fine. Nothing is perfect all the time, but it's still special and magic.

chapter 9

blanket

Days together felt **BRAND NEW**. How lucky was he? He would often think to himself, “She really loves **ALL OF ME**.” It was a kind of love he had never really experienced before—so pure, so all-encompassing, sort of, kind of, maybe, perhaps, a little bit, just a tad. She brought him great happiness, and he did his best to show her how much she meant to him, how deeply he believed in her, how fiercely he cared for her. Just being around her made everything brighter. He knew she had that same feeling about him.

He learned early in their togetherness how much she loved blankets, which would be one of the first gifts he would give. Seeing how she used the blanket and enjoyed it, would feel like a metaphoric representation of him and her. He and she would wrap themselves in a blanket of togetherness, a shared warmth that enveloped them. The blanket was warm, comfortable, plush, and soft to the touch, large enough to cover not just their bodies but the life they were wanting to build together. The blanket was weighted and heavy, protecting them, keeping him and her secure, grounded and safe. Every moment, every laugh, every conversation, each trip, each date, each quiet moment at home, the hugs, the kisses, the cuddles, the plus - added layers and texture to that blanket. It was the product of their time, their love, and their commitment to one another.

They could be doing something extraordinary, like exploring new places together, or something as simple as deciding whether to call out of work so her and she could sleep in to make **BANANA PANCAKES**. The activity didn't matter; what mattered was their togetherness. And there would be so much togetherness. His and her time, that solely belonged to them.

Tacos on occasion on a tuesday would become a thing, typically accompanied by a plate of nachos and a round, or two, or three of tequila. He would see it as a lighthearted yet unintentional nod to their first date—a discreet tribute to how it all began.

He considered himself a bit of a foodie, but it wasn't until her that he realized how much of a culinary fraud he was. Her love for cooking, her refined taste and sophisticated palette, and expertise in cuisine made him realize he was no match, and he loved that.

They found delight in seeking out new spots to try—whether it was brunch, lunch, or dinner, in town or out of town, each outing would be a small adventure in their togetherness.

First, when they received the menu, they would play their usual game—first trying to guess which cocktail the other would choose. It was a playful ritual they both loved, revealing he and she understood each other's tastes. More often than not, the guesses were spot on. They had an impressive success rate. And if by chance they got it wrong, sometimes one would go with the other's guess anyway—because it often turned out to be the right choice.

Next, they would conspire over the food selections, making sure to order dishes the other would want to try, knowing he and she would be sharing bites throughout the meal. She had a special talent for creating different bites out of the combinations of ingredients before them. She would always make sure he would taste the perfect bite.

They would glance around at the other patrons, exchanging amused looks as they tried to guess the stories behind each table's connection. The inquisitive imagination shared by he and she had them weaving tales of awkward first dates, casual outings between old friends, out-of-town visitors exploring new spots, or perhaps colleagues grabbing a

bite after work. The real thrill came when their guesses aligned, each nodding in agreement as they watched. And when their intellectually curiosity via nosey ears picked up snippets of conversation that confirmed their suspicions, he and she share a look, an unspoken victory that only deepened their shared amusement and a reminder that, even among strangers, they were perfectly in sync with each other.

Finally, at the end of the meal, they would tap into their hours upon hours of binge-watching the network dedicated to food. With a playful seriousness, using the network inspired vocabulary they would critic the restaurant's cuisine, the atmosphere, the service.

He and she would travel often, another form of their togetherness. Being on vacation was always exciting, but they found equal appeal in planning it – reminiscent of their first date. They would sit together, tossing out ideas, debating locations, and what would eventually become the most important decision, the hotel or resort that would be their home for a time away. This process could either be days, weeks, even months in the making. Other times, it would be a let's just book it now; and he would pull out his phone and quickly have the itinerary ready for her to approve in excitement prior to hitting "confirm." The prework to the vacation was always a fun little adventure in itself.

Though he and she lived in their own world together, traveling the world together added another layer to their connection. She had a deep love and fascination for the world. She was very intentional of what adventures they would embark on when they reached the destination. He was always

enamored by the things her curious mind wanted to explore – a museum, a church, library, bakery, a park, coffee shop, local cafe – in search of the charm, heart and soul of where they were.

Her fierce independence often made an appearance as she wandered off, led by her curiosity and sharp instincts. He admired the way she moved through the world, her authentic self, guided by her own compass, always ready to uncover something new. Watching her explore was a sight to see, and how lucky was he to see it as many times as he did. So much so that he was her silent paparazzi, trailing behind as she roamed free in nature while he captured perfect candid photographs of her beautiful and inquisitive nature. What image he couldn't capture with his camera phone, was saved in his mental catalogue of the ever-expanding visual collection of her – she was his joy in stills. A gallery carefully curated over years, sparked from the original entry from their first date, the enchanting image of her illuminating in the light snowfall.

He took charge of the lighter side of their trips, ensuring that amidst their adventures, they had time to relax and enjoy simple pleasures. Afterall, it was a vacation for him and her. She had no hesitation in leaving that to him—knowing he would handle it effortlessly. He would make sure they had time to kick back with drinks in their coveted vacation travel mugs, carving out moments at the pool and the beach. She was like a mermaid, completely in her element whenever she was in the water, and he loved to see her there—her joy reflecting in the waves as she swam freely. He would be her silent paparazzi in these moments.

He always found ways to balance their insatiable appetites for local cuisine with their need to simply unwind. Every trip would include a dinner or two for them to dress up, somewhat of an unspoken ritual. She would show him her outfits—pieces she was proud to wear for him—and he, in turn, took pride in being seen with her. Her natural beauty carried itself with

sophisticated elegance through nature. He noticed it each time, and would stop in his world to marvel at her. Another visual added to his brain's collection of her images.

Often, the world around him and her would take notice too. On these trips, they would frequently find themselves being the couple drawing attention from staff and random guests alike. People couldn't help but be curious, and every time it happened, she would be reluctantly surprised. What did these people see in him and her that piqued their interest? Maybe it was the same thing the two strangers who had stopped them on their very first date saw, recognizing something special in their connection. She would often attribute the attention to him—blaming his charm and presence for drawing people in. He would often credit her beauty and grace that captivated them. But it wasn't just him. It wasn't just her. It was him and her together. It was their togetherness.

He trusted her judgment, her opinion, and her mind completely, consulting her on a myriad of things in his life. Her perspective mattered to him, and there was a sense of comfort in turning to her, knowing her advice was grounded in care and thoughtfulness. In turn, she wanted to discuss everything with him. He was the person she wanted to tell all the things to. She trusted his mind, his heart, and his wisdom. She often referred to his “beautiful brain,” intrigued in the way he looked at the world. Although in the same professional field, they were not work colleagues but would become each other's work confidants knowing all the tea of each other's workplaces. He leaned into her regarding his career, valuing her impressive professional track record and seeking her wisdom when it came to discussing his next steps. She leaned into him for human resource guidance, especially when it came to unique human resource challenges, knowing his experience gave her clarity and direction. There was even a

time that her boss asked her if she asked him about a work issue. This brought a smile to his face.

He gave her the role of gatekeeper for his sneakers, building blocks, and clothing purchases. He trusted her to help him make the right

choices, practically and financially and she embraced that responsibility with pride and playfulness, seeing it as a way to connect with the things he loved. She also valued his opinion on her purchases. Trusting his sense of style, she would show him fashion whether online or going shopping. He would make sure she selected timeless silhouettes that would radiate her elegance in the most sophisticated yet understated way, and also approved the occasional wide leg pant. She had a tendency of asking him to weigh in whenever she considered treating herself with a high-priced gift. And each time, he would remind her, with his quiet yet firm reassurance, “You’ve earned it. You deserve to treat yourself.” He loved lifting her up, making sure she knew she was more than worthy of the things she wanted for herself and there be no doubt of deserving.

She trusted him with her felines. He trusted her near bodies of water. She trusted him with her home. He trusted her with his first joy. They trusted each other.

When she suggested small plans or had errands to run she’d casually invite him to join, he’d often respond in jest, “Will you be there?” That question always brought a smile to her face. Her reply was always the same: “Yes, I will.” Then yes, of course he would go. He would go to the ends of the earth for her, but at a point only needed to go across multiple time zones and the atlantic pond to be with her. He cherished those moments, holding on to the knowledge that, no matter what they were doing, her presence made everything better. They would go to bed together, wake up together.

She was consistently thoughtful, always asking how his sleep had been, knowing he often struggled to rest. But whenever she'd ask, his first thought was always, **"YOU WERE IN MY DREAM"**—and because of that, his sleep was peaceful, filled with love, safety, and warmth. Knowing she would wake up next to him brought him comfort when he and she went to bed together.

They were dope. His and her connection ran deep, like **LAVA** beneath the earth, steady and unbreakable, warm and alive. It moved between them in waves that neither could resist, a quiet heat simmering just below the surface. She was his dream bae, through and through. He would often wonder, **"AM I WRONG** for feeling this way? For being so overwhelmed by how real and easy this feels?" He couldn't fully comprehend how the **SIMPLE THINGS** she did—so naturally and effortlessly—impressed him to his core. When she wasn't around, there was a desire he had inside him, a simple, "damn, where are you, **I NEED YOU NOW.**" It was an urge he felt deeply, often, and he knew she felt it too. Only if he were able to bring her with him everywhere he went, his own tinkerbell.

But then he wondered: Was that too much for her? Was his deep love of her too much? Was it something she wasn't ready for? Was his want for her, too heavy a burden for her to carry? Was she getting what she needed from him to flourish on her own? For them to flourish together? These questions remained, but they couldn't diminish their togetherness.

chapter 10

milestones, meekness and mishaps

Milestones – life is full of many of them, birthdays, anniversaries, promotions, new jobs, moving, achievement of personal goals, etc. He was not one to outwardly celebrate his own—a habit rooted in childhood, one he would only come to understand well into adulthood. Not only did he shy away from celebrating himself, but he was also modest, almost timid, when his loved ones wanted to celebrate him., but would learn to accept it. In stark contrast, he was an advocate for celebrating the milestones and accomplishments of those he cared about. Memories are something of vital importance to him. This was especially true for her. He loved, supported, respected and believed in her deeply and wanted to honor her.

He had planned a day outing for her birthday, upon her return home from the island of rhode during the pandemic. This would be the first time he would curate a special day celebrating her bornday. On the morning of, she let him know the exciting news of her receiving a promotion at work— an acknowledgement of her talent, something she seemed shocked with. He would never be surprised by recognition she received; he knew how brilliant and dope and amazing she was, but he would always be so happy and proud for her when was acknowledged. He was happy to up the festivities to extend into the night for both her birthday and her incredibly well-deserved accomplishment. How lucky that he was the one with her for that moment.

Each year, he took great pride when he would ask if he could have her for her birthday, to be with her on her day, plan something for her or be part of her plans, and she would happily agree. He would also want and expect her to be by his side for his day, and he would also be excited and happy when she asked to do something for him.

How blessed and fortunate he and she would be to spend birthdays together, dinner and drinks after afterwork drinks with her work colleagues, venue that served highly rated burgers, daytime drinks at rooftops with a view of the bridges that connect the boroughs, dinner at a caribbean eatery not named after the islands, a surprise photoshoot with his first joy down under the borough overpass, an eccentric themed restaurant in the city, champagne toasts in trendy hotel bathtubs, outdoor flower installations at the botanical garden in the boogie down, impromptu photoshoot by her secret paparazzi in replica red phonebooths, indulge in steak wagu sushi rolls, superhero themed costume house party, getting lost in pumpkin patches and teeing off in miniature golfing, intimate picnic with alcohol filled pinatas overhearing the neo soul songstress with family and friends, hollow's eve masquerade party with friends and family, picture perfect view of sunrises in south beach, luxuriously lavish reserve resort paradise in the common wealth island, watching the girls play on hardwood, a local pasta dinner with his first joy and dinner with first joy at a neighboring award winning restaurant. These celebrations always accompanied by various treats, words written on cards and thoughtful gifts for he and she from he and she, a great deal of love and affection along with passionate hugs, kisses and cuddles, and hashtag plus.

All of life's major events are not milestones of celebration. He and she would come to know and experience this truth during their time When his closest friend from high school passed away unexpectedly, he was sad, and

cried in her arms, which felt warm and comforting, almost as it was the perfect fit and perfect place for him to be. This must be how she feels in his arms. She was there, by his side, as his support and his anchor. Her lovely cat, faithful and cherished companion, would succumb to illness and need to be laid to rest. When she shared the news, he and his first joy went to see her. He understood how much Belle meant not just as a pet, but as a piece of her life, her home, and her heart. It was a shared loss—the loss of a presence that had brought them all joy. When his father was diagnosed with a serious illness, the emotions were overwhelming. She held him tightly, her words and presence steadying him, grounding him. She shared her grief with him when the anniversary of her mother’s passing came around—twenty years since the loss. She shared how she was coping, and he tried to be present for her, offering his love and support even from afar.

Through all the heartaches, and moments of vulnerability, he and she discovered something deeper than celebration. They found that love isn’t just in the highs but in the lows, but in the times when life hurts.

The way they navigated some general day to day activities was, in some ways, was a bit curious. He knew the space she occupied in his life, and he tried to make sure she knew it, that she felt her importance as deeply as he did. She knew it, but he sometimes wondered if she fully believed it. It would be like he believed in her space in the relationship more than she did herself. He wanted her there, always—a part of his every celebration, in every chapter, season and volume. Similarly, he understood the place he held in her life, he was her rock, and he hoped to be included in her journey, whether in those moments meant for celebrating or just being—as someone committed to her and the future they were building together.

Yet, to him, she sometimes approached these moments with a hesitancy, a quiet wariness and meekness that spoke volumes to him. There was a

caution in her, still a sense of uncertainty about where she fit, and it puzzled him. She didn't often ask for things or personal favors directly, as if she moved gently around her desires, avoiding the risk of disappointment. Why would she expect to be disappointed? She was brilliant, dope, talented, loved by many—including by him, deeply. But perhaps, deep down, she feared that one day he might waver, that there would come a time when he wouldn't be there as he had been? Why would she ever expect disappointment from him?

He sometimes wondered if it was her fierce independence surfacing, this protective instinct that led her to believe she could or should handle everything. He'd catch glimpses of it, like the time she seriously considered lugging her newly purchased expensive office chair—throne-like in both size and status—onto public transportation between boroughs, rather than simply asking him to bring it to her in his foreign-engineered chariot. He told her he would pick it up for her, and that is exactly what he did, he went to the store in the a.m. and lugged it in his vehicle, drove it to her residence and upon arrival carried it up the to the third floor of her walk up. She was very grateful and appreciative of it. At a point, she asked him how he was able to do it on a routine workday. He responded that he adjusted his schedule so he would be able to do it for her, emphasizing to her that he would have no issue changing his plans to help and accommodate what she wanted or needed. This would be apparent in the numerous times he would schedule time off in advance to be with her, or call out of work at a whim solely based on her ask. If she needed something, all she had to do was ask, no matter how big. If she wanted something, all she had to do was ask, not matter how small. If he could do it, he would do it. He had always done everything in his power to support her, to show up in every way he could. Why would she question that?

But who was he to talk? He had always been the self-proclaimed ultimate self-sufficient person. If he needed or wanted anything, he would simply

handle it himself. From childhood into adulthood, he had been very specific and particular about certain wants and needs, and because of that he would not ask for assistance in getting it. Yet, on the frequent occasions when someone insisted on knowing what he

desired, typically as a gift or present, he would be precise and clear which he thought would alleviate things.

Whether it was a toy from a special limited-edition line, packaged in an exclusive collector's box, or a navy wool jacket with brown toggle buttons from his favorite lifestyle brand—the one that branded polo players on horseback as their logo—he knew exactly what he wanted for himself. He trusted the person to follow through, not because he demanded it, but because they had volunteered. And yet, more often than not, he found himself disappointed. Either the gift wasn't exactly what he had requested, or they had not acted swiftly enough to get it, but he would only be upset with himself as he was not in his nature to assign blame. He was not shallow or materialistic, but each of these moments left a mark, reinforcing a belief he carried with him into adulthood that if he wanted something or needed something accomplished, he'd just need to handle it himself as soon as possible, so if the outcome wasn't his desired result, he would only have himself to blame. Though this disappointment applied mainly to material things, it seeped into other areas of his life. It became his default approach, a way to shield himself from the sting of reluctantly relying on someone only to be disappointed.

This mindset of his posed its own challenges, especially with her. As she still maybe wondered where she fit, he realized he rarely asked much of her—except for her presence, which he valued and adored so much. But presence alone isn't enough to help someone feel fully anchored in the world, her place in his space. It became clear that for her to believe that she truly belonged in his space as a significant part of his life, he needed to do

more for her, by ironically doing less by himself. He needed to not only to have her occupy and own the space in his heart, he also needed to give her the room to add to it. This would be another important step for him he would come to learn. With one of his love languages being acts of service, her contributions—whether him asking her cook the delicious traditional beef stew and rice dish of her home country, or her offering to watch his first joy afterschool so he could go to a afterwork event she thought was important for him to attend, or her handling his in store pick up purchase of pillows and coasters, or his festival hoodie and superhero tee requiring her seamstress talent, this next level of partnership would mean as much to her as it would to him. He trusted, believed and knew she would be there for him in the way he needed her. Why would he question that?

In learning to connect with each other in these ways, him and her recognizing they are more than worthy and deserving of each other's support, building comfort in asking and receiving freely, and active engagement in the celebration of individual and collective milestones would add to the fabric of their togetherness.

Milestones have a way of forcing reflection, to pause and take stock of life's journey. Birthdays signal personal growth. Anniversaries mark collective progress. A new year herald fresh beginnings or re-enforces commitments from the past year. Promotions celebrate hard-won accomplishments. How these moments are acknowledged often reflects their significance.

For him and her, it didn't always unfold perfectly. He and she did not spend a second consecutive new year's eve together to welcome in twenty twenty-three. She celebrated with her crew at her home. Because he had his first joy with him that year, she may not have thought to extend an invitation. He didn't express his feelings beforehand, perhaps hoping she

would eventually ask him to join her. He also didn't suggest that he and his first joy would love to come by, even if only for a little while. Not being invited—and subsequently not attending—left him hurt. He had envisioned them all together, even if just for part of the night, sharing in the magic of the occasion, like they did the year prior. Later, she realized the impact of her oversight and apologized sincerely for the mishap.

But he was not without his own misstep. A week after celebrating her birthday in paradise, he forgot to celebrate their anniversary. She, too, had kept her feelings about the day to herself, perhaps hoping he would surprise her with a thoughtful gesture, not uncommon of him. She didn't suggest plans or give hints leading up to the day, instead waiting to see if he would act on his own. When the day came and passed unacknowledged, it caused her pain, maybe using that to signal how he felt about him and her. He recognized the mishap afterward and apologized with heartfelt regret for the mistake.

Both mishaps hurt, as would other mistakes or errors he and she would make. When he forgot the anniversary, it showed her that he wasn't perfect, he was human and didn't always read her mind and makes mistakes like anyone else. When she didn't extend the end of year invitation, it showed him that she wasn't perfect, she was human and she didn't always know what he wanted without him expressing it. These mishaps of imperfection and misunderstanding were humbling, they were human, but how would they handle it.

What mattered probably more than the mishaps themselves was how he and she responded to the disappointment they felt from them. How would he and she chose to move forward. Mishaps hurt, but they could also heal, so long as they were met with grace, accountability, and a willingness to grow. In the end, the real milestones weren't just the dates on a calendar;

they were the ways he and she showed up for each other in the moments that followed, proving again and again that their love was worth the effort.

INTERLUDE II: FAMILY

He shared with her pieces of his childhood, the dynamics of his family, and the life experiences that had shaped him. As the eldest child of immigrant parents, he carried the weight of unspoken responsibilities from a young age. She has this experience as well. His parents, cautious and hardworking, often navigated life under a heavy veil of fear and safety, which colored many of their choices. They wanted him to take the safest path, but this often meant he was urged to play small, be small, avoid risks, to stay within confines they believed would protect him. His parents viewed their role through a traditional lens, one in which providing food, shelter, and clothing was seen as the entirety of support. Instilling confidence, encouragement, celebrating accomplishments or praise was a rare act if even existent. This environment left him unable to tap into his full potential, and it was not until he was exposed to people outside that he seemed to be appreciated for the person he was and confident with who he could become.

He had always been a bright child, excelling academically throughout grade school and middle school. When the time came to apply for high school, his grades and aptitude made him a strong candidate for specialized programs at top-tier schools across the boroughs. These schools offered chances that could nurture his talents and set him on an amazing trajectory. But those opportunities never came. His parents, burdened with the demands of their household, didn't afford him the option to explore those paths. Instead of the opportunity to fully realize his potential, he was told he needed to attend the local school, the mediocre one that was close enough for him to fully assume his role --- big brother whom was tasked with picking up and watching his younger sisters after school.

Another memory lingered with particular sharpness: the time he made his high school basketball team. He had been excited, imagining his father in

the stands to show support when he played a home game. On the day of the game, he left early for warm-ups, reminding his dad of the game time. The game ended and he scanned the bleachers but did not see him. With mobile phones still a rarity, he waited outside the gym a bit, then he left assuming his dad had walked home ahead of him. When he finally returned home, he found his father still in bed, having never left. The disappointment was heavy, cutting into his young heart with a sense of abandonment and hurt. How could he be enough for anyone if he wasn't enough for a loved one to even roll out of bed for him.

In sharing this memory, and others, he entrusted her with pieces of his past, not just so she would understand who he was now, but so she could see the path he had traveled to become that person. She listened with empathy, understanding that his story was woven with vulnerability, resilience, and the unspoken hope that, with her, things could be different.

He hoped she found comfort and solace in the exchange of these stories, recognizing in his experiences a reflection of her own. As the firstborn child of her parents, with a father who was also an immigrant, she understood the weight of responsibilities that had shaped him. But her journey held its own profound sorrows, beginning with the loss of her mother at a very young age—a loss that marked her childhood, redefined her role within her family, and shaped her adulthood.

She found herself stepping into a bit of a caretaker role, one that sometimes felt larger than her years. She looked after her younger siblings with a maturity that maybe felt more like duty but was natural based on her nurturing ability, and, in many ways, she even became a source of support for her father. She spoke proudly of how her dad would involve her and her siblings in his work at the shop, bringing them in to help prepare for the day's opening. They were minors, but helping in the best way that could, which she did in an absolutely major way. She observed and

absorbed, learning valuable lessons about responsibility, work ethic, and leadership. Perhaps it was these early experiences that drew her to become a nanny when she arrived in the boogie down, caring for the family with the same keenness she had shown her own. He saw this nurturing side of her firsthand in the way she engaged with his first joy and himself.

It was clear that family was deeply important to her, a fact underscored by the special bond she shared with her sister closest in age. She once joked, imagining the two of them together well into old age, perhaps even living under the same roof, living side by side. It was an attachment that he could see whenever they were together, a closeness that was both enviable and heartwarming. But alongside that deep love, he also saw the quiet hurt she carried when it came to her brother. The relationship didn't hold the same closeness, and it left a noticeable ache in her heart.

She would share with him the evolution of her family dynamics over the years—her father meeting new people, the changes these relationships brought, and the impact they had on her. Over time, she gained half-siblings, step-siblings, and a stepmother, one she wasn't particularly fond of. There were lingering questions that swirled in her thoughtful, curious mind on why certain choices were made. He could see how deeply she sought understanding and clarity. She had a habit of stepping back into the caretaker role, feeling a need to shoulder the family burdens while also feeling great frustration about it. Her sense of responsibility, though noble, extended far beyond what was ever hers to carry. While this spoke to her generous heart and natural strength, he would remind her it wasn't always her duty to bear. He admired her deeply for it, but he also hoped she would see that she didn't have to

always be the one holding things together. Her reflections often mirrored his own experiences with his family, and they found deeper connections in sharing these complexities with each other.

In sharing with him, she allowed him to see her world, her resilience, and the ways her experiences had shaped her. He was very appreciative when she offered up these details with him, and when she did it felt natural and engaging. They were both woven from similar threads of sacrifice and strength, each carrying stories that spoke to a understanding of what it meant to maybe grow up too soon. And in these memories, they found not just comfort, but a deeper bond, an assurance that they had each found someone who understood the language of their past and could help speak to one another's future.

One's past trauma leaves deep, unseen scars, shaping how one views themselves and approaches relationships. To cope with past pain, one often develops self-protective behaviors. These defenses—whether they appear as emotional walls, hesitation to trust, or withdrawing from connection—begin as essential survival tactics. However, over time, they can become barriers that complicate intimacy, making it difficult to let love in or fully open up to another, leading to self-imposed isolation from the very closeness they desire.

In a loving and healthy relationship, these defensive mechanisms, once necessary for self-preservation, can unexpectedly be triggered. As one begins to experience true safety, unconditional love, and acceptance, their deeply ingrained fears and insecurities may come to the surface and their walls of self-protection can paradoxically rise in response. The closeness offered by a healthy connection may stir a hidden fear of abandonment, inadequacy or self-doubt, triggering a reflexive need to protect oneself from perceived disappointment, rejection or loss. This reflex to self-protect—keeping an emotional distance, resisting vulnerability, or questioning their partner's love and intentions, originally meant to prevent pain — now risks

becoming the thing that sabotages the very connection, love and relationship they desire most.

For one who has lived in fear of being abandoned or not being "enough," the love and acceptance in a healthy relationship may become unsettling. Self-doubt takes root, leading them to interpret their partner's affection as conditional or temporary, even when there is no evidence of this. One may feel an overwhelming fear that they will eventually disappoint their partner or that the love will be withdrawn.

This constant fear of inadequacy or anticipation of abandonment can be emotionally exhausting, and in many cases, cause one to simply end the relationship first—an act of self-protection and preservation disguised as control—to spare themselves the pain of a perceived, inevitable loss. They conclude that it's better to leave than to face the vulnerability of being truly loved, fearing that if their partner truly knew them, they would eventually find them lacking.

However, in a relationship rooted in patience, understanding, and compassion, these self-protective behaviors can be gently unpacked. A loving partner provides a steady presence, creating a space where self-doubt can slowly give way to trust. Each act of openness is met with reassurance, allowing the journey of self-protection to transform into one of true connection. Over time, the person learns to let go of the reflex to guard themselves, leaning into trust and connection instead.

In this shared space of growth, healing takes place as old scars are turned into shared strength. Here, the individual finds that their worth is not defined by their past, and that they are indeed enough—not only for their partner but for themselves. The relationship, no longer an object of fear or potential pain, becomes a sanctuary where

both partners can experience deep resilience, transformative power of trust, and authentic love.

Both his and her parents held a deep-rooted belief that prayer \ was enough to solve problems, relying on faith to guide them through rather than making concrete plans or addressing challenges that required careful thought and action. This unwavering trust was admirable, yet it often led to a lack of preparation for the very real obstacles life threw their way.

Their adult figures shared another pattern—one of avoiding tough conversations. Conflict, challenges, the deeper pains of life—these were topics often left unspoken, uncomfortable truths that seemed easier to brush aside. It was a pattern he and she had grown up quietly resenting, promising themselves to handle things differently, be more open, confront the difficult matters head-on.

Yet, over time, he and she found themselves slipping into similar habits, following the very same path they had once vowed to avoid. It was a shared struggle, this inherited reluctance to fully face the hard truths, or even discuss them. Maybe he and she thought it could be prayed away. But in recognizing it together, would they share resolve to break the cycle? To build something different, founded on both faith and honest communication? It was a journey that could honor their parents' strengths while healing the parts of themselves shaped by that silence.

chapter 11

teamwork makes the team work

They needed to grow together, and as much as they longed to grow, it was critical they realized the importance of putting in the work individually to reach their full potential. Just as in sports, each person's success contributes to the team's being victorious.

He was her biggest cheerleader, always pushing her forward. She was a **DIE-HARD** fan of his, rooting for him with unwavering loyalty. But being each other's biggest supporters wasn't enough.

Belief, desire, even prayer, without a plan, strategy, effort and action, won't win championships. This is something he and she would know well as the eldest child of the family, and parents depending on higher beings of worship to solve problems and issues without any active participation from it themselves. They had the talent, the potential, magic, the love—but they didn't always have a game plan. They wanted to win, to thrive, but they hadn't discussed what plays needed to be run. What strategies were being used? Who are calling the plays? She knew how to play. He knew how to score. They knew how to win, but they weren't communicating effectively on the field. He would need to be the coach at times. She would need to call the plays at times. There should be a mutual understanding and agreement that they are both responsible for the success of the outcome of their game. Without proper communication, audibles were being called on

the fly, and the opposing side—relationship challenges, internal conflicts and outside distractions —caught them off guard.

Relationships are a constant work in progress. But the fact that there is work doesn't mean the relationship isn't working. The work is a natural and constant part of the growth of a relationship, partnership and connection. He and she were the best teammates and made the best team. They were the overwhelming favorites going into the season, each and every season, chapter and volume. Everyone was rooting for them, at least on his side. But now he and she were at a point trying to figure out what adjustments needed to be made to hang the championship banner... the one that belonged solely to them. They needed a long overdue quarterly check – in. He needed to look inward and figure out what parts of him were **IN REPAIR**. She needed to assess what areas of her life required attention.

Their mutual **ADDICTION** for one another, the constant reassurance of “**YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU,**” was powerful, but it couldn't carry them across the finish line on its own. They had to develop the discipline, the effort, and the plan to match the intensity of their love and what they wanted for their future. Only then could they work as a true team and win the championship they both deserved - the relationship they desired, the one that belonged solely to them.

That **ELECTRIC FEEL**, undeniable energy that surged between them, making every moment alive with possibility that was sparked on the day that forever changed his life would be at jeopardy.

chapter 12

a page turn

For the first time, what was a connection —filled with love, passion, energy, trust and togetherness —was starting to feel different under the weight of reality. It was no longer just about the excitement, the fun, or the magic they shared. Their companionship had evolved into a living, breathing, active relationship, moving beyond the effortless ease that created and defined it. Now, they faced the subtle challenges—the miscommunications, the quiet fears, the internal conflicts, mishaps, and the absence of a clear path forward—that began to introduce small creases and wrinkles into the fabric of the blanket of their togetherness. This feeling was unfamiliar to him and her, a contrast to the seamless connection they had known, but would be normal and par for the course as relationships grow. After all, him and her were not actual superheroes, they were humans, so minor cuts untreated would grow into large wounds, wounds that would hurt. He began to feel a shift in himself. He began to feel a shift in them. Most painfully, he began to feel a shift in her. But neither was brave enough to speak the truth. They danced around it, both too afraid to directly confront what they both were worried was happening. But what were they afraid of? It seemed like it was hard. It was very hard. Why was it so hard? Was it actually hard? It would be an easy thing to solve for. They could tackle anything together. They were professionals paid to be a resource of humans for a living, Why wouldn't they do it for

themselves, be a resource for each other. The relationship wrinkles could be easily ironed out.

The joy and intimacy were still there, but some interactions had lost its vigor. They moved through familiar motions, but sometimes it felt like they were pretending. The core of their bond remained. They leaned into it. They still rocked with each other heavy. He was her rock. She was his peace. After all, their connection was still **#BEAUTIFUL**.

In their space of togetherness, with the genuine feels of fun, joy, playfulness, conversations, and life on display—would consistently be a new yet timeless scene within an episode of the show starting them, his dream bae and her prince charming, a classic that audiences would tune in for season after season after season. Their affection hadn't faded, nor had the warmth they offered each other in a simple embrace, or their mere presence. Their care and ability to comfort one another was still there. When they whispered, "**HUG ME**," they still found security in each other's arms. Afterall, they are a perfect fit for each other.

The physical connection between them remained fierce, and they clung to it as though it could fix what was changing. When things got too overwhelming, they fell back on their bodies, on their passion, and maybe convinced themselves that it was enough. No one could ever **KISS IT BETTER** than they could for each other. Afterall, they are the perfect fit for each other.

The inevitability of a shift had been lingering over them for some time, like a quiet storm gathering on the horizon. They both felt it, even if he and she hadn't spoken it aloud to another. And then, finally, she made a decision to turn the page. The shift was more than he thought it would be, and with what seemed like reluctant resolve, her voice soft, she lightly said, "I think we should break up."

He knew how much it took for her to say those words, and she knew how hard it would be for him to hear them. He could tell it was a decision that weighed heavily on her heart. She knew it was a decision that could bury him, as she was also being crushed under the weight of its reality.

He believed with all his heart that love meant leaning into each other when things got hard. But she admitted her truth, which had been on display: when things became difficult, she often chose to walk away, fearing that staying would lead to more pain. She had long begun to shield herself, withdrawing to guard her heart from her perceived uncertainties of the future. In an act of protection, she would lock her love and heart in a box, almost suffocating it from the oxygen it needed to breath, to thrive, to survive, because she was scared for it to grow only to be abandoned, disappointed, hurt and broken. But why would she think that would happen? He noticed. He saw flashes of it. She asked to take two weeks for herself earlier that year, which was a very difficult time for him to understand. There were several last minute random rain checks made. Some days where they were weirdly out of sync. He would notice, but wouldn't press her of it and respected her space. Should he have inserted himself more? Did want and need him, ever thought she said she didn't? Was their blanket of togetherness now unraveling?

She shared things that had been bothering her, the insecurities she had still held onto. Her feeling small. Why did she not think she was enough? Her still feeling there was something preventing her from being fully vulnerable with him. And it hurt him deeply to realize that he had not adequately addressed her fears. Was she properly addressing her fears herself? Why didn't she speak to him about it more to solve it? Should be have taken more of the lead to be what she wanted?

Admittedly, he also didn't share things that had been bothering him. He didn't give her an opportunity to hear him out and address it. He hadn't

felt safe enough to voice them. Would he understand why he was so worried to speak? Was he scared that telling her how he felt would be the reason she wouldn't want him? He wanted her to be with him. He knew she wanted him, why would he question her?

Their shared fears, left unspoken, had slowly affected the magic of their relationship. He wished he spoke more. He wished she spoke more. He and she were so comfortable talking about everything else, finding fun and ease in conversations that flowed without hesitation. She was the people whisperer, he was the wise counsel, he and she built careers based on their special ability to communicate, assess issues and get to a proper resolution. This would be more important work to do with each other, than the work they get paid to do. Together, he and she laughed, explored ideas, shared dreams—why, then, were they so afraid to discuss the things that truly mattered, the things that could impact the heart of their relationship? Affect her heart and his heart. Did they not trust the strength of their bond enough to be honest? Were they afraid that speaking these fears aloud would somehow make them real? Did they not want the relationship to succeed? Or, perhaps, was it the fear of losing something so precious that held them silent? He and she would be standing in their own way — self sabotaging and blocking blessing.

How would they navigate through this now? He kept asking himself. Is this really a break-up? It didn't feel real. It felt so sudden and out of the blue. Their connection was so strong—how could she not want him? How could she not want them? He was the one she had chosen. What she had asked for, even down to the chariot he drove. She was the one he yearned for. That he didn't know he needed until she arrived and wore his crown. That undeniable pull between them still constant. Did the bad outweigh the good? What was even the bad? If asked, what would she say is the reason they are not together? What would he say is the reason she said no? Would

any of it make sense? He and she made sense together. They would need to come to their senses and get the senses knocked back into each other.

He hoped this was more like a pause, a break. It was up and down, another one of the fits and starts in their love rollercoaster. He knows how cot damn stubborn she could be; she was protecting herself in ways that she didn't even want. But why? She knows how resilient he would be; his determination to make it right. How could he not. So why fight it? Yet – They fought. They argued. He was furious. She was upset. He cried. She cried. They would text. Then they wouldn't. They planned to spend time. They would spend time. Then they wouldn't. Then they would.

Eventually they agreed to meet, and after an evening at a local bar that specialized in the favorite drink of her favorite pirate, he and she would find themselves back at her dwelling in a deep and powerful conversation, one that peeled back layers and invited vulnerability. He challenged her, encouraging her to look closer at her own feelings, while sharing with clarity the depth of what he felt—and had always felt—for her. He was honest about his hesitations, the moments of doubt and the fears he sometimes struggled to name. In return, he listened as she opened up, voicing her reservations, her concerns, and the uncertainty that lingered in her mind about herself personally and the path ahead together with him. He spoke to her with a sincerity that was almost new, admitting the commitments he held in his heart—the dreams he had of building a family and a home with her. He confessed that, while these desires had always been there, he hadn't been honest with himself about just how deeply they ran. He knew he hadn't been as open with her as he should have, often hiding his hopes beneath layers of hesitation and self-doubt. But now, looking into her eyes, in her presence, in that moment, he wanted her to know fully and without ambiguity that she was a part of his vision

for the future. She always was and would always be. It was important that she hear it, so she would have the words he said to replay back and listen to anytime she needed them. She asked him to stay the night. He agreed. He and she would hug, kiss, cuddle, plus.

He understood that this connection they had, even with the challenges they faced, who else would ever **COME CLOSE** to their magic. Did she not know that? How could she not, they were special. He knew she knew that. She would show sparks of it, expressing excitement and joy, exchanging sweet words and messages, including the acronym that represented and celebrated their relationship, sharing links to apartments she wanted to consider making a home with him, and planning to spend time together before returned to the island of rhode for the holiday, but it would be followed by uneasiness and rainchecks. He wanted her to lean into it, to push through the discomfort, to talk to him about what was actually happening. She wanted some space, maybe afraid to lose herself. He was afraid of losing her. He wanted them to get lost in each other — again. Something that solely belonged to them.

chapter 13

re-new year

Then, an invitation came. She asked him to bring in the new year with her and her crew at her home. This would be the first time since twenty fifteen that the schedule would have him be without his first joy to bring in the new year with, so he would be available her. Although he questioned for a moment if he should go — he knew he would be there. He knew she wanted him to be there. Although she questions for a moment, she knew he would be there. He knew he would Is been present for her, as she had always been the most amazing, beautiful presence in his life — she was still his new joy. She knew he was her rock and light always, the most supportive and caring presence in her life.

He rang. She let him in, each instinctively going into their greeting of circular kisses on her forehead, each cheek, nose and lips. Pre-game and card games until midnight. Smiles and laughs with the crew. As their countdown into the new year began, what was an annual routine for the rest of the world, again felt symbolic to him. This was a moment, a new beginning. A fresh start. The ease of their reunion manifested itself emotionally and physically. She asked him to stay the night. He agreed. And when they finally came together, their bodies moved in perfect harmony, flowing all night like the champagne bottles they'd uncorked earlier. She had to hold back, quieting the scream that wanted to erupt as the fireworks of their connection exploded within her. He restrained

himself too, overwhelmed by the raw energy that moved between them, which oftentimes moved furniture. She missed him so deeply, and he missed her so much. She said she did not want to give this up. He told her she would never have to. They hugged. They kissed. They cuddled.

That night, or maybe it was early morning depending on the perspective, was unlike any other, but reminded them of all the others. The energy of their reunion reignited their spark. It was a **NEW**

LIGHT. As he and she awoke to more passionate love, followed by their creep stares to each other in bed, they agreed to continue the first day of the new year with each other and exchange gifts of the holiday they missed spending together after the rest of her crew left. It reminded her of what they had and what she had to look forward to. It confirmed to him who they were and what they would become. They would watch television, joke, talk and just be happy. The chemistry and connection between them always strong led to more hugs and kisses and cuddles and amazing intense powerful love. He and she missed spending time together. She felt it. He felt it. She said it. He said it. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

They were back in the comfort of each other's presence. Their togetherness felt like home. Now, all they needed to do was work on building their home together, brick by brick. Address what needed to be that led to the breakup and move past it together. He and she, as a team, in action with a plan. And when they would, everything would be **ALRIGHT.**

The way the year started for them, he knew they would find themselves **FALLING IN LOVE** all over again, even though they never fell out of it. Feels and emotions flurried back to them both, like the snow flurries from the first date.

She wanted to spend time together. He wanted to spend time together. Movies. She got dressed up. She looked stunning in an outfit she was excited to wear for him. He watched as she put it on and he was mesmerized. She is so beautiful. She would sneak in adult beverages for them to enjoy while watching the academy award nominated film. He and she would have a night cap. He would go to bed with her. She would wake up with him. He and she would creep each other, it was hugs, kisses, cuddles.

She wanted time with his first joy too. It was an afternoon at her place before her trip with her sister to the center of the world. Food was ordered where the sushi made them do it. All would participate in a guessing game where they learned each other's favorites beverages, soda, chips, candy, ice cream flavors. He was in the presence of his two absolute favorites. She was excited to show him the holiday card she did not quite finish, but was patient and said she would share it upon her return, which would exhibit patience in receiving. The aura of her that day was one filled with glee, happiness and authentic bliss about him. He was filled with thrill, delight and genuine joy about her.

It was the platitudes, texts, words, planning. He missed her, and she missed him – not sort of, not kind of, not maybe, not perhaps, not a little bit, not just a tad. He saw it in her smile, her face, her mannerisms, actions, and most impactful in her words. He didn't want to slow down their momentum. He knew they need to stay connected, be enveloped in the togetherness, block out any outside noise and distractions, to teamwork and plan and take action together, and focus on building with each other for what would be the greatest of all time, of all timelines across all multiverses. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together. Then:

- She had a trip to the center of the earth with sister.

- She returned from the trip.
- He wanted to spend time.
- She wanted to spend time.

Then, something happened, and she was reluctant. But they would spend time together. Pregame then a dinner at a distillery. He and she had flights of whiskey and a meal. They would have an honest conversation about each other, always leaning into the affection and strong feeling they have for another, and ended the night with hugs and kisses. Then there was a Homtel night at his place. He and she ordered food and wrapped up for bed fairly quickly. As she entered the bedroom, she went into the normal routine breaking down the bed, tossing decorative pillow after decorative pillow. She rolled into bed and quickly pounced on his side with a smile, her beautiful smile, leaving him little room to enter. He would chuckle as it forced them to get close with each other, although he and she both knew the prework was not required for them to be close to each other for hugs, kisses, and cuddles. They had a passionate night of love together. In the morning, when they affectionally looked at each other like creeps, he asked her if she was doing ok. She replied that she was, that she wasn't sure that she should have seen him that evening balancing internal feeling, and with tears swelling in her eyes she said she was glad that she did. A v hesitant v-day dinner together at her home. She cooked. They ate. She chefs well. He gave her treats, including rose colored tennis shoes and introduced her to the monthly pick the prize game. She picked well. They had a good time. She was sick one weekend and he would offer to take care of her, she said she was going to ask him to, and she was very appreciative he catered to her. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

- She was going to London for 2 months.
- He was worried.

- She invited him to visit.
- He accepted the invitation.
- He offered to help her prepare and drop her to the airport.
- She accepted his offer.

They had planned time together before her flight. He wasn't sure it was going to happen at first, but it happened. A quiet, low-key late afternoon into evening as she made final preparations for her trip, a flight she pushed out to later so she could have more time. He arrived,

and they went into their familiar greeting, she leaned in and he kissed her forehead, cheeks, lips and nose. He put together a sort of going away care package for her filled with a collection of small comforts to remind her of home, tokens that showed he believed in her, and goodies for her to feel her best while away. He also included a special card that he asked her to wait and open in a week's time on the anniversary of when they first met, a card with his words that would represent him and her and their togetherness. As she dove into her care package, and went through the items, tears gathered in her eyes; she was deeply moved, feeling the love, thoughtfulness and care put into each detail. She thanked him, voice thick with emotion, and in that moment, he felt it too—the gratitude, the love, the beauty of sharing these small but powerful gestures. He loved her so very much.

They held each other close, hugging, kissing, and cuddling, savoring every last moment before it was time to leave. In the foreign engineered chariot, their hands remained intertwined. At the airport drop off, he got her baggage, and they started their goodbye. He pulled her into a long embrace, pressing his lips to hers, and before she stepped away, he told her something he wanted to say and she needed to hear: he loved her. She looked up at him, a soft smile forming with a look that held both playfulness and sincerity, whispered back to him that she loved him too.

When she boarded, she would text him that she did not realize how much she needed him to be there with her, and she was so grateful for the time. It was great. It was fun. She was happy. He was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

- She left for London
- She opened the special card. She said it was perfect.
- He visited her in London.

They spent time together in London. She planned many things in advance of his arrival and showed him around the neighborhood her flat was located. She hosted him as if it were her hometown, taking him to a trendy restaurant for a fantastic dinner where they would guess the drink the other would order while looking at the other patrons trying to guess their story. She suggested a great local coffee shop and bakery for him to enjoy while she was at work. They explored museums, took in the sights, walked popular areas and shopped, and wandered down the city's dainty streets hand in hand, where he would attempt local slang in a terrible accent that made her laugh every time. He and she even threw their own private house party late one night at her flat, just the two of them, singing along to a playlist they curated on the spot. He planned a thing to replace a thing they were not able to do, booking a mini getaway that would give her the feeling of a vacation in the city. They indulged in delicious meals, played games, concocted drinks, made toasts and held conversations, relaxed in the jacuzzi, spoke, hugged, kissed, and cuddled. Even thousands of miles away from where he and she reside, when they are in togetherness, it feels like home. She was grateful. He was grateful. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

- He returned from London.
- He prepared her home for her return
- She returned home with sister.

- She was surprised by the welcome package
- She thanked him.
- He wanted to spend time.
- She wanted to spend time.

They planned to spend time, but she would reschedule and raincheck. Something happened. He would text. No response. He would call. No answer. He was confused. Was she also confused? Did he do something? Something happened. What happened? He would revisit his personal journal and notes and then send her an email where he would be transparent, real, vulnerable and authentic. He sent an honest message of what was felt was happening, highlighting the on and off, where he stumbled, the inconsistently, but then also emphasized fun and excitement, ease of connection, and solid partnership. He also stated how he wanted a future with her, and in all the ways he wanted it and how he saw it with her. It was important that he write them down, so she would have those the words to look back to and read anytime she needed them. She would respond with a voicenote, and acknowledge she is not in the best space personally, that she was not good enough for anyone at that point, and understood if that was not a place he wanted to be, but shared that he is the only person that she could see a future with, would ever see a future with, one filled in an abundance of love and life and family and happiness and togetherness. He trusted what she shared with him and would do his best to navigate her space knowing that it was always a place he wanted to be in, always as her rock.

Before her visit to the island of rhode for the holiday of memorial, they agreed to attend at a resource for humans conference together, where they can catch up. After a couple of presentations and a couple drinks during the social, he and she found themselves getting very cozy with each other amongst industry colleagues, so decided to leave for some alone time. She

helped him pick out sneakers for his first joy before they had an early dinner at a place she used to frequent. He and she had a sweet conversation, shared they missed each other how it always feels good and easy to be together. He accompanied her to station where she would catch the train home, and they waited together until time to board. She gave him tips on how the service is not as complicated as it seems, and he would take note knowing that he would ride with her to her home soon. He and she would have a great embrace and kiss each other. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

- She returned from back home.
- He wanted to spend time.
- She wanted to spend time too... like for real this time.

They spent time the together. The best time together. She had another trip across the pond, so he and she planned to spend time beforehand, then he would take her to the airport. He changed light bulbs for her, they ate, spoke, joked, laughed and watched television. They bonded as they always do, affection never lost between the two. They started to hug and kiss, each wanting to do more with each other to each other. While cuddled up, with their hands all over each other in a familiar bout of lips vs. face, tongue vs. cheek, pecks vs. nose, nibbles vs. bites, he and she would make their way to the bedroom. Him maintaining some semblance of accountability he asked her if there was enough time before the flight, and said vehemently said yes. The hashtag plus was phenomenal, almost as if he and she were attempting to fit a weeks' worth of passionate, incredible, intense climatic sex within the one hour timeframe before they would need to leave, which they successful accomplished. They laid in bed keeping track of the time, succumbed to each other's love, he and she were in the feels, all the feels. He did not want it to end, and neither did she. She made an Impish

decision and changed her work trip to stay with him, so he and she didn't have to leave the position they were in, cocooned in a firmly loving squeeze of affection, his shoulders and arms still always the perfect place for her to fit into. She wanted to spend more time together. She said she did not want to leave him, she was not ready to. It was an action of intention and commitment and togetherness. The shock, thrill and excitement of that act made him feel loved and appreciated more than words can describe. She was the very best and his absolute favorite. She asked him to spend the night. He agreed. She went to sleep with her. He woke up with her. Always the best feelings for them to feel.

Over the next several weeks, they went to basketball games to watch the girls play. She bought his first joy tennis shoes for her school dance. He and she watched a tv shows about dragons. They had sleepovers. They discussed getting matching rings that tracked sleep and health. She was excited to buy him a pair of comfortable sandals to match the ones she just purchased for herself. He and she attended a dance rehearsal with his first joy and the best mascot in all of sports. She took him to a concert in the park central in the city where they stumbled upon the best turkey and cheese deli sangwich. He took her to a 91razilian steakhouse where they indulged in an amazing selection of cuisine. He and she would have the most amazing passionate intense sweaty, yummy, crazy bananas, hugs, kisses, cuddles, hashtag plus throughout. The discussions were intentional. The momentum was taking them to where they both wanted to be. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They are always happy when they are together.

As the country's independence day was approaching and she would plan to venture to the island of rhode for the holiday weekend with her family, they planned to spend more time together before she left. To watch the show about dragons, to go to another basketball game to see the girls, to schedule a long overdue spa date. He would even plan to tell her he wanted

to join her on that trip home, taking the train that was not that complicated, an action of intention and commitment and togetherness. But – something happened. What happened?

chapter 14

the pull up

He checked in with her later on in the day of their plans and asked for her **ETA**. She did not respond. He texted again. She did not respond. He knows how phone works, but he didn't know how to respond to her non-response. He was so confused. He and she had been together just a couple of days before at the game where their girls played, wrapped in the kind of closeness that was uniquely theirs. They had been affectionate and loving, her touches and words flowing freely, her sharing how much she loved and cared for him, sharing sweet affirmations, adding more layers and texture to their blanket of togetherness. The compliments exchanged emphasizing how much they complemented each other. But something happened. What happened? Should he be worried about her wellbeing and safety or pissed at the thought of how she was now treating him, and as confusion settled in, he found himself being both.

He had always known her in many forms, seen many sides of her, but what seemed to be happening now is something entirely different. She had shared glimpses before, fleeting moments where her stubbornness, that cot damn stubbornness would surface, or when her fierce independence took center stage, or a timid meekness, or even when things became difficult and her defensive mechanism was to walk away. At least those times there was some form of communication. Now, he stood on uncertain ground. Was it

the worry that something was wrong? Or was it the anger that she was abandoning him? Something happened. What happened?

His concern overtook him first. He texted her again. He called. He left a voicemail. Then, when she didn't respond, the frustration took hold. He was worried. He was pissed. The silence from her end only fueled the unease building inside him. He left another message sharing he was worried and that if he didn't hear back from her – he would stop by her

place. She did not respond, so he did the only thing left—he pulled up. Something happened. What happened?

When he showed up, it wasn't just concern that weighed heavy on his mind—it was everything. And when he opened the door, she was there. It was clear she wasn't expecting him. But how could she not? They made plans. He texted and called her. She wasn't just upset; she was disappointed that he had come, almost annoyed that he seemed to care so much. He said he was worried and wanted to make sure she was okay. Her words were unkind, telling him he didn't need to worry about her, telling him that she would always be okay. Something happened. What happened? Where did this come from? Was it a dangerous combination of that cot damn stubbornness, fierce independence and defensiveness that would make its debut appearance. She then seemed to lean into the fact that she would always be okay. But the way she said it, the defiance in her voice, the distance in her eyes—everything about that moment told him that those were not words of reassurance. No, they were the opposite. He knew her well enough to know when she was putting up walls, and this was one of those times. Those words, spoken in that tone, were a clear sign that he needed to worry about her, needed to worry about them and things were not ok. Something happened. What happened?

He was pissed. Out of frustration and anger, he slammed her door shaking her hallway wall causing some artwork to fall. He felt like she minimized

his feelings in the situation. What exactly were her feelings in this situation? She was mad, mad that he was there when her ignoring his communications was signally that she did not choose to be with him that night. The energy between them shifted into something raw, something turbulent. They yelled. They argued. She told him to leave and to not come back. But even as she said it, he knew she didn't mean it. She knew she didn't mean it too. It was mean. She wasn't a mean person, so why was she being mean? He asked her, and she said maybe she is mean. Something happened. What happened? What did he do? Was it a shield, a wall she was putting up to protect herself, but from what? Why? He would be so confused by what was happening. Words flew fast, sharp, unfiltered. They leaned into each other, with their shared frustrations, anger, confusion and hurt meeting head-on. The tension had reached its boiling point.

She stood her ground, almost pushing him away with every sentence and every unspoken word, and he leaned into it, refusing to let her close him out. It wasn't just about the argument anymore—it was about everything they weren't saying, maybe the things that had been building between them for some time at this point. Something happened. What happened? Perhaps, the things they still had challenges confronting each on. He would question his own rationale—even believing he wasn't of sound mind, she would question her own sanity—even wondering out loud if she was crazy.

Finally, he stepped back, knowing if they pushed any further, potentially irreconcilable damage could be done. His voice softened as he asked her to look into her heart and her mind. Did she truly want him in her life? More importantly, did she want to be part of his life? He wanted her to make a decision, to understand her choice, one that wasn't driven by anger, fear, stubbornness, defensiveness, or what happened, because he knew something happened. To show her the gravity of the moment, he reached into his pocket and offered to return her apartment keys. It was his way of asking her to indicate how serious she was—if she was truly ready to let go.

She looked at him, her expression softening, and acknowledged that she did not want them back. It was a moment of honesty, vulnerability and truth.

In that same moment, he couldn't help but speak his truth, be vulnerable and honest and say the words that had been hovering in his heart, "i love you." And as the words left his lips, a thought flashed through his mind: "I'm such a cot damn fucking **FOOL FOR YOU.**" But he couldn't help himself being that for her, for his and her love, their togetherness and future. He would be an absolute fool not to.

Before he left, they shared a long, deep embrace. Their bodies pressed together, the tension finally giving way to something more honest, vulnerable and truthful. Her head sunk into his chest and her body into his arms. A place she called home. A place she said was the perfect fit for her. His and her lips met in a passionate kiss. They would go into their routine of the circular kisses across her face. They would hug. They would kiss. They would cuddle.

He would leave for the night, knowing she would leave soon for independence day, both knowing they were leaving many things between then very much unfinished. Something happened. What happened?

chapter 15

past. present. future.

This would be their biggest fight, one that came out of nowhere. This would be all very confusing for him. Was it all confusing for her too? It's been sometime since they had a semblance of meaningful communication. He knew they needed to finish what was unfinished. He knew she knew that as well. But what would that mean?

He had to make a choice. He had many choices to choose from. He thought. He prayed. He sought. He centered himself. He evaluated. He re-evaluated. He reminisced. He was mad. He was sad. He was confused. He was hurt. He was in love. He reflected. He was stubborn, so cot damn stubborn. He was in thought. In deep thought. He looked deep inside. He wanted to know what were in her thoughts. He made a choice. He chose to continue. He chose to pursue. He chose to explain. He chose to dedicate. He chose to fulfill. He chose to commit. He chose to love. He was chosen for her. She was chosen for him. He chose her. He would always choose her. He hoped that she would always choose him. He was purposeful. He was intentional. He was not playing. 'This is real life. This is his life. This is her life. This is their life.

Finally, after some somewhat consistent dialogue over text messages and voicenotes - they agreed to meet, to speak, and also fulfill some obligations they previously made to each other, as they had some unfinished business. They agreed to meet at the mall and tried on rings they wanted to get that

tracked health and sleep, agreeing on the style and color so it each other would match, a his and hers. She gave him a pair of sandals she purchases that would pair well with hers, and matched ones her mother wore, another his and hers. After a little shopping they decided to walk to a place to eat and begin to finish what needed to be finished. He asked to start first.

He wanted to share with her their past, a reminder of purpose. He put together a picture album of their journey, togetherness and memories. Each photo would be a portal taking them back to that moment, that time, that feeling, that love. He and she had so many times of magical connections, amounting to hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of joy in stills that he had stored. Her selfie game always on full display, whether her showing off her criminally natural beauty or her carefully curated outfit of the day bathroom mirror pictures. Many of his and her favorite “usies” found a place in the album, snapshots they took with real love that fully captured their authentic affection in the most genuine fashion. He included some of his secret paparazzi candids, those stolen moments where he would catch her spirit in its most natural form. He was happily surprised to discover a few of her own candid shots of him, moments she had seen and wanted to remember. He added images of their animated selves, the well-designed avatars expressing the silly and playful things he and she did together in the most extravagantly exaggerated humorous way. Photos of them on vacations, at festivals, celebrating birthdays, sharing kisses, cuddling felines, moments with his first joy, and all the small things that made them who they were.

He purposely left several pages blank, spaces for her to add to, as he saw this as a collective effort for her to contribute to the picture album. Then, they would come back together shortly, sit side by side and flip through, turning the pages reflecting on how much they had been to each other,

with each other and for each other in their togetherness, with recognition it was just the beginning—the first chapters, the first seasons of the first volume of the _____ story.

He wanted to share with her his present, a signal of progress. He opened up about where he was in his personal journey, what he'd been doing, and the reflections in an effort of growth, confronting patterns he now realized had held him back, which would hold him and her back. One of the most significant truths he uncovered was how often he was the one that fell victim to overthinking, battling this strange and persistent concept of perfect timing.

He allowed chasing the perfect timing to dictate his actions in their togetherness, leading to his inactions, whether it was finding the right moment to address conflict, have difficult conversations, to share his inner thoughts and feelings and how they might be affecting him, or even to open up about his plans for their future, he often hesitated. It wasn't hesitation born of doubt, but rather in desire to affect a positive outcome, and not to disturb their connection and bond, that would hold especially true in the in-between rebuilding space he and she were in currently. The overthinking had an unintended consequence—it left him frozen, often paralyzed by the fear of getting it wrong. She was the most important thing to him, and he was scared to get it wrong. With help, he recognized that there is no perfect time, and that is perfectly fine. He would gain more comfort and confidence in this area as part of his growth, knowing that the intent to control an outcome can have uncontrollable and unintended consequences.

In his silence, he would understand how her mind could wander, entertain distractions, listen to outside influences, leading her to question, to second-guess the certainty, and then self-protections and defense mechanisms are triggered, that may result in not so nice actions from her. He hated the idea

of her wondering, of there being any doubt in what she meant to him. And so, he decided to take a step, a symbol not just of the present, but his commitment to their future—a physical key to his home. It was a long overdue gesture he would beat himself over during his time of reflection. He recognized the literally key giving her all access to his home, accompanied with his first joy, the figurative key giving her all access to his heart, would remove any doubt

of deserving. No more waiting for perfect timing. No more holding back. He is here. She is here. He and she are there together.

He wanted to share with her the future, an intention of plans. He brought up their current living situations, referencing how, despite just giving her a key to his home and already having a key to hers, it was time to start seriously planning their next steps as a unit and partnership, and his desire of living together. They had touched on this idea several times before, most recently after that deep and heartfelt conversation at the end of the prior year, following their outing at the local bar that served her favorite pirate's favorite drink. Back then, he and she sent each other links to potential new dwellings, but the discussions had remained light and fleeting. He would ask for her opinion on furniture purchases, with the thought that if she liked it, it would be something they can have when they moved in together. Another small gesture was to also get her towels, pictures and other items that matched and coordinated with his, so when they got moved in together they would have their complete his and her sets. This time he would be different and more intentional. He noted when both of their leases would be up and wanted to discuss realistic timing for the move, factoring in locations, their collective financial budgets, having enough space for plants, felines, building blocks, sneakers, home office set-ups, and most importantly— a dishwasher.

He was convinced he did not want any more children, his first joy being enough. However; being with her, seeing how she was with his first joy, her warm, naturally nurturing spirit, he felt he wanted to experience parenthood with her, with joys of their own. He gently reminded her that if they sought to have a family together, to bring their own joys into the world, they needed to start having those serious discussions too. At ten years her senior—something she still playfully teased him about—he felt the importance for planning, not in a rushed or pressured way, but to ensure they have a gameplan. He joked, with a hint of seriousness, that had she told him she wanted children back when they were official, they might already have one. She smiled but responded with an honesty that caught him off guard. She admitted she hadn't wanted a child then, but since changed her feelings. Then with sincerity and vulnerability in her eyes, she told him how important it was for him to fully move on from his vultures—the lingering shadows of his past. She explained to him, in a way she never had before, that his failure to close that chapter left her feeling uncertain, even fearful, as though he might one day up and abandon her for it.

Her words, though direct, weren't said in anger but in love, a plea for clarity and trust. He felt the weight of her honesty and knew she was right. He understood he needed to address that part of his life, not just for himself but for her, for his first joy and their future joys. And so, he asked for her support in doing so. She accepted with grace and vigor, eager to stand beside him in a way she had always longed to.

She wanted to truly be his partner, not just in name but in every facet of their lives. He saw it in her eyes, felt it in her words. It was something he had to admit he hadn't fully embraced before, operating too often under the guise of self-sufficiency, but not always doing it successfully. But he wouldn't need to anymore. He had her, and she had him. Together, he and she could create something stronger, something lasting—a shared life built

on love, trust, and the mutual understanding that they were better together. Teamwork makes the team work.

He wanted to be intentional with himself and with her on the vision of their future. To do the work now, what at times may feel like hard work, but would be what they needed. She was receptive, she smiled, was happy and onboard, offering what she would do on her end to ensure they would be successful, including them going to therapy together. A recommendation he welcomed and was excited for as it would be a sign that she wanted it as much as he did. Actions of intention and commitment and togetherness.

Now it was her turn to speak on what was unfinished. She said she hadn't expected him to respond the way he did. She had braced herself for the opposite of what he shared, for an outpouring of disappointment, anger, or frustration. She knew her actions from that night had hurt him, was mean and she had prepared herself to hear it spelled out, loud, maybe even harsh, as though that was what she deserved. And while she was right that what she did had hurt him deeply, he chose not to voice those feelings in that moment—or maybe perhaps ever.

But a part of him wondered if perhaps he needed to say it, and she needed to hear it—not as punishment, but so she wouldn't come to believe that he was immune to hurt, that he could bear any wound without consequence. She had done similar things before, things that had caused him confusion, discomfort and pain, things that were not ok. While he understood that people are layered, complicated, and even the most loving hearts sometimes make mistakes or commit acts that can be hurtful, he hoped she would see that he was still human, and that mean things hurt and left a mark.

For reasons even he couldn't fully explain, he never felt compelled to always call her out on the ways she hurt him. It wasn't in his nature to assign blame; he trusted her to sense the impact of her actions for herself. She was smart, mature, kind, and thoughtful—qualities he deeply admired. Because of this, he believed that in her heart she could feel when her actions missed the mark. And in that silent understanding, he held a quiet hope that she would recognize his pain, not because he demanded it, but because she wholeheartedly cared about him and was genuinely sorry.

He couldn't see her as a mean person—he knew she wasn't. He knew mean, and she was not it. She was beautiful, genuine, compassionate, loving, all the things that had drawn him close to her. She's his dream bae. If she ever acted in ways that seemed to contradict these qualities, he believed it wasn't intentional. It was likely something buried deep, maybe a wound from her past, or perhaps a defense mechanism she'd built over time. Maybe it was a reflexive attempt to avoid conflict or to face difficult truths, or have challenging discussions, a self-protective impulse which became a habit, perhaps learned as a child, similar to him. Maybe it's just because something happened., none of which would excuse the action. But it couldn't be intentional, could it? He couldn't imagine she would ever willingly go **OUTTHEWAY** to hurt him, the person she loves, the person that she calls her love, who had been there for her more than anyone—the person who was her rock always, her light, her support and shoulder to lean on, quite possibly more than anyone else in her life—since that magical day they met. He couldn't understand it fully, and it was very confusing and would drive him crazy, but he believed it wasn't cruelty. It was something else, something happened, and he hoped that in time, she would see it, understand it, and he and she would move past it together.

So, in this meeting, in this moment, he chose to respond with patience, not because he was impervious to pain, but because he wanted to show her something greater than disappointment. He wanted to show her grace,

trust and his hope that they could move forward with love, togetherness, action and promise that he and she would embark on together. He would declare to her and himself that this day would be a milestone for them, a day he and she would revisit at different points in their future together, reflect on and be grateful for.

The day carried as they moved to another establishment for more dialogue and drinks. As they sat across from each other, he realized again how they were still effortlessly able to connect in conversation and extend their time with each other. It was early evening, and although not what she originally planned, he and she made their way back to her home. She wanted to smoke. He wanted to drink. But above all, they both wanted to keep talking. They needed to continue. The discussion carried on, rich with emotion and honesty. Some parts felt light and easy, a natural exchange between two people who knew each other deeply. Other parts were heavy, difficult, and challenging, but necessary. He and she had reached a point where meekness no longer had a place between them, which led to tears. She nestled into his arms, the place where she always fit so perfectly, as though it had been made just for her. He held her tightly, both a gesture of comfort and a declaration of his unwavering affection.

Then kisses came next—soft, then intense, each one layered with meaning. They hugged, then cuddled, and finally surrendered to the undeniable pull between them. Their love became physical, expressed through amazing, passionate, emotional, sweaty, yummy, deeply satisfying sex, a culmination of everything they had felt that day and the days prior: the disappointment, the appreciation, the anger, the happiness, the frustration, the forgiveness, the gratitude, and above all, the love and magic, figuratively christening her new couch, that transformed under their bodies. She asked him to stay the night. He agreed.

He resolved to take the lead and lean in. To remind her of them. To remind her of the happiness and passion they found in each other. To remind him that the best version of himself he is inspired of becoming when he was with her. To remind her of the best version of herself she is capable of being is when she is with him. When he and she are good, they are absolutely great. When they are at their best, nothing in the world is better.

chapter 16

purpose + progress + plans = promise

A reminder of purpose, the signal of progress and an intention of plans lead to a great deal of promise for him and her. They were side by side, together, preparing for the ride they would continue to embark on. There is no other place he would **RATHER BE** than with her, and he felt there was no place she would rather be than with him. Together, he and she were unstoppable.

Between her work, friends and family, there were a lot of obligations she had that would impact her schedule in this chapter and season, pretty much up until her last work trip across the pond when she would have more time. He would understand and adjust his calendar accordingly to accommodate.

She had just returned from a weekend camping trip with her highschool friend and their family. He had summer half-days at the end of his workweeks, and since she was available that day, he asked her if she would join him to pick up his first joy from summer camp. He knew his first joy would be overjoyed and surprised to see her. She, too, was elated by the invitation—not just because she adored spending time with him and his first joy, but because it was another intentional step in the partnership they were building.

He stopped at her place first, where he updated her on the legal aspects of closing out his past, and she offered support to him with seeking out other referrals. They relaxed for a bit before heading to camp, and as expected, his first joy lit up with pure excitement and delight upon seeing her. The reaction was everything he had hoped for—proof of how naturally his two joys fit into each other’s worlds, like how she naturally fit into his.

The journey back, the togetherness was always a sight to see. They walked together, talked together, laughed together, played together, sang together, picked flowers, and ordered food that they picked up together. Even when his first joy exhibited moments of exaggerated prepubescent drama—complete with sighs and embellished acts—she handled it with a calm yet firm nurturing presence. Her ability to positively shift the mood in those moments was something he deeply admired and understood he could not always do alone. He realized that she was there not just for his first joy, but she was there for him as well, stepping into the role of a partner with grace and purpose. The dynamic was a sight that made him pause internally to reflect on how beautifully their lives intertwined, a promise of their future lives together.

As they settled in for dinner at her place, because sushi made them do it, she mentioned her frustration in coordinating travel plans for an engagement party in the neighboring state. The logistics sounded exhausting: a train, followed by two buses, a boat, a small mountain hike and finally timing being picked up by her father. He immediately thought the entire plan was madness, and without hesitation offered to drive her there himself, turning it into a little road trip for him, her, and his first joy, which his first joy was a hundred percent down for. She was visibly appreciative of the gesture, but seemed reluctant to take him up on it because she thought it would be an inconvenience for him. He gently reminded her that she could always ask for his help, that it was never an issue, there is no need to lean into her fierce independence, especially if it

would be a giant inconvenience for her. It would be a reminder of the growing foundation of their partnership.

The night unfolded with an impromptu movie viewing at her place of a surprisingly heartwarming film about a daddy day care. They all got comfy with blankets sharing laughs on her transforming couch. But as the movie played, he and she indulged in scandalous, naughty, and utterly mischievous touches under the covers on their side of the furniture. It was their private little sexy exchange, hidden in plain sight, adding yet another layer to their chemistry.

When the movie ended, he and his first joy half-heartedly prepared to leave. His first joy wanted to stay for another movie, and he wanted more impish intimate time with her. They said their goodbyes, and the next day, she confirmed she would take him up on his offer for the road trip. They set off together—him, her, and his first joy—on their little adventure. It wasn't just a car ride; he and she agreed it was a test run for the many road trips they imagined taking together in the future. With laughter, shared playlists, stops for food at regional convenience stores, and the open road ahead of them. This felt extremely purposeful.

A few days later she invited him over to spend the night at her place. It became another movie night watching a film starring the same actor from the daddy day care flick. They decided then and there that they would watch his most iconic movies together as their thing, something that would solely belong to them, and he added it to ever growing action list of things they needed to act on. He drank, she smoked; she drank, he smoked. Their energies interwoven naturally. She invited him to partake in her late-night self-care routine, a careful process of teeth pulling, brushing, flossing, face washing—each step carried out with care using only the best products, because she was product of her products, always choosing the best

ingredients for herself, and now sharing those with him. He reveled in this moment, the simpleness of their togetherness still feeling amazing when doing the ordinary and routine. He and she was extraordinary in their partnership and relationship, connecting on grand and minor level. A chore such a washing faces together was exciting for them to share in.

They went to bed together, but not before picking up where they had left off a few days earlier, indulging in the scandalous activities under the blanket, the actions of passions that always seemed to pull them closer. It ended in amazing hashtag plus, in love, in a relationship that felt as normal as it was electric. He and she woke up wrapped in each other, already confirming to spend the next day together before she left for another weekend trip back to the island of rhode for her niece's birthday party.

He and she had planned to go to the theater and watch the movie about multiverses and timelines, maybe a reflection of how their own lives had many dimensions. With her job piling on more than its fair share of stress, she asked to raincheck the movie. What she did not ask to raincheck was the time with him. She wanted a low key evening, just them, and he was happy to accommodate. He appreciated that she sought him out as her safe space, a haven, her outlet for the complexities of the world—just as he sought her when he felt overwhelmed or off-center.

She texted him when she was en route to his apartment, and as always he would feel the excitement knowing they would engage in the simple, subtle and unassuming exchange that would always be an all-time favorite experience of his. When she arrived, he could sense she was not in the best spirits from her day, but she still showed up, and still carried the warmth that turned his space into a home.

He thanked her for sharing how she felt before she came, expressing his appreciation for her honesty and for still wanting to spend time despite her not-so-great day. She seemed to need reassurance, asking if her tone and

communication with him during the rough day she was having had been okay. He told her it was perfect, and her relief was evident. He wanted her to know that she didn't need to always be her best to be with him. She could be mad, sad, upset, frustrated, stress, all the emotions of a human and not be apologetic of it or feel the need to hide it from him, or be alone by herself in those feelings. He loved her, and that included all parts of her, and he wanted her to understand that as they are bonding their lives together, living together, they would have to be their full selves with one another. She agreed and appreciated the reassurance. They settled in with drinks, deciding on dinner plans, and then he handed her a couple of treats.

The first was a card with images of puzzle pieces fitting perfectly together, a symbol of how he and she complemented each other so perfectly. Inside, he had written words that reflected the recent actions, activities, and dialogue he and she shared together since the day he declared would be a milestone for them, a day he and she would revisit at different points in their future together as the start of a new chapter, season, volume of their forever.

She had casually mentioned wanting a bed light at his place so she could read at night, so he got her one so she can feel at home in his space until they got a place of their own. When she opened the gifts, her face lit up with a mix of delight and curiosity. She looked at him, almost shyly, and asked, "Why does this feel so easy and simple now?"

He smiled, responding gently, "Because it always was—if we just let it be and let us be what we are and who we are." He acknowledged that there would be times when things wouldn't feel as easy, times when he would need to take the lead to pick her up and keep them afloat. But he also reminded her that when he couldn't, she would need to step into that role. It was how they would balance the greatness of their relationship, the connection, a partnership where both were equally invested in its success.

When he and she are good, they are absolutely great. When they are at their best, nothing in the world is better.

They hugged, kissed, and cuddled before heading out for dinner. They agreed on a particular restaurant within walking distance, enjoying the nice night as they held hands and talked along the way. When they arrived, they discovered the kitchen was closed. It was ok. It just meant more time to walk, hold hands, to talk, to be together, to soak in each other's presence, and even have time to make a song together, a collaborative duet. Afterall, he and she made beautiful music together, in every sense of the word.

Eventually, they found another place that was open and shared a lovely meal, exchanging bites and sips of each cocktail. They walked back to his place afterward, still holding hands, and the night deepened. Their bodies met as it always did, with an intensity that was both familiar and exhilarating. Each touch, each kiss, each movement further cemented the connection they had. It wasn't just about the physical; it was about love, trust, and the undeniable magic of their togetherness manifested. She would work from home for a few hours at his place the next morning, reminiscent of early their days together. After she left, she would send him a message saying how much of a good time she had, from the drinking to the smoking to the sitting on the couch to the walking to the singing to even brushing teeth together. There was mutual recognition that the simplest of routines between them would always feel special, there was significance in fact that he and her doing regular things still held a heavy weight of joy. It would be something he and she would be intentional to lean into more, understanding that having collective delight in sharing a bathroom sink to brush teeth together was not regular, something to be admired, something special.

With her birthday approaching, she found herself in the thick of a demanding time at work and unfortunately unable to take the time off to

celebrate herself in the way he had hoped. He wanted to make her feel recognized and celebrated, so they both agreed that once work slowed down—perhaps even ended—he and she would take a well-

deserved vacation, a chance for them to escape together, a reprieve they both desperately needed, and a reason for her to wear her new bathing suits, another thing he would add to the list of actions.

Still, he didn't want her special day to pass without his presence. He asked if he could spend her birthday with her, starting the evening before by spending the night at her place, and then taking her out for dinner with his first joy on her actual birthday. She happily agreed, and he felt reassurance of gratitude that she wanted him to be part of her time.

The evening before her birthday, he arrived at her place, bringing food and gifts in tow. It was quaint, quiet, and she enjoyed it, it was what she said she wanted—the thoughtfulness, the simplicity, the way he always made her feel seen. At some point in the evening, she mentioned wanting ice cream but didn't have any at home. Without hesitation, he offered to go out and get it for her. Her initial surprise at the gesture made him pause. He reminded her, as he always did, that she could ask him for things, especially something as small but meaningful as a birthday treat.

When he returned with the ice cream, she expressed her appreciation with a timidity that struck him. It was almost as though she was just beginning to realize how deeply he cared, how willing he was to do these things for her, anything for her, and how she could lean on him for the little and big moments. He silently hoped she would remember this in the future, that she would feel comfortable asking without reluctance.

He understood how she tended to feel around her birthday—a milestone that brought deep reflection for her, a time when her thoughts would spiral into a sea of self-examination. He tried to be by her side as she processed it

all, offering his presence as a steadying force, but he also knew there were parts of this she would have to navigate on her own. He couldn't fully engage with her inner workings in the way he might have wanted or she might have needed. Some of it, she would need to handle herself.

That night, as they hugged, kissed, and cuddled before bed, he tried to let his love and warmth fill the spaces words couldn't reach, making his presence feel like home for her. When morning came, he woke her up on her birthday with a song, as he always did—his voice full of admiration, affection, and a playful kind of reverence. She smiled, her expression a mix of joy and quiet reflection, and in that moment, she seemed happy.

As they got ready for work, he noticed her emotions brimming just beneath the surface, though he wasn't sure what had triggered them. Sensing her vulnerability, he held her close and told her he loved her. He reassured her of her worth, of her place in his life, his joy, and how incredibly proud he was of all that she had accomplished, and how she is an absolutely positively amazing person. She absorbed his words, but he could tell she still needed a moment to herself. When she said she wanted to write in her journal, he offered to stay with her while she did, but she gently insisted that it was something she needed to do alone, which he understood and respected.

Later that evening, he, his first joy, and she met for dinner. A sudden rain shower caught them on their way, and he could see how it added to the weight of her day, dampening her spirits. Hoping to lift the mood, he gave balloons that his first joy had picked out—simple, colorful tokens of celebration. Though the dinner didn't feel as festive as he had envisioned, over time, the energy shifted, the food was good and the company always great. The three of them held hands as they left, walking down the dimly lit street, entangled in a way that felt natural, easy, and real.

As they said their goodbyes and went their separate ways, he couldn't shake the feeling that he hadn't done enough to make her day feel as special as she deserved. That night, he left her a voice note, pouring his thoughts and feelings into words. He acknowledged what he had observed saying it's okay to lean into the feelings, expressed his desire to make things better for her, reminded her of how deeply he cared, and she is cared for by many, and reassured her of how wonderful of a human she is.

Her response came in earnest, filled with gratitude. She thanked him for the message and for always being there, her steady rock in the ever-shifting tides of life. This all felt like significant progress coupled with purpose.

Later that week, on another one of his summer half-days, he helped her book and pick up a car rental for her weekend camping trip with family. Her spirits seemed lighter around him, perhaps now redirecting the frustration she had been carrying toward the adults she would soon see on the campgrounds. They met at the train station, holding hands as they walked to the rental dealership, but somehow managed to get lost on what should have been a quick and straightforward walk. But he or she didn't mind. It just meant more time to walk, hold hands, to talk, to be together, to take in each other's presence. When they finally arrived at the rental place, the wait felt long, but she ended up getting an even better discount, which added a touch of serendipity to the day. As she drove the rental car through the streets of their borough, he realized this was first time he played passenger prince, with her confidently at the helm of a vehicle. He joked—half-serious, half-playful—that on their future road trips, she would have to drive the foreign-engineered chariot, a challenge she accepted with a sly and confident smile. They spent some quiet time together at her place before parting ways,

hugging, kissing, and cuddling in that way that only he and she could. She headed off for her camping trip, and he left to pick up his first joy from summer camp.

A few days later, he surprised her with tickets to a concert in the park for an artist she had casually mentioned months earlier. She was touched he remembered and excited to attend with him. They planned their usual pregame ritual of meeting at her place for drinks, a toast, and maybe even a quick smoke before heading out. But on the day of the concert, when he reached out to confirm the time, her response was stoic and unexpected. She asked that he meet her directly at the park, skipping their usual pre-show routine.

Sensing a shift in her mood, he gently reminded her of their pregame plans, to which she doubled down and replied that she would bring the drinks to the park instead. When he finally saw her, she looked beautiful, as always, but something felt off. As they stood together waiting in line, he asked if it was okay to hold her hand. She said she didn't know and she was still deciding. This was so confusing and landed heavy with him. He asked her if this is something they needed to discuss, and she said not now. Did something happen again? What happened?

Despite the uncertainty, they walked into the park, hands eventually held, securing a spot with a decent view of the stage. She prepared cocktails and unpacked fruits she had picked up, and slowly, the mood began to shift. Their bond, that organic chemistry they shared, took over. Within moments, the tension gave way to ease, and they were back to the smiles, laughter, and effortless dialogue that always felt like home. They sang along, danced, people-watched, and shared kisses and cuddles, their positive energy filling the air around them. After the show, he walked her home, respecting her wish for him not to stay the night. Before he left, they embraced in their usual way, with circular kisses on cheeks, nose, forehead,

and lips. As he said goodbye, he felt a rush of excitement, knowing he would see her again in just a few days, hoping they would stay in sync.

Her previous mention of wanting scallops led to an unintentional but delightfully jam-packed weekend ahead of them. He had suggested taking her on a fancy date, where they could both dress up. That evening, they dined on fine wine and food at a semi local bistro, followed by walking hand in hand to the hard to get into lounge afterward, they were able to get into. The venue was chic, the drinks were pricey but delicious, and the staff was less than kind—giving them plenty of material to rate and critique the night, tapping into their network of food vocabulary. This was also the night they took several selfies together, their outfits perfectly color-coordinated, both of them looking effortlessly cool and delicious. It being very clear in one photo how much he adored her based on how he gently kissed her back, a prelude to his desire to devour her. They looked so good together. The evening ended back at his place, wrapping up the first round of their weekend.

The next morning, they prepared for round two. She had planned a trip to an island accessible only by ferry for biking and a picnic. Together, they shopped for ingredients—she crafted the most delectable sandwiches—and packed their snacks and beverages. Once on the island, they rented bikes and explored every corner, pedal to the metal smiling as they unofficially raced each other taking different paths along the way, circling the island multiple times before breaking for lunch. They found a cozy spot to eat just as the sky began to break and darken. Moments after finishing their meal, the rain came. She was visibly disappointed that the weather had disrupted her plans, but he wasn't bothered in the slightest. To him, the day had been perfect because she was there. He and she could be **EVERYWHERE**, anywhere, or nowhere at all, but as long as she was there, nothing else mattered.

Returning to their borough, they coordinated with impressive efficiency: splitting up to shower and change before meeting back at her place. That evening, they watched the show about dragons, ate, drank, smoked, and reflected on the incredible time they had together. They talked about letting things flow, about accepting the magic of each other without overthinking. They went to bed together that night, and woke up with each other the next morning. It was great. It was fun. He was happy. She was happy. They were always happy when they were together.

The following week, his new joy and his first joy attended a basketball game together to see their girls play on the hardwood. Once again, it was a sight to behold—watching their bond blossom into something organic, independent, the two had built a relationship that was their own, and witnessing that evolution filled him with joy.

She asked him to go shopping with her that weekend, wanting to find some new denim denim denim. He was thrilled that she had asked him to join, and they planned a weekend out of it. He and she spent time wandering through the shops south of houston, him having the incredible privilege of watching her try on jeans of all different styles and fits. Each time she emerged from the fitting room, he could barely contain the desire he had for her. He adored her figure—every curve, every line, so watching her model clothing was nothing short of exhilarating. It was even more rewarding to see those brief moments when she would stand a little taller, exuding pride in how she looked and felt in something that fit just right. When she thought she looked good, he thought she looked great. He loved her so much. She was his **VIVRANT THING**. After selecting a few pairs of jeans that made her feel good, he couldn't resist picking up an in-style tennis skirt for her,

knowing it was probably more for him than her. She humored him and thanked him with a smirk that only made him want her more.

They ventured to a restaurant he had not been to for years so wasn't sure what to expect, but the food exceeded their expectations. Each bite was more delectable than the last, and they couldn't help but rate the dishes with their imaginary scorecards. The scores were high, laughter plentiful, and their time as effortless as ever. They planned to return, so he added it to their actions list.

They returned to his home afterwards, and since she was on holiday from work the next day, she asked if he could join her on her day off. Of course he would. The next morning, he called out of work to extend their time together, leading to an incredible a.m. of passion. They shared a few rounds of intense, sexy, and yummy hashtag plus, their chemistry undeniable and magnetic before starting the day. She left to freshen up at her place, and he met her there so they could finally cash in their raincheck to watch the movie about multiverses and multiple timelines. Throughout the film, her sweet giggles and infectious laughter was on full display. He found himself glancing at her probably more than the screen, completely entranced by the joy she radiated. For him, her happiness was his own. He loved her so much. They ended the night back at her place, where he spent the night before leaving for work early the next morning.

They planned to spend more time together in a few days before she headed out of town again for the weekend with sister and a family friend for a show in beantown. Still juggling a lot at work, now dealing with communications and organizational impacts, and she admitted she might not be in the right headspace to spend the quality time they had planned. She promised to let him know, but he recognized how emotionally draining it was to be a resource for humans—something they bonded over, especially under such circumstances.

Wanting to brighten her day, he decided to check in on her for a quick moment. After lunch, he pulled up to her place, rang the bell, and waited as

she answered the door. Not knowing who it was, she opened the door and saw him standing there, her face lit up with surprise and happiness—this even before she noticed the thoughtful treats he held in his hands. He had brought her flowers, donuts, and ice cream, small comforts to help her navigate a tough day. She was visibly moved, her eyes softening as she thanked him and hugged him. She would use that time to quickly update him on some small sibling quarrel she was having and wanted his ear to hear. Then as he was leaving so she could continue with work, she called him back give him another huge hug and embrace, shower him with kisses, and to thank him profusely for his thoughtfulness. Shortly after, still in the midst of her whirlwind day she texted him “you are the best boy ever.” Her words touched him deeply. He thanked her in return, telling her she made him want to be the best for her. She responded with a genuinely authentic selfish that captured the facial expression of her reading those words. He loved it. He loved her. She loved it. She loved him. When he and she are good, they are absolutely great. When they are at their best, nothing in the world is better. She would confirm that she needed the night alone, but agreed to meet him the next day before she left for the weekend.

The next day, on another one of his summer half-days, he made his way to her place to spend time with her. She had a few chores to tackle, so he accompanied her to the laundromat to pick up her clothing. Among the load was a pair of his shorts she had been on a mission to restore, following advice from a podcast she had listened to. He still despised doing laundry, but there was an unexpected serenity in hanging clothes to dry with her—a quiet rhythm they shared, something so simple yet deeply intimate. Something special.

She decided to tackle making a rhubarb pie—or rather, her ambitious interpretation of one, given the ingredients she had on hand, and he stood by her side for every step of the journey. As she prepped, she opened up about lingering frustrations she had with her sister. There was an ease and

closeness to the way she spoke, her words unfiltered and real. She felt comfortable sharing her family dynamics with him, trusting him to listen, to hold her words with care.

He received her words thoughtfully, listening intently and sharing insights when he felt it was helpful. She thanked him for offering his perspective from his big beautiful brain, agreeing with some of his sentiments. He took the opportunity to revisit something she had mentioned weeks earlier, asking what he could do to mend any misunderstandings or tension he may have caused with her sister. He understood how important that relationship was and wanted to show her that it mattered to him, because it did. She brushed it off, assuring him there was nothing to worry about and that she had already taken care of it.

As the pie baked, he and she made their way to her transforming couch, settling in together. She suggested watching the animated series about gargoyles, a show they had not watched in a long time. Her choice thrilled him, not just because he loved the show, but because of the reason behind her suggestion. They poured drinks and watched a few episodes, sharing laughs and commentary. At one point, the antagonist delivered a particularly clever line that had her in stitches, her beautiful, infectious laughter filling the room.

Their lightheartedness transitioned seamlessly into a deeper conversation about family and their own journeys. She decided to pause the show to focus on their dialogue and to not miss any more quips from the antagonist, but soon chose a series about two best friends designing homes that caught both of their attention. The afternoon drifted by, filled with meaningful exchanges and shared moments, hugs, kisses and cuddles as she prepared for her upcoming trip.

Before he left, he wanted to ensure she understood the gravity of his feelings and intentions. He looked her in the eyes and told her exactly what

he wanted. He wanted to be with her. He loved her. He wanted her to be his girlfriend again, and he to be her boyfriend again. He wanted to have a future with her. He thanked her for allowing their bond and connection to go through somewhat of a re-awakening, for trusting in him, and for letting herself be swept away by the beauty and depth of what they were building together.

He explained to her this was intentional. All that he and she were doing, everything that's happening—it's purposeful. It's progress. It's part of the plan for him and her, for partnership, togetherness and future.

She thanked him for saying those words and with sincerity in her voice she shared that she needed to hear it. They hugged, kissed, and cuddled before he left, their connection reaffirmed as she prepared for beantown. Later that night, as she was on the train, she texted him to say the day and time spent together was both regular and special. This seemed to be a theme unique for him and her, something that solely belong to them. She felt good in her head, heart and body because of him, saying nothing can bring her down in that space, and she was happy that he still wanted her to be his girlfriend. He was happy to hear that, and echoed her feelings, with buckling down in the momentum in their togetherness that he did not want to slow down. There was mutual recognition that as much fun they have together when out on dates and trips and outings, doing social things, there was an equal amount of reverence and joy and fun in doing household things together. It was reinforcing the foundation of family and partnership they had to look forward to in the future. It was really very magical.

While she was away, she would often tell him that she wished he were there with her, imagining how much fun they could have together. She suggested they visit the city she was in one day, already envisioning it as the perfect place for them to explore and make new memories. While out at a local bar with her old work colleagues, she excitedly told him about the venue,

saying it was exactly his vibe and that she couldn't wait to bring him there. She had invited him join her to see one of her favorite artists perform live at a beach perfect for the jones. Both were equally thrilled, already planning to make a long weekend out of it which would include seeing the rapper from the big easy who was performing a few states away. In anticipation, he dove into the album by the artist, wanting to make sure he could sing along with her, just as they always did at concerts—connected through lyrics, music, and their shared energy.

In turn, when he found himself at a new bar he thought she might like, he would take a mental note, already imagining bringing her there, the thought bringing a smile to his face. He had several ideas for road trip destinations that he was excited to share with her. He was also thinking ahead, mapping out the playoff schedule for their girls who played on the hardwood, securing tickets with her in mind to accompany him. She, knowing how much they both loved these moments, would tell him she wanted to contribute toward next season's tickets so they could keep attending games together—a gesture that spoke to their shared investment in each other for each other, not just in the short term but in the long term, in their future in togetherness.

Even when they weren't in the same space, they were intricately woven into each other's thoughts, effortlessly planning how to create new moments of togetherness. It was an extension of their bond—a relationship so strong it flourished in their absence, manifesting through the places they dreamed of sharing, the plans they made, and the constant presence of one another in their minds, hearts and soul.

In the several weeks since the day he declared would be a milestone for them, his and her time had been filled with bliss, romance, joy, love, passion, happiness, honesty and an undeniable excitement. This stretch

together was marked by thoughtful communication, clear intentions, heartfelt declarations, deliberate actions and a trust that seemed firm. He and she admittedly were adamantly smitten with each other in every way. There were early morning voicenotes, messages exchanged throughout the day, selfies, and day and nights spent wrapped in each other's presence. They would even have new pet names for one another inspired by fruits and vegetables, after all this time, still finding creative ways to express their affection for each other. Everything they were doing was a masterclass in a reignited romance, a relationship blooming in this new season anchored in something deeply real and stable, in promise. It was beautiful and loving, it was gross. It was real. It was fun. It was what he and she were meant to be. It was magic grounded in reality, added to the tale a proud fairy would soon be grateful to tell.

As he reflected on the journey, on their journey, thoughts swirled in his head, his heart, his spirit, and his soul. He could feel it—this connection, this love—it was moving to another level. When he and she are good, they are absolutely great. When they are at their best, nothing in the world is better. And as far as he was concerned, there was no limit to how far they could go, together as long as they both wanted it. They were leaning into it fully, without hesitation or fear, and it felt right. It was promise. He would add more to his action list, excited to share with her all the things he was wanted for her and him to do together to continue their flourishing and the wonderful re-awakening and rekindling they were in the midst of. So gross!

chapter 17

good mourning

The weekend after the country took off for labor, he would shoot her over a “good morning” text, knowing she and her sister—the one closest to her in age and in heart—were thrilled to attend a concert later that night starring a childhood favorite artist they both adored. He first wanted to see her geek out over this artist during a residency in sin city two years prior, and regretted not being able to make it happen; however he got to witness it when the superstar singer performed the year prior during the festival of dream they were attending together for the second year in a row, a tradition they started, cherished and would look to continue. So, when he learned earlier this year, while she was across the pond for work, that the rhythm-and-blues crooner would be performing in their city when she was back, he made sure to secure tickets. Initially, it was supposed to be a date for him and her, but then turned into a double date with him, her, her sister and sister's boyfriend which he was looking forward to, but ultimately, it became a sibling night for her and her sister. Though he didn't attend, he smiled at the thought of her geeking out again, knowing how much fun she and her sister were having together, some of which he got to see when she sent him some selfies. She is so beautiful.

He hoped he would have a chance to see her and her sister in action, in what he would affectionately refer to as the “sibling and sibling show” during the visit, especially in an effort to check in and reconcile any mishaps he committed that sister did not like, but did not get an opportunity to do so outside of quick drop off of a box for sister to stash things in and a quick hello and goodbye.

This concert weekend led into the final days before she was set to return across the pond for a couple of weeks for the last work trip, wrapping up her role as the people whisperer at the upstart company. Between her sister being in town, her work demands, and his commitments with his first joy and work socials, their communication wasn't as frequent as usual—a fact they both acknowledged. He understood she needed time to prepare for her trip, but he wanted to ensure they had plans to spend meaningful time together before he took her to the airport. She left him an earnest and heartfelt a.m. voicenote proposing what sounded like an amazing run of show: an evening together after work to catch up and unwind, with her plan to work from home the next day, then another evening together leading into the weekend, then they would part ways for a few hours for her to prepare for her trip but reconvene that night before her departure the next day. She said how much she missed him and was looking forward to their togetherness. He was excited about her plans and added that he would work from home as well, so he and she could maximize their time. Her voice carried warmth and excitement, and he was thrilled by how much time she wanted to spend with him. They finalized the arrangements, and he was eagerly counting down to the start of their time together before she would be away for two weeks.

Later that day, he checked in to confirm the timing of evening's plans they committed to just a couple hours before, but her response blindsided him. She told him she was still deciding what she wanted to do and suggested he go home while she figured it out. Confused and taken aback, he wondered what had changed. What happened? Something happened. What did he do? He asked her what happened and she later informed him she needed some time and would talk to him the next day. But the next day came and went with no communication. By the morning of the day before her departure, he called, hoping for clarity and to ensure they spoke and saw each other before her trip. She assured him they would talk later that day.

Day turned to evening, then evening slipped into midnight, and then into that in-between time that's either very very late night or very very early morning. She finally reached out, saying she was ready to have their **EXCHANGE**. He called for a car, his mind racing during the ten minute ride the car raced to her place, replaying every interaction, every word, trying to decipher what could have gone wrong. When he arrived, the familiarity of their usual warm greeting—circular kisses on her forehead, cheeks, nose, and lips—was absent. She kept her distance, her demeanor calm but resolute, as though she was preparing for something. He felt disoriented, out of sync and confused, while she seemed composed, almost rehearsed for what was about to unfold.

When he asked what was going on, her words hit like a lightning strike. “Today is the day,” she said, and with a voice devoid of hesitation, she told him the romantic part of their relationship needed to end. He froze, shocked, struggling to process her words and understand what she meant. How? Why? Everything had been good, their bond strong, their connection electric, the relationship reawakening. He searched her eyes for answers but found none.

He asked her for honesty, as he kept asking himself, “What happened?” But it wasn't what happened; apparently it was who happened. She said she had met someone else. The words shattered him. What? Who? When? Why? How? His heart sank as he tried to comprehend, but after that revelation, everything else she said faded into white noise.

How could this happen when their love had momentum, when their rocket ship was rising? They were moving together as a team. He loved her. He knew it, and she knew it too. She loved him, she knew it, and he knew it too. He was baffled, desperate to understand how they had gone from being grossly smitten with each other—adamantly adoring one another, making arrangements for outings and shows and trips, taking steps towards

mending their past while building a future together, literally planning the weekend together—to this. He had felt their love; she had felt their love. The progress they had made was real.

He said it. She said it. And yet, here she was, saying she had already mourned their relationship, and had mourned it for some time.

You can only mourn what has truly died. And they were not dead, not even dying, not close to it. Some parts of his and her relationship warranted a good mourning, a grieving—pieces of their shared history that had served its purpose and were ready to fall away, like withering leaves on a tree, not uncommon as seasons change. Those leaves, maybe once vibrant, would need to be gently clipped, not out of disregard, but with intention—to ensure they didn't drain the vital nutrients, waters and energy that were needed to nurture the thriving branches, blossoming leaves, and blooming flowers, which represented the parts of their connection, his and her tree—rooted in a purposeful foundation strengthened through effort, action, intention, grace, trust, love, understanding, forgiveness and commitment.

He had been in her presence for days, weeks, months, the love shared in that time, the intimacy, the plans, the actions, the romance, the commitment, the laughter, the fun, the joys, the magic, the intentions, the reality, the togetherness that had been so alive between him and her, breathing, growing, blossoming, flourishing. Outside of the incident that led to the pull up, and the pull up itself, where did he and she go wrong? Was it all a ruse? Was it in his imagination? Did he over romanticize their recent time? Did he exaggerate their entire time? While she acknowledged all of what he felt and the time they had, recognizing she felt it too, she repeated aloud again she had already mourned the relationship, but her words felt unsure, almost as though she was trying to convince herself and him of this. Everything about that moment told him that those were not words of reassurance.

It felt, at times, as though she deliberately leaned into distractions, intentionally creating distance to resist fully surrendering to them, to the undeniable pull of their connection. It wasn't that she couldn't love him—loving him was the easy part. Being with him was fun, they made beautiful music together. Wanting him ran deep, a desire that coursed through her in ways that both excited and scared her. And yet, despite all of this, there were moments when she stepped back as opposed to leaning in, carefully avoiding being completely swept away by their togetherness, as though she was still worried about being consumed by the magic of what they shared, protecting herself from something happening, from being hurt, as though she still did not trust it, or maybe fully trust him. He could see it, sense it, and understand some aspects of her feeling that way, as clearly as he still felt the love between them. He wasn't the easiest to always deal with. He had been working on himself and his things for himself, and for her. He told her. He showed her. He wanted to show her more, he had his action list. Did she not trust him? Did she not trust herself? Did she not believe him? Did she not believe in them? Their connection was so rare, so special, so magical, so real, that it was as if she didn't quite know how to trust its authenticity because of the flaws in it, its imperfections. He wouldn't discredit her feelings, he couldn't, but he hoped that he and she would continue to have the dialogue and work together for what they both wanted, which was to always be together. He knew her well enough to know this was their truth, but he also knew this was not the time to speak it.

He left her apartment brokenhearted, blindsided, and consumed by confusion. He didn't understand how something like what they had could be severed so suddenly, and in the way and manner it was. He felt hollow. It pained him deeply, not just for his own hurt but for hers too. She must have also been heartbroken with this, to get to this point. He felt sorry that it had come to this for her, and that she had reached a place where she

believed breaking them apart was not only a choice, but was the answer. What it really the right answer? Was it really that someone else she met that drove her decision? Did she believe that someone else she met would be a better future for her? He knows her appetite to control things, so was she severing ties with him now, to avoid any risk of getting hurt by him in the future, to get a head of her strange fear that he would sever ties with her first? Was it fight or flight? But there would be nothing to fight against, only things to fight for, he and she both wanting to be together with each other. Maybe she just didn't love him anymore. Maybe she didn't even like him. Maybe it was a combination of all. Maybe it was much more.

Their story had been filled with magic, love, and connection. As he walked away, a mix of emotions flooded him: sadness, anger, disbelief, disappointment, culpability, frustration, and the faintest glimmer of hope. Even in his pain, he couldn't help but believe that the ____ story wasn't truly over. Not yet. Or was it?

INTERLUDE III:

no words.

words.

No. Why. Us. What. Love. Hate. Sad. Disappointed. Heartbreak. Sorry. Shattered. Hurt. SquashE. Nafapple. Confused. Wow. How. Where. Who. Babe. Dear. Bae. Honey. Love. Queen. King. Rings. Oura. Pain. Sadness. Shock. Lock. Keys. Protecting. Lies. Truth. Steal. Joy. Hug. Kiss. Cuddle. Sex. Games. Spades. Cheat. Puzzled. Trick. Real. Cliché. Challenge. Sabotage. Blessings. Touch. Feel. Hold. Warm. Cold. Bond. Partnership. Connection. Energy. Chemistry. HKC. Biology. Hashtag. Plus. Sloop. Paak. Cole. Carolina. Mayer. Wale. Tyler. Wayne. Bey. Rih. Memes. Skeletor. Coachatron. Plush. Bond. Apartment. Past. Present. Future. Shades. 309. 2014. Belle. Bishop. London. Skims. Felines. Bed. Music. Tunes. Text. Voicenotes. Story. Bitmoji. Parkside. Cortelyou. Bedford. Brooklyn. Rhode. Home. Human. Resource. Advice. Consult. Sophisticated. Beautiful. Cute. Handsome. Pretty. Gorgeous. Brilliant. Breakfast. Brunch. Lunch. Dinner. Foodie. Eat. Drink. Tacos. Nachos. Tequila. Believer. Hope. Genuine. Real. Authentic. Insecurity. Brave. Bold. Demure. Meekness. Scare. Encouragement. Pride. Hide. Help. Trauma. Irvs. Dance. Trips. Journey. Healing. Control. Avoidance. Vacation. Barbados. Rum. Pirates. Caribbean. Milestones. Blessings. Celebrations. Birthdays. Promotions. Memories. Plans. Moments. Podcast. Crazy. Sexy. Cool. Elegance. Beard. Hair. Curls. Freckles. Abandonment. Reflections. Rejections. Protection. Projection. Family. Parents. Siblings. Eldest. Childhood. Trauma. Lost. Times. Melodies. Songs. Arms. Thighs. Thick. Hands. Hold. Fingers. Head. Shoulder. Knees. Toes. Lips. Nose. Cheeks. Forehead. Smile. Laugh. Joke. Cry. Frown. Smirk. Giggles. Juman. Prince. Muse. Star. Wish. Faith. Defense. Princess. Paparazzi. Photos. Journals. Candid. Charming. Independence. Deep. Luxury. Pearls. Chains. Elegance. Insecurity. Pride. Health. Wealth. Protection. Mistake. Decision. Adore. Another. Ego. Dragons. Shows. Streaming. Bars. Slime. Festivals. Tickets. Concerts. Shows. Court. Binge. Park. Beach. Yacht. Swim. Water. Snorkel. Sand.

Sushi. Burger. Bourbon. Gummies. Edible. Smoke. High. Low. Flights.
Trips. Ritz. Hotel. Resort. Reserve. Miami. Mexico. PR. Mario. Wii. Games.
Snow. Rain. Park. Sun. Bicycles. Wawa. Road. Weddings. Funerals. Shoes.
Office. Puzzle. Plants. Sleep. Creep. Spoon. Snuggles. Blankets. Pillows.
Blissy. Tippy. Pleasure. Fun. Flirty. Connection. Relationships. Mirrors.
Herringbone. Demin. Chambray. Paisley. Wide-legged. Bowling. Share.
Care. Wear. Tear. Patience. Socks. Gifts. Cards. Forever. Chapter. Season.
Summer. Winter. Autumn. Spring. Special. Magic. Fairy. Dust. Resolution.
Resilience. Dedication. Peace. Happy. Choice. Date. 2019. Shows. Phone.
Wallets. Lightbulb. Kiehls. Pamper. Mask. Lotion. Self-care. Dior. J'adore.
Runaway. LES. Parks. Soho. Luxury. NYE. Crew. Pier 17. Catch. Museum.
Movies. Authentic. Genuine. Generous. Hope. Tale. Fairy. Cocktails.
Raffles. SNKRS. Air. Sneaks. Cloffice. Laugh. Giggles. Squeeze. Rings.
Anklets. Bracelets. Journal. Scent. Dope. Style. Grace. Kindness. Comfort.
Fresh. Local. Time. Company. Togetherness. Skirt. Shirt. Furniture. Chair.
Curtains. Miti. Lizzie. Sweet. Polly. Pizza. Reese. Cannoli. Pumpkin. Wings.
Fish. Scallops. Vegas. Usher. MOMA. Party. Museum. Dance. Gym.
Goliath. Xanatos. Happy. Ending. Superstore. Home. Garden. Food.
Network. Love. List. Yoda. Donuts. Coffee. Tea. Umbrella. Bracelets. Spa.
Bed. Massage. Touch. Feel. Cry. Tear. Sad. Pain. Lace. Butt. Perfect.
Nibble. Pinch. Bite. Fit. Persnaps. Chill. Cozy. Comfies. Sangwich.
Sammies. Mustard. Mayo. Aioli. Sauce. Massa. Pasta. Sausage. Peppers.
Eggs. Cheddar. Chive. Biscuits. Swings. Climb. Hike. Blazers. Toasty.
Pandas. Walks. Icecream. Donuts. Treats. Patties. Perfumes. Chains. Lego.
Life. Death. Liberty. Ellie. Prizes. Gifts. Bedlight. Pictures. Albums. Cards.
Letters. Words. Alita. Deadpool. Kids. Winifred. Freddi. Winnie. Zoe. Zo.
Z. Siblings. Flowers. Birds. Paradise. Lillies. Roses. Mirrors. Portraits.
Curtains. Towels. Robes. Candles. Soaps. Stash. Wardrobe. Vinyl. Purse.
Joy. Favorite. Friend. Couple. Mate. Bae. Beau. Boo. Boyfriend. Girlfriend.
Lover. Bestie. Partner. Engagement. Bride. Groom. Wife. Husband.
Marriage. Father. Mother. Forever. WHAT. THE. FUCK.

chapter 18

ever after

The story began with a swipe on an app with a flame logo that would ignite something neither of them saw coming. Followed by swipes of letters on mobile device keyboards that would create words and sentences and messages that led to a swipe of a transit card onto the metro system, that finally led to him and her having a date on the first day of the third month in the year two thousand and nineteen.

What started as a simple date laid the seed for something profoundly deep and intense. It gave life to a connection that was as rare as it was refreshing—a friendship and togetherness that felt effortless, genuine, and naturally grounding. That relationship quickly blossomed into a romance, a passion so fiery and magnetic it defied the very simplicity of how it began. Together, they cultivated something more—a love that bore the fruit of a togetherness, a future so rich, sweet, and enduring that it rivaled the fruit of the date palm tree. Strong, earthy, resilient, comforting, and satisfying.

He had no idea that that day would mark the beginning of his forever. She didn't know that it would be the beginning of hers. But from that moment forward, the _____ story was set into motion, for chapters, seasons and volumes. A tale told by a magically fairy.

What now? What should he do now? What did she do now? What happens now?

He did not know how to swim, and was left drowning in the depths of his sadness, confusion swirling around him. He was heartbroken, felt hollow, sad with the undeniable slipping away of what they once shared tearing at him. He was hurt. She was hurt too. She had to be for it to get to the point of where he and she both were. This was the end.

But what was it the end of? The chapter? The season? The volume? Or was it the end of the _____ story? Would it now be a tale the fairy never tells?

In the shadow of his pain, accepting the reality of where he and she are, he still found himself hopeful—by the memory of their happiness, by the vision of the future they dreamed of together. What a fool he is? How cot damn stubborn could he be? Why would he still cling so tightly? Why wouldn't he let go? Why would he still be so resilient? Why was he so stupid? So Why does he love her so much?

But then, the answer was always clear: **her**. It's always her.

He would ask himself, was he still willing and wanting to do anything to remind himself and her of what they shared, what they were and who they were becoming, and what they had to look forward to? Absolutely. Because no matter how unbearable this moment felt for him, it wasn't fleeting. It wasn't insignificant. It wasn't the kind of love you walk away from, not without a fight. She was worth fighting for—the connection, the relationship, the togetherness, the future they had envisioned together. The future he saw with her and the future she was only able to see with him in it. She was worth every ounce of struggle, every tear shed, every doubt he had to overcome. She wasn't regular, she was special. She is his dream bae. He is her prince charming. Did she think he was worth it? Did she think she was worth it? Would this be her reality or is this just his imagination. But what would he do?

Though the beginning of his and her journey felt like it was created by magic, dust sprinkled upon their unsuspected heads that faithful night, later leading to a friendship, relationship, partnership, love, romance—consisting of enchanted moments, creating charmed memories, highlighted by a captivating chemistry and connection, not every story unfolds like a perfect fairytale. Some are forged in challenges, in detours, through conflict and resolution, grace and resilience, and in the unexpected twists that life throws along the way. Would this be his and her truth?

Persnaps his and her was one that required some separation, two paths diverging, so they could each grow in their own way. Persnaps it was one where they would rediscover each other in a moment of divine timing, where reconciliation would feel as natural as the first time they met. Persnaps she needed to read his thoughts on paper, listen to tunes and solve a puzzle. Persnaps the love that bound them would simply call them back together, reigniting the magic and passion that had always been theirs. Persnaps he needed to be bold. Persnaps she needed to be brave. He didn't know for sure. He didn't know what to say.

Well, you know what they say— the bigger they are, the harder they fall; the early bird gets the worm; that apple doesn't fall far from the tree; don't cry over spilled milk; the cat's got you tongue; and when life gives you lemons, make lemonade.

But, you know what they say too— if it's meant to be it'll be; no one can take from you what is yours; and nothing worth having comes easy.

He trusted the universe, trusted in all the multiverses across all the timelines. He believed in their bond, in her, in himself, and in the journey that was uniquely theirs—a journey rooted in both reality and magic. Despite the heartache of the present, he carried an unwavering faith. He believed in the chapters yet to be written, the seasons yet to unfold, and the

volumes waiting to be filled with the richness of their love, their connection, and their togetherness.

When the time came— and deep in his soul and in his heart of hearts he believed it would—he and she would step into a new chapter, **RE.UP** into something that had always been destined to endure.

The tale of their love being told by an eager fairy, one who had patiently waited through all the twists and turns of their journey, through the fits and starts, the highs and lows, the heartbreaks and the triumphs. It would be a story full of magic and truth, one that captivated all who heard it. And when the fairy reached the final page, with a smile of joy, pride and relief, she would close the book and end with the words:

“And he and she lived together, happily ever after.”
