

WE SAY

Yes

Emma  ???
22.02.2022

*A Dream
Wedding*

WITHOUT A PRINCE

Impressum

Titel: "Traumhochzeit ohne Prinz"

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Verantwortlich für den Inhalt nach § 18

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Druck: Amazon Distribution GmbH

Am Strandkai 1

20457 Hamburg

Deutschland

Imprint:

Independently published

1. Auflage: Oktober 2025

ISBN (Taschenbuch): 9798270477141

Urheberrecht:

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Informationen.

I jolted awake and it was crystal clear
On February 22nd, 2022, I'm getting
married.

There is no better date.
Granted, I was only four years old, but
this much was certain.
Now, 27 years later, six months until the
wedding.

So many frogs kissed
and not a single prince found.
I don't want to search anymore.

I want to celebrate.

Venue booked.

Menu tasted.

Time for the invitations.
Should I invite the frogs?

Yes. Lets do this.

11 frogs. 12 invitations



Chapter 1: The Kindergarten Prince

Saturday, 1 p.m. The first card.

I opened the desk drawer, and there it still was – wedged between paperclips and old sweets. A scrap of card, crumpled, coloured in with crayons worn down to stubs. Glitter stones stuck on wonkily, some missing. In wobbly child's handwriting it read:

Wedding of Emma and Maximilian.

The second 'i' was backwards.

I smiled. That's how it all began.

Sunshine Nursery, 1996. I was five years old and wore the same pink dress every day, because princesses wore pink. That was simply how it was. Maximilian was the only one taller than the climbing frame – at least, that's how it seemed to me.

"Emma, your ball!" His voice sounded important as he retrieved my golden rubber ball from the highest branch. I'd tried to throw it over the swing, but it had ended up in the birch tree instead. "You're my hero!" I called out, beaming at him. Maximilian went red right to his ears.

"Then I'll just marry you," he said, shrugging as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

Eleven to go.

I put the old invitation back in the drawer and reached for the next one.

Of course I said yes. Princesses always said yes when the prince rescued them. Many years later, I sat at my desk watching the cursor blink on the screen. Maximilian Brenner.

It took a moment to find him. No flashy profile. No grand statements. Then a row of images appeared.

Wood.
Workbenches.
Hands.

A table, so plain you'd almost miss it until you looked closer. Fine joinery, precisely cut, nothing concealed. Japan. I recognised it from the characters in the background.

Light slanting through a window. Italy. An old workshop, dust hanging in the air.

France. A studio with tall windows. I scrolled further.

In one of the pictures, children's feet ran through sawdust. Barefoot.

As if they belonged there. These images stayed with me.

Click.

The invitation went out.

Dear Maximilian,
Do you still remember the golden ball?
I'm getting married on 22 February 2022.
If you fancy dropping by, you're invited.
Emma

I closed the laptop.
Back then, I'd believed he was my prince
because he was taller than me. Because
he'd rescued me. Now I knew that had
been enough to build childhood dreams
on – but not a life.

Perhaps he'd never come to rescue
anyone.

Perhaps he'd always been someone who
put things together without forcing
them.

One card.
Eleven to go.

I put the old invitation back in the
drawer and reached for the next one.



Chapter 2: The Apple Prince

Tim Waldmann. Second grade, seat three, second row. Every morning he stood at the school gate waiting for me. In his lunchbox he always had two apples—one for him, one for me.

"For the prettiest princess in the world," he'd say, turning bright red.

I thought it was sweet. So I drew him an invitation.

This card was more professional—markers instead of crayons, and I'd learned that hearts could be drawn straight.

"Emma & Tim's Wedding" was written in swooping letters. I'd even drawn little apples around the edges.

Linden Square Elementary, 1999. I was eight and wore braids with pink hair ties. Tim was my first fan.

"Emma, do you want to go out with me?" he asked one day during recess. We were standing under the chestnut tree, and he was nervously squeezing his apple.

"Sure," I said. Why not? He was nice, he liked me, and Mom had said you should be kind to kind people.

"So we're getting married then?" he asked hopefully.

I nodded. Marriage was what people did when they liked each other. I knew that from TV.

I found his old card in my diary from back then. It was still just as pink, though the marker colors had faded a bit. I set it aside and opened his Facebook profile.

Tim had become a teacher. Elementary school teacher, naturally. His profile pictures showed him with beaming children holding up artwork.

He was single, as far as I could tell. Still the same gentle eyes, still the same shy smile.

But there was more. A photo from 2019—Tim at a teacher training on "Bullying in Elementary Schools."

His expression was serious, focused, mature. Another picture: Tim with a group of kids doing crafts.

He was smiling patiently while a little boy smeared Play-Doh in his hair.

This wasn't the shy eight-year-old who would have done anything to please me anymore.

This was a man who'd found his place in the world.

I wrote:

Dear Tim,

Do you still remember your apples? You were the first boy who gave me something every day. That was very sweet. I'm getting married on 02.22.2022—this time without a lunchbox, but with just as much heart. If you'd like a reunion: You're warmly invited.

Emma

P.S. Feel free to bring an apple. For old times' sake.

Send.

The truth was more complicated than I'd seen it back then.

"Emma?" Tim had asked me three years ago at a class reunion. "Do you remember elementary school?"

"Of course," I'd laughed. "You were so sweet with your apples!"

He'd looked at me strangely. "You were pretty mean to me, you know that?"

That had stung. "What do you mean?"

"You treated me like a toy. As long as I gave you presents, you were nice.

When I didn't have an apple one day, you ignored me. And when Lisa said I was boring, you just dumped me."

Had I done that? Probably.

"I'm sorry," I'd said. And I really was sorry.

"It's okay," Tim had replied. "We were just kids. But I cried a lot because of you back then."

Tim had been perfect. Attentive, loyal, reliable. He would have done anything for me. But that was exactly his problem —and mine too.

Three weeks after our "engagement," Lisa from the parallel class had said: "Tim is totally boring. He does everything you want."

And suddenly I'd noticed it too.

Tim never said no. Tim never had his own ideas. Tim only wanted to please me.

"I don't want to be your girlfriend anymore," I'd told him after gym class.

"Why not?" he asked with wide eyes.
"Because you're too nice."

He cried. I cried too. But it was still over.

At eight years old I'd already sensed it: Someone who gives themselves up to be loved can't really love. Tim had put me on a pedestal instead of meeting me eye to eye.

But the sad part was: I'd liked the pedestal. I'd gotten used to being adored. And when I got bored with that, I'd simply tossed Tim aside like a toy that wasn't interesting anymore.

Tim had never been my frog. I was his. He'd tried to kiss me, but I hadn't let him.

I was the one who hopped away.

Two cards down. Ten to go.

Next up Leon from fifth grade. The first boy who ignored me.

The first one I chased after. My stomach tightened.

Oh Leon. With you it really began.



Chapter 3: The Unattainable

Next up Leon from fifth grade.

The first boy who ignored me. The first one I chased after. My stomach tightened. Oh Leon.

With you it really began.

I stood up and walked to my closet. Up at the very top, behind the winter coats, it still sat the old shoebox that had eventually become too small for all my wedding dreams. Today it had turned into a cardboard box. Wedding

02/22/2022 was written in ornate letters on it. Written with the same glitter pen I'd used back then for Leon. I opened the box. The smell of old paper and long-faded perfume rose up to meet me. There they all were invitation cards to weddings that had never happened.

Each with a different male name. Each in a different style, depending on how old I'd been... The one for Leon lay at the very bottom.

Glitter pen on pink cardstock, full of hope and ignorance. The box had been created in 2004, after

Leon had ignored me for the first time.

I'd run home, cried, and then decided: If I couldn't find any princes, at least I'd plan the perfect wedding. It had started with Leon's invitation card, which landed in the shoebox together with the other two as the first ones.

Then other things were added: torn-out pages from bridal magazines Mom had bought. Fabric samples for my dream dress.

A list of wedding songs, carefully written on graph paper. With each frog, the collection grew larger.

New invitation designs. Different color schemes. Various menu ideas—depending on what the current dream man probably liked to eat.

Only the wedding date always stayed the same: 02/22/2022.

I pulled out Leon's card and looked at it. The invitation card for Leon had become my first real masterpiece.

I'd written it with glitter pen and stuck little stars on it. I'd worked on it for hours because it had to be perfect. Perfect for the perfect boy.

Leon never got it. I never gave it to him.

I sat down on the bed and let the memories come back. Leon Kramer. Fifth grade, parallel class, as untouchable as a rockstar.

While all the other boys were still playing with Pokemon cards, Leon leaned coolly against the gym wall, pretending nothing in the world interested him. His hair fell casually into his forehead, and he wore designer clothes when the rest of us still had H&M stuff.

Leon was the first boy who didn't notice me. Of course I fell in love immediately. Next to him always stood his best friend Marco.

Marco was shorter than Leon, had freckles, and laughed too loudly at Leon's jokes. Marco was... nice. But nice was boring when Leon stood next to him.

Northside Comprehensive School, 2002. I was eleven and in the phase where I thought that being ignored was romantic. Leon was my first real heartbeat...

"He's so cool," I gushed to my best friend Jessi.

He's different from the others."

Different he actually was. While Tim had brought me apples, Leon didn't even notice when I stood right next to him.

"Just try it," Jessi encouraged me. "Just talk to him." So I gathered all my courage and went over to him.

"Hi Leon," I said in my sweetest voice.

He looked right through me as if I were air. "Leon?" I tried again. "What now?" he asked, annoyed, without looking at me.

"Nothing special," I stammered. "Just wanted to... say hi." He shrugged and walked away. Marco stayed behind. "Hi Emma," he said, turning red. "Nice shirt you're wearing." "Thanks," I mumbled without looking at him.

My gaze followed Leon, who had already disappeared around the corner.

At home I secretly googled "How do I get a boy to like me?" The answers all sounded so simple: "Just be yourself!"

But who was I? I didn't even know that myself.

I didn't even know that myself. I bought Just Seventeen magazine and studied every love quiz.

"Is he into you? 10 sure signs!"
I memorized flirting tips as if they were vocabulary.

Everyone else already had a boyfriend. Even quiet Marie from the neighboring class was going out with someone. Only I stood there alone, staring after Leon.

Maybe I was too fat? Too boring? Too average? That's when I started looking at myself critically in every mirror, in every shop window.

For months I'd tried to get Leon's attention. I positioned myself near him. I laughed extra loud at his jokes. I even bought the same designer brands.

Nothing. Marco, on the other hand, talked to me. Marco listened to me.

Marco helped me with math homework.

"Leon's an asshole," Jessi said at some point. "He treats you like shit." "He's not like that," I defended him. "He's just shy."

Leon was anything but shy. Leon knew exactly what he was doing.

But then something strange happened. In seventh grade I gave up. I stopped chasing after him. I ignored him, just as he had ignored me.

And suddenly he noticed me... "Hey Emma," he said one day after break. "Why don't you talk to me anymore?" "Why should I?" "I thought... we get along well?" Now I was the one who walked away.

From then on it was like a ping-pong game. When I gave him attention, he became cold again. When I withdrew, he came running.

It was as if we both had the same broken blueprint for love in our heads: Whoever wants less has the power.

The game went on until ninth grade. Then he changed schools. I was relieved and disappointed at the same time.

"Marco totally likes you," Jessi had said once when we were in eighth grade.

"Marco?" I'd laughed. "The boring one? He's totally uncool." "He's actually quite sweet," Jessi had mumbled. "He's all yours," I'd said generously. "I like Leon."

And that's what she apparently did. I set the old card aside and opened my laptop. I googled his name. Leon Kramer, business consultant in London.

His LinkedIn profile showed a man in an expensive suit, still the same dismissive eyes. Married to a woman who looked like an Instagram model. Of course.

Then, out of curiosity, I searched for Marco. Marco Weiss. Elementary school teacher in Liverpool. Married to... I froze.

The face in the photo looked familiar. Very familiar. It was Jessi. My best friend from school days.

I scrolled through Marco's Facebook profile.

There they were: wedding photos from 2015.

Marco in a suit, beaming with happiness. Jessi in a white dress, beautiful.

Under one photo it said: "Finally married our childhood sweetheart! It took so many years, but sometimes waiting is worth it."

That must have been over 10 years? That meant... I stared at the wedding photo.

Marco looked happy. Really happy. Jessi too. They had three kids, a dog, a house with a garden, and in every photo they beamed at each other as if they were still freshly in love.

Marco had never been my frog. He had been my overlooked prince. Really? But he had become Jessi's prince. And that was a good thing.

I wrote Leon an invitation anyway:

"Dear Leon, I don't know if you remember me. We were in parallel classes, and I was the girl who talked to you once.

You were very... busy. I'm getting married on 02.22.2022 and thought maybe you'd have a minute for a hello this time. If not—no problem. I'm used to it.

Emma Weber

P.S. I made an invitation card for you back then. You're getting it belatedly now."

Then I wrote a second email:

"Dear Marco,

Jessi never told me you guys got married. I'm so happy for you! I'm getting married on 02.22.2022. If you'd like: Feel free to come by. I'd love to hear how you found each other.

Emma

P.S. You were a sweetheart even in school. Jessi had good taste even back then."

Send.

Send.

Leon had been my first big lesson:
Someone who ignores you isn't mysterious—they're just not interested.
Marco was my second lesson:

Sometimes we overlook the prince because we're too busy chasing after the wrong frog.

Some princes are simply meant for a different princess.

The irony was perfect. While I'd wasted years chasing Leon, who never wanted me, Marco had liked me—but I'd never noticed him.

Instead, he'd become happy with my best friend. Maybe life was sometimes kinder than I thought.

Three cards down. Nine to go.

I placed Leon's old card with the other unsent dreams and reached for the next one:

A card with rockstar motifs and black lettering.

"Emma & Niklas's Wedding" was written on it. Niklas.

The guitarist. My first real love disaster.

Oh God. Niklas.



Chapter 4: The Guitarist

Niklas Weber. No relation, but that had fascinated me back then—we had the same last name, it had to be fate.

He played guitar in the school band "Dark Heart" and always wore black T-shirts with band names.

I didn't know but still thought were cool. His hair hung in his face, and when he played, he threw his head back like he was born on stage.

Niklas was my first great love. And my first big lesson in manipulation.

Southside Secondary School, 2005. I was fourteen and thought that deep feelings automatically meant deep love.

Niklas was seventeen and already knew how to wrap younger girls around his finger.

"Emma," he'd said after band practice, looking at me with his dark eyes. "Want to hear what I composed?" Of course I did.

I would have agreed even if he'd asked me to wash his socks.

The band practice room was small and smelled of dusty amps and stale smoke

A scent that seemed incredibly grown-up and forbidden back then.

Niklas sat down on a stool, picked up his guitar, and played the most beautiful chords I'd ever heard.

"The song is called Emma," he said quietly. "I wrote it for you."

My heart didn't just do somersaults—it held an entire Olympics. No one had ever written a song for me.

I was fourteen and felt like Juliet. I reached for the card with the rockstar motifs.

The writing was so gothically ornate you could barely read it. "Emma & Niklas's Wedding"—in black ink, surrounded by little guitars and hearts.

I still remembered my finger smudged with glitter ink afterward.

I googled his name. Niklas Weber, music teacher at a secondary school in Dortmund. His Facebook page was sparse—a few pictures with his guitar, but no family photos. Relationship status: "It's complicated."

Of course. The first weeks with Niklas were like a fairytale—if fairytales took place in practice rooms.

He wrote me poems on ICQ ("You're my dark angel"), sent me romantic texts, and constantly played me new songs. "You're not like the others," he always said.

"You understand me." Sure I understood him. I was fourteen and understood everything a seventeen-year-old guitarist explained to me.

We cuddled after band practice on the old sofa in the practice room. His hands were gentle, his kisses sweet.

When he touched me, my skin tingled like after sitting too long. I felt grown-up and loved... His hand on my arm made me get goosebumps. When he kissed my neck, all the little hairs stood up, and I got dizzy with longing.

I didn't even know my body could react like that.

But then something changed.

"Emma," he said one evening while we were kissing. His hand wandered under my T-shirt, and my skin got hot under his touch.

"I love you so much." "I love you too," I whispered.

"Then prove it," he murmured and tried to open my bra clasp.

There was that tingling again—but different this time.

Not the nice goosebumps, but something cold in my stomach. "Not here," I said, holding his hand tight.

"Why not?" He suddenly sounded impatient. "We're together, aren't we?" "I'm not ready yet."

He sighed and let go of me. The warmth in my body disappeared immediately.

"When then?" "I don't know. Later. When it's perfect."

Niklas went quiet. The romantic mood was gone, as if someone had unplugged the amplifiers.

That became the pattern. He was sweet and attentive until I stopped his hands.

Then he became cold like the sofa in the practice room.

"My ex wasn't so uptight," he said casually one day.

"You had an ex?" That was new for me.
And painful.

"Sure. Sandra from twelfth grade. I was
with her for a while too."

The stab in my heart was so sharp I
involuntarily held my breath.

"Why did you break up?" "She moved
away. But we had a real relationship, you
know? An adult relationship."

I knew what he meant. And I suddenly
felt like a little girl in Mom's too-big
shoes.

Thoughts whirled uncontrollably through
my head. "All my friends already have,"
Melanie had also said when we were
leafing through Just Seventeen
magazine. "It's totally normal."

"Lisa said it only hurts briefly," Jana had
added. "Afterward it's really nice."

"You're just making a fuss," Melanie had
laughed. "Poor Niklas."

"Do you love me?" Niklas asked a few
days later while we were kissing.

His hands became more insistent, and my
heart pounded—but not with excitement.

"Yes, of course."

"Then show me. For real."

His hand slid over my back, and I felt my muscles tense. I tried to push his hands away, but they kept coming back.

"Niklas, please."

"What's wrong with you?" He sounded annoyed.

"I thought you loved me." "I do." "But you don't trust me."

"I do, but..." My voice had become very thin.

"All the other couples in our grade do this. Just not us. That's not normal."

His eyes were no longer gentle, but cold.

"Maybe you're just not ready for something real."

That hurt. More than anything else. But there was something in me—a small, defiant voice that rose above the noise of all the others: "This doesn't feel right."

"It should feel different. Better. Safer."

"If you really love me," he'd said, "you'll do this for me."

"And if you really love me," I'd answered—surprised by my own clarity—"you won't pressure me."

"Then you're not ready for a relationship either," Niklas had answered and left.

Three days later he was with Sandra. The supposed ex who had supposedly moved away. Turned out: She'd only switched to the parallel class.

I cried for three weeks straight. Not just in bed at night, but also at school, in the bathroom, while brushing my teeth.

My eyes were so swollen that Mom asked if I had an allergy.

The worst part wasn't the heartbreak—the worst part was the self-doubt.

I saw them together in the schoolyard.

Sandra laughed at his jokes, Sandra leaned on his shoulder. Sandra did all the things I hadn't done.

"Maybe you really were too prudish," a nasty voice whispered in my head.

"Maybe if you had... he'd still be here."
"Everyone else does it too," another voice said. "You're the only one making such a fuss."

I barely ate, slept poorly, and secretly listened to his band CD just to torture myself.

The "Emma" song hurt every time, but I couldn't stop listening to it.

"No," a third voice in me said eventually. "You were brave. You listened to yourself. You did the right thing."

It took months for that third voice to become louder than the other two.

I learned the truth about the song from Jessica at a girls' night three months later.

"Oh, 'Emma,'" she'd laughed. "It was called 'Jessica' for me. And 'Marie' for Marie.

Niklas just swapped out the names." The betrayal hurt. But not as much as expected.

Somehow I was relieved. So it had never been about me. It had been about his ego.

"And you know what?" Jessica had continued. "Sandra said he was the same way with her. Constantly pressuring. She only gave in because she was afraid of losing him."

That's when I knew: I'd made the right decision.

I wrote an invitation anyway:

"Dear Niklas,

Do you still remember 'our' song? By the way, you also played it for Jessica and Marie—I found out later. Pretty creative, just swapping out the names. I'm getting married on 02.22.2022. This time everything will be real—no fake feelings, no manipulation. If you feel like honest encounters: You're invited.

Emma

P.S. I hope your female students learn early that 'No' is a complete sentence. Some teachers need that as a reminder."

Send.

Niklas had taught me the most important lesson of my life: Real love doesn't give ultimatums.

Real love respects boundaries without testing them.

He'd tried to pit my love for him against my love for myself. Fortunately, my self-love had won back then—even though it had spoken very quietly and it took me months to trust it.

The longing for the "perfect first time" had remained.

I would fulfill that a year later on the beach in Lloret de Mar—with someone who had waited until my whole body said yes, not just my head.

Four cards down. Eight to go.

The next card was white with sunscreen stains. Otherwise—empty. First big freedom?

Oh yes. The graduation chaos. Lloret de Mar. And Carlos, the Spanish boy who had shown me that desire and love could go hand in hand—even if it was only for a week.

My smile grew warm. That was a beautiful memory.



Chapter 5: The Unforgettable

Even though I would never write him a wedding invitation, even though

I knew I'd never find him again—or maybe precisely because of that—this week with Carlos was unforgettable.

Only the empty card lay in my wedding box for him. No carefully drawn hearts, no ornate letters, no dreams of white dresses.

With Carlos, for the first time, I hadn't thought about marriage, only about the here and now. Lloret de Mar, 2007.

Graduation trip, 16 years old, and finally free from Niklas's shadow. My classmates drank their way through the hotel bar while I walked along the beach, breathing in the salt-heavy air.

"¿Hablas español?"

A warm voice behind me. I turned around. A boy, maybe 17, stood there with a bucket full of shells.

His hands were rough and chapped, his arms deeply tanned. He smiled shyly.

"Un poquito," I said, holding my thumb and index finger together.

"Perfecto" His smile grew wider.

"I'm Carlos."

"Emma."

"Emma." He spoke my name as if it were a poem. "¿Quieres ver algo especial?"

Carlos led me to a hidden cove only the locals knew about. The sand was softer there, the water a deeper turquoise, and the tourists far away.

"My father's a fisherman," he said in his charming English-Spanish mix. "I... cómo se dice... help him. But I dream of..." He pointed to the sea. "Estudiar. Biología marina. In Barcelona."

"You want to study?"

"Sí. Research dolphins. Understand the sea." His eyes lit up. "But mi familia... they need me."

I sat down next to him in the warm sand. "Tell me about the dolphins."

We talked for hours.

He in Spanish, I in English, and we understood each other perfectly despite our language mistakes.

"En Inglaterra," he said, "life is... predictable?"

"Predictable," I translated. "Yes. Very predictable."

"Here too. Boat, nets, fish, sleep. Repeat." He sighed. "But with you... it's... diferente."

I spent the next few days not with my class, but with Carlos. He showed me the real Spain—not the tourist beaches, but the small taverns where his aunt cooked.

Where the fishermen repaired their nets in the morning and told their stories in the evening.

"Your hands," I said one evening as we lay on the beach counting stars.
"¿Qué pasa with my hands?"

"They're so... rough." I touched his palms, felt the calluses from the fishing nets. "But still gentle."

He blushed. "Las redes... they make hands hard."

"But your heart is soft," I whispered.

"Emma..." His voice was hoarse.

On the fourth evening we kissed.

Unlike with Niklas, there was no pressure, no manipulation, only longing and respect.

Carlos's hands trembled as he touched my face.

"¿Está bien?" he asked quietly.

"Sí," I whispered. "Está muy bien."

His kisses tasted like salt water and freedom. When his rough hands glided over my arms, I got goosebumps—but the good kind of goosebumps.

"Emma," he murmured between kisses.

"Eres... hermosa."

"You too," I said and meant it.

On the sixth evening we went further.

Carlos spread his jacket on the warm sand, and we lay under the starry sky.

"¿Te gusta así?" he asked gently as his hand stroked over my stomach.

"Sí," I breathed.

His touches were hesitant, respectful.

When I flinched briefly—not from pain, but from nervousness—he immediately pulled his hand back.

"No, está bien," I said quickly and guided his hand back.

"Pero... más despacio."

"¿Más despacio?" He smiled understandingly.

"Slower."

"Exactly."

For the first time in my life I communicated what I wanted. And for the first time someone listened.

"¿Te gusta esto?" he asked as his fingers gently wandered over my skin.

"Sí, me gusta mucho."

"¿Y esto?"

"Hmm... un poco más... like this."
He learned quickly.

And I learned that honesty was sexy. That I was allowed to say what felt good and what didn't.

When for the first time in my life I was truly ready, I guided his hand between my legs. His eyes widened

¿Estás segura?"

"Muy segura."

His rough, fisherman's hands were endlessly tender. As if I were made of glass. When I paused briefly, he waited. When I guided him, he followed. When I whispered "sí," he smiled like the sunrise.

"Emma," he breathed as we made love.

"Eres perfecta."

And in that moment, under the Spanish stars, with the ocean murmuring its own soundtrack and Carlos's honest eyes looking at me as if I were a miracle—in that moment I really was.

On the eighth day I had to leave. Carlos stood at the harbor pier and waved until the bus was out of sight.

"¿Me escribirás?" he'd asked. Will you write to me?

"No sé cómo," I'd answered. I don't know how.

He'd smiled. "Está bien. Tenemos esta semana."

We have this week. Carlos was right. We'd had that one perfect week.

A week in which I'd learned that love doesn't have to hurt. That men can ask instead of take. That communication is the best proof of love.

I googled his name sometimes over the years. Carlos Martinez, fisherman in Lloret de Mar. But there were hundreds of Carlos Martinez in Spain. I never found him again.

That was okay. Carlos wasn't my lost prince—he was my found self-confidence. He'd shown me that I mattered. That my wishes counted. That I was allowed to say yes—and no.

Five cards down. Seven to go.

I needed a moment to feel Carlos's warmth linger.

After Niklas's cold manipulation and Leon's indifference, Carlos had given me back trust in love.

I took a deep breath and carefully placed the empty card back in the box. Carlos had shown me what I needed to look for: respect and honesty.

With this newfound clarity, I was ready to try again.

I reached for the next card. This one was handwritten on cream-colored paper.

"Emma & Jonas's Wedding" in neat handwriting.

Oh yes. Jonas. The mama's boy.

The time when I thought a family-oriented man would be exactly right after all those egoists.

Spoiler: Sometimes family can be too much of a good thing.



Chapter 6: The One Who Never Took Off His Crown

There are men who are raised by their mothers. And there are men who never stop being raised.

Jonas belonged to the second category.

The card was flawless, written on cream-colored paper. "Emma & Jonas's Wedding" in neat handwriting—his mother had probably helped with the writing.

I was 17, shortly before graduating high school, and thought I needed a man who valued family. After all those superficial schoolyard romances,

I wanted someone grounded, reliable, family-oriented.

Jonas was definitely family-oriented. I googled his name. Jonas Schneider—he now worked as a claims adjuster at an insurance company.

His LinkedIn profile showed him at various company events, always neat, always smiling.

His Facebook page was a family album: birthdays, holidays, vacations—all with Mom.

Status: "Married." To whom was clear. His mother.

The new woman was just the understudy.

We met at the gym. I was struggling with a machine, he helped me.

"You're doing it wrong," he said kindly. "My mother's a physiotherapist. She always explains to me how to train correctly."

First minute, first mother reference.

"You like to help, don't you?" I asked. "My mother always says: A gentleman helps wherever he can."

Second minute, second mother reference.

Jonas was 20, worked at an insurance company, and still lived at home.

"Just one more year," he said. "I'm currently saving for my own apartment. Mom thinks that's sensible."

"And what do you think?"

"I do too. Why pay rent when you have a nice home?"

The first date was... supervised.

Jonas picked me up—in Mom's car.

She lent me her Mercedes," he said proudly. "She already likes you."

"She doesn't even know me yet."

"I told her about you. She says you sound nice."

"What did you tell her?"

"That you're in high school, look presentable, and come from a good family."

Apparently, I was a résumé with legs. He'd chosen the restaurant—no,

Mom had recommended it. "She knows the owner," Jonas explained. "Clean kitchen, fair prices."

While we ate, his phone rang. Three times.

"Excuse me," he said on the third call.

"That's Mom. She's worried."

"About what?"

"About everything. She's very caring."

He answered.

"Yes, Mom. Yes, we arrived. Yes, the restaurant's nice. No, we're not drinking alcohol, I still have to drive. Yes, I'll be careful. See you later."

"Sorry," he said. "She worries."

"About a 20-year-old man?"

"She raised me alone. We're very close."

After a month I met Mom. That wasn't a date—that was a job interview.

"Jonas has told me so much about you," Gisela Schneider said as she served coffee.

"So you're in high school?"

"I'm in my senior year."

"I see. And what do you want to do professionally later?"

"Study, I think?"

"I see." Her smile grew cooler. "Jonas, thank God, has a secure position."

"That's nice for him."

"A woman needs security. That's what I always tell Jonas."

Jonas nodded eagerly. "Mom's right. Security is important."

"And what plans do you have for the future?" Gisela continued.

"I... want to graduate first?"

"Children?"

"Maybe someday."

"Jonas loves children. He was very caring even as a little boy."

She ruffled his hair. He was 20.

The next months were like a three-person shared apartment. Except the third roommate didn't live with us.

Jonas called Gisela every morning.

"Good morning, Mom. Yes, I'm going to work. Yes, I took my jacket."

Every noon: "Hi Mom. Yes, the morning went well. Yes, I'm eating lunch soon."

Every evening: "Hi Mom. Yes, I got home safely. Yes, I'm going to bed early."

"Don't you find that a bit... much?"

I asked him after six weeks.

"What?"

"The calls. She's your mother, not your manager."

"She worries. Since Dad died, I'm all she has."

"But you also have your own life."

"She's part of my life."

"And me?"

"You too, of course."

"Where do I rank?"

Jonas thought. "At... second?"

"After your mother?"

"She was there first."

In his world, chronology defined affection.

"Jonas," I said after three months, "can we go away for a weekend?"

Just the two of us?"

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere nice."

"I'll ask Mom if she has an idea."

"No! I want YOU to have an idea."

"But Mom knows about vacation spots."

"Then just google it!"

"Mom googles better."

I stared at him. "Jonas, you're 20. You can decide for yourself where we go."

"But why should I do it alone when Mom can help me?"

"Because it's OUR vacation!"

"She's not coming along."

"But she's planning it!"

"She's just helping."

"She's taking over!"

"You're being mean to her."

"I'm not being mean! I just want to go away alone with my boyfriend!"

"You're jealous of my mother."

"Yes! I am!"

"That's sick."

"No, Jonas. Sick is when a 20-year-old man calls his mother three times a day!"
"She's alone!"

"Then she should find friends!"

"You don't understand. You always had both parents."

"My parents are divorced too!"

"But your mother isn't as lonely as mine."

Gisela's loneliness became the emotional whip Jonas used to strike me whenever I wanted to set boundaries.

During the first big fight, he didn't call me—he called Mom.

"My mother thinks you're too demanding," he said the next day.

"Your mother only knows your version of the story."

"I tell her everything."

"EVERYTHING?"

"Well, almost everything. She's my best friend."

"I thought I was your girlfriend."

"You are my girlfriend. She's my BEST friend."

After five months I realized: I wasn't dating Jonas. I was dating Jonas and his mother. And in that relationship, I was always the third wheel.

The final break came at Easter. Gisela hadn't invited me to the family dinner. "That's family time," Jonas said.

"I thought I was part of the family."

"You are. But not the immediate family."

"Then what am I?"

"You're... my girlfriend."

"After five months I'm still just the girlfriend?"

"What do you want to be?"

"Part of your life!"

"You are."

"No! I'm a hobby! Mom is your life!"

"She raised me!"

"And now she needs to let you go!"

"That would hurt her."

"And what about me?"

"You're strong. Mom is fragile."

"Aren't I fragile too?"

"Not like her."

I wrote him a final message:

"Dear Jonas,

I'm getting married on 02.22.2022. If you can find time between Mom's appointments: You're invited. Feel free to bring her—she comes everywhere anyway.

Emma

P.S. I hope you eventually find a woman who wants a three-way relationship. Good luck with that."

Send.

His response came—naturally after consulting with Mom:

"Dear Emma,

Mom and I wish you all the best for your wedding. We're sorry it didn't work out between us, but sometimes it just doesn't fit. Mom says you were certainly a nice girlfriend, but not mature enough yet for a serious relationship. I hope that changes someday.

Best regards,

Jonas (and Mom)"

Even the farewell letter came from the family conference.

Jonas had taught me: A man who's never emotionally let go of his mother can't love a partner—he can only look for a second mom.

True partnership means both people are adults who freely choose each other.

The most important realization: I didn't want a man who was still being taken care of by Mom. I wanted a man who wanted to take care of me—emotionally, not financially.

Six cards down. Six to go.

The experience with Jonas would help me often in the coming university years. I reached for the next card.

This one was in neon colors and smelled of cheap disco. "Emma & ..."

I hesitated. The name was covered with correction fluid and then written over.

Then covered again.

Oh yes. The university chaos. The time when I thought I was grown up just because I'd moved away from home.

My smile became wistful.

The next phase would be less romantic.



Chapter 7: The Intellectual

Some frogs turn into princes. Some stay frogs. And some... turn into toads

.

Daniel was a backward step in evolution.

The card was a masterpiece of confusion.

"Emma & Daniel's Wedding" it said, then "Daniel" was covered with correction fluid and "David" written over it, then "David" was covered again and "Daniel" returned.

The whole thing looked like a proofreader having a nervous breakdown.

I still remembered that phase exactly.

University years, first apartment, and the confusion about whether I should marry the intellectual or his sexy roommate. Or both. Or neither.

After Jonas and his mother complex, I wanted a man who was at least mentally independent.

University of Cambridge, 2010. I was 19 and thought being an adult meant having complicated relationships. Daniel was 22 and proof that you can be intelligent without being wise.

"Emma, have you read Nietzsche?" was his first sentence to me in the university library.

"Um... no?"

"That explains a lot." He'd smiled pityingly. "Without Nietzsche you can't understand the postmodern condition."

I had no idea what a postmodern condition was, but I nodded anyway.

Daniel looked like a philosopher—dark glasses, wrinkled shirts, and that way of talking as if every sentence were a gift to humanity.

I googled his name. Dr. Daniel Hoffmann. No, wait—Daniel Hoffmann, assistant manager at Waterstones. His dissertation had apparently remained as unfinished as our relationship.

The first months with Daniel were like a crash course in cultural snobbery. He took me to art galleries where I learned that I had "no taste."

"Do you see the deconstruction of bourgeois aesthetics in this work?" he asked in front of a painting that looked like someone had spat paint at the wall.

"Um... yes?"

"No, Emma. You don't see it. You're only looking superficially."

That was Daniel's favorite word: superficial. My favorite books were superficial. My music was superficial. My thoughts were superficial. Sometimes I wondered if I myself was just a superficial person.

"Read this," he said, handing me Kant.

"Then we can discuss on equal footing." read Kant. I didn't understand a word, but I read him.

Still, for the first time I felt intellectually challenged.

Daniel knew answers to questions I didn't even know existed.

He spoke three languages, had bookshelves up to the ceiling, and could lecture for hours about the meaning of a single sentence.

The only problem was: He couldn't kiss.

Technically, yes. But his kisses felt like fulfilling an obligation.

As if he were going through his shopping list while doing it.

"Daniel," I said after three months, "we... we never sleep together."

"Sex is a biological function," he answered without looking up from his book. "True intimacy arises through intellectual connection."

"But I also want you... physically."

"That's very primitive of you."

Primitive. Another favorite word.

After six months I was so frustrated that I started looking at other guys.

Especially David, Daniel's flatmate. David studied sports, not philosophy. David talked about football, not Foucault. David had muscles and laughed at my jokes and looked at me as if I were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"You're spending a lot of time with David," Daniel observed one day.

"He's nice."

"Nice is the adjective for people without interesting qualities."

"Maybe I sometimes need something uninteresting."

"Maybe I sometimes need something uninteresting."

Daniel closed his book. For him, that was like a tantrum.

"I thought you were different, Emma. But you're like all other women. Superficial."
"And you're like all other pseudo-intellectuals. Arrogant."

That was our first real fight. And our last.

But that wasn't the end of the story.

After Daniel came David.

For two wonderful weeks. David was everything Daniel wasn't: warm, spontaneous, and very, very physically interested.

The only problem was: After sex, we had nothing to say to each other.

"So what do you read?" David asked after our third date.

"Right now Sartre."

"Who?"

"Um... a French philosopher."

"Cool. I'm reading German " Kicker" right now."

That was the moment I realized: I needed both.

Head AND body. Mind AND passion.

Daniel had given me the mind, but ignored my heart and body. David had made my body happy, but bored my brain.

After David came three more. Marcus, the sports student. Stefan, the aspiring lawyer. Tom, whose profession I still don't know to this day because we never talked.

They all filled different holes in my life. None filled them all.

And Daniel? He watched from the sidelines and commented on every one of my "superficial" decisions.

"You're seeking fulfillment in the wrong places," he said when I told him about Marcus.

"And where should I seek it?"

"Within yourself. Through intellectual development."

"What about physical fulfillment?"

"That's overrated."

"For you maybe."

"You'll learn."

Still, I wrote him an invitation:

"Dear Daniel,

I'm getting married on 02.22.2022. In case you're wondering: Yes, I've read Nietzsche in the meantime. And you know what? He was right—sometimes you have to be superficial to be profoundly happy. By the way, some people read Rosamunde Pilcher and can still have intelligent conversations. Revolutionary, right?

Emma

P.S. I hope your dissertation is going better than our relationship."

His response came promptly:

"Dear Emma,

I congratulate you on this... conventional step. Hopefully you'll find in marriage the fulfillment that intellectual stimulation apparently couldn't give you. The irony of bourgeois marriage as an escape from...

"existential emptiness is quite remarkable.

Daniel

P.S. My dissertation on 'Postmodern Deconstruction in Contemporary Literature' will be published soon."

I laughed out loud. Some people never change.

Daniel was still the same arrogant prig who confused intimacy with intelligence and considered warmth a weakness.

Daniel had taught me an important lesson:

A partner must fulfill you holistically—intellectually AND emotionally AND physically. It's not superficial to need all three levels. It's human.

He'd also shown me that it's completely okay to know what you want—and what you don't want.

Seven cards down. Five to go.

The next card was professionally printed and smelled of expensive perfume.

"Emma & Sebastian's Wedding" was written in elegant script.

Oh yes. The colleague. The time when I thought workplace romance was a good idea.



Sebastian and Emma
02/22/2022

Chapter 8: The Colleague

The frog who became a hamster in a hamster wheel that looks like a career ladder from the inside.

Sebastian was my first proof that some people pretend to climb upward while they're actually just running very fast in place. And doing it in an expensive tailored suit.

The card was professionally printed—of course. "Emma & Sebastian's Wedding" in elegant Copperplate script on cream-colored card stock. Even with invitation cards, Sebastian was an upgrade type.

"Creative Solutions" advertising agency, 2014.

I was 23, fresh out of university, and thought a job in advertising would be glamorous. Sebastian was 28, Account Director, and looked like he'd fallen out of a men's magazine.

"You're the new Junior Account Manager?" he'd asked, smiling as if he'd just had Christmas and his birthday on the same day.

"Yes, Emma Weber."

"Sebastian Richter. Welcome to the team." His handshake lasted three seconds too long.

"If you have any questions—my office is always open."

His office wasn't just open, it was equipped with everything successful people supposedly needed: designer furniture, an espresso machine, and a photo of himself running a marathon.

I googled his name. Sebastian Richter, Senior Director at "Premium Brand Solutions"—a title that sounded like a lot and meant very little.

His LinkedIn profile was a fireworks display of buzzwords: "Thought Leader," "Growth Hacker," "Synergy Maximizer." The first weeks at "Creative Solutions" were exciting. I'd finally arrived in the real working world.

Sebastian introduced me to the secrets of account management.

"The most important thing," he said while we drank our latte macchiatos at Starbucks, "is that you learn who the important people are."

"And who are the important people?"

"Me, for example." He grinned.

"But don't worry, I'll take care of you."

He did.

Sebastian invited me to client meetings, took me to industry events, and explained the unwritten laws of the advertising world.

"Success is 20% skill and 80% networking," he said as we walked through the office corridors.

"The best ideas won't get you anywhere if the right people don't hear them."

"And who are the right people?"

"Me again." His grin grew wider.

After two months, he asked if I'd like to have dinner. Not business. Private.

"I like intelligent women," he said as we sat in an expensive restaurant and he ordered the wine for both of us.

"Most women in the industry are... well, not particularly deep."

"Thanks?" I said uncertainly.

"That was a compliment. You're different, Emma. You have potential."

"Potential for what?"

"For everything. Professionally. Personally."

His hand moved across the table to mine. "We could be a good team. Privately and professionally."

That was the beginning of a very confusing time. Sebastian was charming, successful, and interested in me. At the same time, he was my supervisor, my mentor, and my... what exactly?

"We should keep this discreet," he said after we kissed for the first time. "Office romance is always tricky."

That made sense to me. So we met secretly after work, wrote each other private emails, and pretended in the office that we were just colleagues.

Sebastian had rules for everything—even for sex. First he showered. Then I had to shower. Then he spread a towel on the bed—always the same one, always perfectly smooth.

"You need to lie exactly here," he said, pointing to the middle of the towel. "Otherwise the bedding gets dirty."

While we made love, I sometimes thought of Carlos. Of his rough hands that trembled before they touched me. Of the way he'd asked "¿Te gusta?" Of the warm sand beneath us.

Sebastian never asked if I liked it. He didn't listen to my body. He didn't listen to my words. He only listened to himself—and the stopwatch in his head.

For him, sex was an appointment between business dinners and the gym. Efficient, goal-oriented, done.

He took what he needed. And gave back what he thought he had to give—no more, no less. As if pleasure were a spreadsheet that needed to be balanced.

"Don't shift," he said when the towel moved. "Everything gets wet that way."

When he was finished—and he was always finished first—he immediately jumped into the bathroom.

Showered off the sweat, brushed his teeth, used mouthwash. As if he had to wash away the traces of our closeness.

"You can shower too," he'd say then, handing me a fresh towel. "The small one. I need the big one tomorrow morning."

Sometimes I lay awake afterward and wondered: Was this love? Or just hygiene?

The only problem was: Sebastian didn't treat me like a colleague. He treated me like his personal assistant.

"Emma, could you finish the presentation for Morrison & Co?" he said one morning. "I have meetings all day."

"But that's your account."

"Sweetheart, we're a team. Teams help each other."

So I did his presentation. And his cost calculation. And his client report.

A week later Sebastian sat in a meeting with the client and presented my work.

"Brilliant as always, Sebastian," the client said. "You really have a knack for creative solutions."

"Thanks," Sebastian said, beaming. "I always give my all for my clients."

I sat beside him and said nothing.

"Wasn't that a bit... unfair?" I asked him later.

"What do you mean?"

"You got all the credit for my work."

Sebastian sighed. "Emma, that's how business works. The Account Director bears the responsibility and gets the credit. That's completely normal."

"But I did all the work."

"You're still learning. See it as an investment in your future."

"What future?"

"Our future. Together we can achieve anything."

That became his mantra: "Together we can achieve anything."

Except "together" meant I did the work and he got the recognition.

After four months my big chance came. A new client, an innovative campaign, and this time it was my project.

"I trust you," Sebastian said. "Time to show what you can do."

I worked for weeks on the campaign. Overtime, weekends, everything.

The idea was brilliant—even I was proud of it.

One day before the presentation, Sebastian called me into his office.

"Emma, we need to talk."

"What's wrong?"

"I think it would be better if I took over the presentation."

"Excuse me?"

"You're still inexperienced. The client is important. We can't afford any mistakes."

"That's MY campaign!"

"Your campaign, my responsibility. That's how it works here."

"But..."

"Emma." His voice turned cold.

"I thought you understood how business works. Maybe you're not as mature as I thought."

The next day Sebastian presented my campaign.

The client was thrilled.

Sebastian got a promotion.

I got a raise of 50 pounds.

"Sweetheart," Sebastian said later, "you should be grateful to me. Through me you're learning how success works."

"Through you I'm learning how theft works."

"That's pretty harsh."

"Is it? Then stop stealing my work."

"I'm not stealing. I'm optimising. You think too small, Emma. You only see your little idea. I see the big picture."

"The big picture where you're the hero?"

"The big picture where we're successful together."

"We? Or you?"

Sebastian fell silent. Then he smiled his salesman's smile.

"You know what? Maybe we should take a break. Professionally and personally. You seem stressed."

Three days later I saw him in the office kitchen with Julia, the new intern. He was just explaining to her how important networking was. His hand rested on her shoulder.

"Success is 20% ability and 80% networking," I heard him say.

Julia giggled. "And who are the important people?"

"Me, for example."

I still wrote him an invitation:

"Dear Sebastian,

I'm getting married on 02/22/2022—and this time I'll truly be the star of the show, not just the invisible producer. If you'd like to see how real teamwork functions: You're invited. Feel free to bring your current 'mentoring project.'

Emma

P.S. Thanks for teaching me the difference between a career ladder and a hamster wheel. From the inside they really do look bloody similar."

Send.

Sebastian had taught me an important life lesson: love and career are separate realms.

A partner should celebrate your success, not steal it. And someone who keeps you small professionally doesn't love you—they only love their own superiority.

He'd also shown me that some people can talk so eloquently about teamwork that you almost forget they're exploiting you.

Nine cards. Four to go.

The next card was digitally printed and smelled of... nothing. "Wedding of Emma and Alexander" in modern fonts, perfectly aligned.

Oh yes. The Tinder era.

The time when I thought love was just a swipe away.

Spoiler: It wasn't.



Chapter 9: The Swipe Prince

You don't kiss frogs anymore. You swipe them.

That was the moment I realised the fairytales of my childhood were outdated. Prince Charming no longer rode up on a white horse—he had a perfect Tinder profile and was 2.3 kilometres away.

The card was digitally printed and smelled of... nothing.

"Wedding of Emma and Alexander" in clean, modern fonts, perfectly aligned.

Even my wedding dreams had by now been captured by the digital era.

2017 I was 26, had just quit my job at the agency (thanks, Sebastian!) and now worked as a content manager at a start-up.

Everyone said: "Try dating apps!"

So I downloaded Tinder and thought: How hard can it be?

Very hard, as it turned out.

I pulled Alexander's card from the box and with it came the memories—or rather: the screenshots. Because that was all that remained of Alexander.

Six perfect profile photos: six-pack on the beach, suit in the office, casual with golden retriever, hiking, at a restaurant and an artistic black-and-white portrait.

His bio was a masterpiece of self-marketing.

I opened my phone and scrolled through the old chat history. It was all still there, every message, every timestamp, every false hope.

08:12 — Tinder

Alexander: Good morning, beautiful 🥰

Alexander: Hard to believe this app ever does anything right.

08:13 — Tinder

Me: Good morning. Bold opener.

08:14 — Tinder

Alexander: Bold is my middle name.

Dinner tonight?

08:15 — Tinder

Me: Tonight is fast.

Alexander: Life is short. Italian place,

7:30 p.m. is booked.

Me: Already booked?

Alexander: Manifestation. You'll love it



08:17 — Tinder

Me: ...okay.

I still remembered that moment precisely. I'd thought: Wow, so confident. So decisive. Today I'd say: Too smooth. Too practised.

19:27 — Messages

Alexander: Here. Corner table.

[Image: Table, two wine glasses]

19:32 — Messages

Me: Coming.

21:03 — Messages

Alexander: Was perfect. You're different.

21:05 — Messages

Me: From who?

Alexander: From the noise. Sleep well, star 🌟

The first date actually had been lovely. He was charming, attentive, asked the right questions. I felt seen. What I didn't know: I was one of many who felt seen.

07:31 — Instagram Stories

@alex.digital: Perfect start to the day 🍷

#grind #gratitude

[Seen by: Emma 07:35]

07:33 — Messages

Alexander: Can't stop thinking about yesterday.

07:40 — Messages

Me: Me too.

07:42 — Messages

Alexander: Playlist for you.

[Spotify link: "New Adventure"]

Alexander: Picked every song for us. I clicked the link. The playlist was perfect. Indie rock, a bit of melancholy, exactly my taste. I listened to it on my way to work and thought: Maybe he's different.

12:18 — Messages

Alexander: Lunch?

12:20 — Messages

Me: Right now?

Alexander: Life is what happens while you're planning 😊

12:22 — Messages

Me: Okay. Where?

Alexander: Surprise. Send me your location.

He picked me up. With coffee.

"Thought you needed a boost," he said and handed me the cup. Oat milk latte, exactly how I liked it.

Had I told him that? I think so.

We ate sushi. He ordered for both of us.
"Trust me," he said. And I did.

14:02 — Messages

Alexander: Thanks for today. You make my day better.

14:05 — Messages

Me: You make mine better too.

14:07 — Messages

Alexander: When will I see you again?

14:09 — Messages

Me: When do you want to?

Alexander: Right now. But I have to work.
Tomorrow?

The next few days were a whirlwind.

Messages all day. Good morning texts at 07:00. Goodnight voice notes at 23:00. He sent me photos of his daily life: coffee at his desk, sunset from the balcony, a book he was reading ("Thought of you at this passage").

I secretly googled: "How do I know if he's serious?"

The articles said: "If he texts every day, he's interested." Alexander texted. So he was interested. Right?

18:45 — Messages (One week later)

Alexander: Come over tonight. I'll cook for you 🤗

18:48 — Messages

Me: You cook?

Alexander: Not just a pretty face 😊

18:50 — Messages

Me: Okay. What's for dinner?

Alexander: Let yourself be surprised. 8 p.m.?

18:52 — Messages

Me: Perfect.

His flat looked like something out of an interior magazine. Grey, white, minimalist. No personal photos. No clutter. On the dining table stood candles, wine, and two plates with pasta.

"This looks great," I said.

"Carbonara. Family recipe," he said, pouring wine.

It tasted... familiar. Very familiar. Like the Italian restaurant three streets away. "Where's the kitchen?"

I asked. "Through the hallway on the left. Why?"

"Just curious. I'll get us some water."

In the bin were three Deliveroo boxes.

"La Tavola - Pasta Carbonara". On the counter: the receipt. £24.90. Ordered at 19:35.

I came back. He smiled.

"How is it?"

"Just like an Italian restaurant," I said.

"Thanks. Took me ages to perfect." He winked.

I said nothing. Maybe he'd ordered it because he didn't have time? Maybe that was okay? Maybe I was being too critical?

But then why did he lie?

"Stay longer," he said after dinner and pulled me closer. His hands were warm, his kisses slow. He took his time—or at least I thought so.

He led me into the bedroom. Everything was perfectly staged: dimmed lights, clean sheets, music in the background.

He kissed my neck, my shoulders, my hips. His hands glided over my skin as if reading a map he knew by heart.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured.

I believed him.

His touches were gentle, almost tender. He took his time exploring every inch.

I relaxed, let myself go. This was different from Sebastian. This felt real.

Then, as it continued, something changed. His movements became faster, more mechanical. He no longer asked. He took. His hands held me tight, but not tenderly—controlling.

"Wait, slower," I whispered.

"Hmm?" He murmured something but didn't listen.

I tried to slow his rhythm, but he was already elsewhere. In his own head. His breathing became faster, his eyes closed. I was no longer there—just my body, ready for use.

Two minutes later it was over. He rolled to the side, reached for his phone on the bedside table.

"That was good," he said without looking at me.

I lay there, the duvet half over me. "For whom?" I wanted to ask. I said nothing.

He scrolled through Instagram. The screen lit his face blue. Swipe. Swipe. Swipe.

"I should go," I said after a while.
"You don't have to. You can stay too."
But he didn't look at me. His thumb kept moving. Like. Swipe. Like.

I got dressed. He didn't walk me to the door.

"Text me when you get home," he called from the bedroom.

I didn't text.

14:32 — Messages (Next day)

Me: Home safe. Thanks for yesterday.
Delivered 14:32

23:15 — Messages

Delivered

12:00 — Messages (Two days later)

Me: Everything okay with you?
Read 12:02

Those moments when the message switched to "Read" but no reply came were like little pinpricks.

I stared at the screen. Typed messages, deleted them again.

Have I done something wrong?"
Deleted.

"Why aren't you replying?"
Deleted.

"Can we talk?"
Deleted.

In the end I sent nothing. I waited.

00:12 — Instagram (Three days later)
@alex.digital: With this wonderful woman
🥰 #blessed
[Photo: Blonde, wine, corner table]
[Seen by: Emma 00:14]

My stomach cramped. I stared at the photo. The blonde sat at a corner table. In the restaurant where we'd been. With the same wine glasses. The same filter. The same caption structure.

I scrolled through his older posts.

There we were. "Dinner with a special woman 🥰" - two weeks ago. Before that: a redhead. "Those eyes 🥰" Before that: a brunette. "So grateful 🙏"

I was number 247. Another line in his timeline.

00:14 — Messages (Draft, not sent)
Me: Looks like a great "meeting".
I deleted the draft. Wrote again:

00:15 — Messages

Me: Nice photo. Same location as ours, wasn't it?

Alexander is typing...

The dots disappeared.

08:02 — Messages (Next morning)

Alexander: Hey! Sorry, been crazy busy. Slammed at work 😊

Alexander: Thinking of you 🥰

08:05 — Messages

Me: When suits you?#

08:07 — Messages

Alexander: Tonight? Spontaneous dinner?

08:08 — Messages

Me: Spontaneous after a week of silence?

Alexander: Come on, don't be like that. Busy is busy. You know you're something special.

08:10 — Messages

Me: Special like number 247?

08:11 — Messages

Alexander: What?? 😂

08:12 — Messages

Me: Your Instagram captions repeat themselves. The poses too.

08:13 — Messages

Alexander: You're checking my Insta? 😊

08:14 — Messages (System)

Alexander is typing...

Alexander is typing...

Alexander has stopped typing.

I waited. One hour. Two hours. Nothing.

12:41 — Messages

Alexander: Okay, real talk: We never discussed exclusivity.

12:43 — Messages

Me: We discussed honesty though.

12:45 — Messages

Alexander: I was honest. You're misinterpreting my Instagram.

12:46 — Messages

Me: Instagram is pretty self-explanatory.

12:48 — Messages

Alexander: You're too sensitive. That's social media, not my life.

12:50 — Messages

Me: And what am I? Content?

Read 12:52

No more replies.

00:01 — Messages (Two weeks later)

Alexander: Hey stranger 🙌

Alexander: Missing your energy. What are you up to? 😊

00:05 — Messages

Me: Sleeping. Alone. On purpose.

00:06 — Messages

Alexander: Haha feisty 😂 Come on, let's talk.

00:08 — Messages

Me: About what? Your latest "special woman"?

00:10 — Messages

Alexander: You're really still angry? That wasn't anything serious.

00:12 — Messages

Me: For whom?

00:14 — Messages

Alexander: For both of us. Chill.

00:16 — Messages

Me: I'm perfectly chill. Sleeping well, actually. You should try it sometime.

00:18 — Messages

Alexander: Whatever. Good luck 👍

00:20 — Messages

Me: Wide awake.

I put the phone aside and the card back on the table. The chat history was still there, a digital monument to my naivety.

The first date had been like Instagram: great pictures, little substance. The "playlist just for me," the "randomly discovered" restaurants, the perfect captions—it all fit.

For everyone. Not for me.

Alexander dated like a project manager: multiple projects in parallel, all set to "in progress," none to "committed." The pasta was Deliveroo. The playlist was from Spotify recommendations. The compliments were copy-paste.

I was one of at least five women in his rotation system. Same restaurants. Same poses. Same phrases. "Dinner with this beauty 🥰 #newadventure." Adventure number 247.

I wrote the invitation anyway:

"Dear Alexander,

I'm getting married on 02/22/2022—for real, not just for Instagram content. If you can find time between your Tinder dates: You're invited.

Feel free to bring your current 'beloved.'
Or your current three.

Emma

P.S. Your profile is still active, by the way. Age setting 18–28 at 39 looks more like market segmentation than soul-searching."

Send.

His reply came promptly, like an autotext:

"Hey Emma! Wow, getting married, mad! 🥰 Who's the lucky guy? Really happy for you! ... Unfortunately crazy busy with work, not much time for events ... But maybe we'll bump into each other sometime ... You'll be taken soon anyway 😊 Haha! Good luck to you both! 💪
P.S. Profile is only still active because I'm too lazy to delete it 😂 You know me!"

I didn't delete the message unread. I read it three times—and then deleted it.

Alexander had taught me an important lesson: Those who seem perfect online are usually a disaster offline.

Real people have rough edges—in their profiles too.

And someone who's dating 15 others in parallel isn't looking for you—they're looking for validation.

Modern dating is like online shopping. Everything looks perfect until it arrives. Then you realise: That was Photoshop.

Alexander wasn't a frog on the way to becoming a prince. He was a chameleon that changes colour depending on the target audience. And that was worse.

Nine cards. Three to go.

The next one was handwritten on special paper. "Wedding of Emma and Florian" in careful script.

Oh yes. The know-it-all. The time when I thought that a man with depth automatically meant deep love.

That was a mistake. But an instructive one.



Chapter 10: The Spiritual Narcissist

There are people who have opinions. And there are people who have the only correct opinion about everything.

Florian belonged to the second category.

The card was handwritten on special paper. "Wedding of Emma and Florian" in careful script, with little details that I surely found important at the time—probably because Florian had explained to me why they were important.

I was 28 and had decided I needed a man with depth.

After Alexander I wanted someone with substance, with real interests, with well-considered views.

Florian definitely had well-considered views. About everything. Always.

I googled his name. Florian Wagner, freelance "life coach" and author of the blog "Reflective Living".

His LinkedIn profile was a collection of his expertises: conscious communication, mindful eating, meaningful leisure activities.

His Instagram showed exclusively composed images of books, coffee cups and inspirational quotes. We met in a bookshop.

I reached for a thriller, he shook his head pityingly.

"Do you only read entertainment?" he asked.

"Sometimes. Why?"

"I mean... there's so much meaningful literature out there. Things that actually move you forward."

He recommended three books on self-reflection. I bought the thriller and one of his books. Compromise.

The first date was... educational.

Florian had chosen the café—"authentic, not as commercial as Starbucks". He ordered a special coffee that the barista had to explain first. I ordered a cappuccino.

"Do you drink a lot of coffee?" he asked.

"I do, yes. Why?"

"I went through a phase where I was addicted. Now I only drink it consciously."

"Consciously?"

"I ask myself: Do I really need this right now? Or is it just habit?"

I looked at my cappuccino. Was that now conscious or unconscious?

"Do you watch many series?" he continued.

"Sometimes. You too?"

"I used to. But at some point I realised: That's pure waste of time. Passive consumption."

"And what do you do instead?"

"Read. Think. Live consciously."

The next few weeks were a masterclass in conscious living.

Florian had a more considered alternative for everything. Instead of mainstream music he listened to independent artists "who really have something to say".

Instead of going to the cinema he went to arthouse films with "real substance". Instead of spontaneously deciding what we'd eat, he first researched the restaurant's philosophy.

"Most people live so... automatically," he often said.

"They never think about why they do what they do."

And you think about everything?"

"I try. Otherwise you're just a sheep in the herd."

After three weeks I felt like the stupidest sheep in the herd.

"Do you want to order pizza tonight?" I asked one day after a long day.

"Delivery pizza? Have you ever considered what's actually in it?"

"I don't care right now."

"But... how can you care so little about yourself?"

"Sometimes I just want something tasty quickly."

"There are so many more conscious alternatives. I'd be happy to show you some recipes."

We cooked. It was healthy. And took two hours.

After two months every conversation was a test.

"Look, the new series is out," I said, showing him my phone.

"You still watch mainstream series?"

"I enjoy it."

"But... what does that give you? Apart from distraction?"

"Sometimes I need distraction."

"Why? What are you running from?"

"Nothing! Sometimes I just want to be entertained."

"True fulfilment doesn't come from passive entertainment."

"And where does it come from?"

"From conscious engagement with yourself."

I watched the series alone. In his presence I felt guilty doing it.

"Do you ever listen to music just for fun?" I asked him one day.

"What do you mean by fun?"

"Just because. Because it sounds good. Without deeper meaning."

Florian looked at me as if I'd asked whether he ever eats rubbish.

"Music without meaning is just noise," he said.

"I prefer listening to things that inspire me."

"And what if I just want to dance?"

"Dancing is great. Conscious dancing."

Even dancing had a right and wrong way

.

The breaking point came on our first holiday together.

"Where shall we go?" I asked.

"I know a place. Very unspoilt. Not so touristy."

"Sounds good. Hotel or holiday cottage?"

"Neither. I was thinking of conscious travel. With a tent."

"Camping? I've never been camping."

"Perfect! Then you'll learn what it's like to be truly connected to nature."

"And if it rains?"

"Then you'll experience the rain more consciously."

We camped. It rained. A lot. I was soaked, exhausted and just wanted to go home.

"Isn't this wonderful?" Florian asked as water dripped through our tent.

"So immediate!"

"It's wet."

"But real. Not like those sterile hotel rooms."

"I like sterile hotel rooms."

"That's a shame. You're missing so much."

"I'm missing a cold?"

"You're missing real experiences."

On the third day, whilst I was trying to light a fire with wet clothes, it burst out of me:

"Florian, can we please just do something without you explaining to me why it's better than everything else?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: Can we order pizza without you telling me what's in it?"

Can we watch a silly film without you recommending better ones? Can we just... be normal?"

"What is normal?"

"Be spontaneous! Have fun! Not question everything!"

"But... those who don't question live unconsciously."

"Then I want to live unconsciously! At least sometimes!"

"I don't understand that."

"That's the problem. You don't understand that you also need to be able to switch off sometimes."

I wrote him a final message:

"Dear Florian,

I'm getting married on 02/22/2022—to someone who loves me as I am, not as I could be.

If you can find time between your conscious activities: You're invited. By the way, we'll also be playing silly music and having superficial fun.

By the way, three numbers remain: 4, 7, 8. Your breathing technique has saved my sleep many times and helped me achieve more calm and thus success in many a meeting.

The irony? The man who had to overthink everything taught me in the end to switch my mind off.

Emma

P.S. Your book is still here. You can collect it—or I'll consciously donate it to someone who needs advice."

Send

His reply came, naturally:

"Dear Emma,

I respect your path, even if I don't understand it. You were an enrichment to my life—you showed me how important it is to communicate consciously.

I'd be happy to come to the wedding.

Perhaps we can talk about how to make celebrations more meaningful?

Conscious regards,

Florian

P.S. Superficial fun is a contradiction in itself. But everyone must find their own way."

Even his congratulations were a suggestion for improvement.

Florian had taught me: There's a difference between having principles and being a know-it-all. A partner should inspire you—not correct your every thought.

The most important realisation: Love also means being able to do silly things together without feeling like you've failed.

Ten cards. Two to go.

The next one was elegant and simple. "Wedding of Emma and Mark" in perfect calligraphy.

The perfectionist. My last attempt to find the right man.

This was going to hurt.



Chapter 11: The Perfect One

Some frogs camouflage themselves so perfectly as princes that you only realise they're poisonous when you no longer recognise yourself in the mirror.

Mark was my near-downfall. And like everything that gleams too perfectly, he began to shine before he shattered.

The card was elegant and simple. "Wedding of Emma and Mark" in flawless calligraphy on cream-coloured card. Even the script breathed perfection, like everything about him. Almost too perfect.

2020 was the year of masks. People concealed their faces, Mark concealed his personality.

I was twenty-nine and had sworn to myself after Florian: The next one had to be normal. Successful, but not arrogant. Charming, but honest. Perfect, but real. Mark seemed to be all of that.

I googled him. Mark Fischer, Senior Partner at Excellence Consulting GmbH. His LinkedIn profile was like his flat later: clinically tidy. Same firm for ten years, steady promotions, zero rough edges.

His profile picture showed the smile of a man who believes in his own perfection.

We met in a café.

I was sitting with my laptop, he asked politely:

"Excuse me, is this seat free?"

That's how it started. Polite. Charming. Respectful.

He wore a suit that looked tailored and spoke in that quiet, controlled voice where every sentence could be a compliment, if you wanted it to be.

"I know this sounds clichéd," he said, handing me his business card.

"Management consultant with a BMW. You're probably thinking now: typical suit wearer."

"No," I lied.

He smiled. "I would think so. But I try to be more than my job."

He said everything in just such a way that you felt seen, and a little bit tested.

The first date was perfect. Too perfect.

He remembered everything: that I drink coffee with oat milk, that on Tuesdays

get tired, that I get restless when my battery drops below twenty percent.

"You're so attentive," I said.

"You're worth being attentive to."

I felt safe with him. For the first time in years.

When I fell asleep at his place for the first time, I felt the world finally went quiet.

I should have known: Silence is sometimes just the precursor to being silenced.

After three months I moved in with him. He promised to give me what I could only find within myself.

Mark's flat was like a catalogue: glass, concrete, perfection.

My books didn't fit in the bookshelf, my blanket didn't fit on his sofa.

When I made coffee in the morning, he would subtly turn the cup.

"I thought you like the handle on the left," he said.

I liked it on the right. But I nodded.

Then came the corrections.

"Emma, the toothpaste."

"Emma, the dishwasher."

"Emma, you're exaggerating."

My name became a command.

"I just want us both to feel comfortable," he said. Only his "us" always meant "him".

He began to adjust my world.

I listened to his music. I ate his breakfast. Gradually I forgot what I liked myself.

It took weeks before I saw Lara again.

Mark didn't like her. "Single women attract single energy," he'd said, half-jokingly. "And you're not single anymore, are you?"

I laughed then. My laugh sounded strange.

When I finally met Lara, we sat in our old favourite café.

"Cappuccino with cinnamon as usual?" she asked.

I hesitated. "I drink black coffee now. Mark doesn't like milk foam."

She looked at me as if searching for something she used to know.

"You're not yourself anymore," she said quietly. "You don't laugh like you used to. Even your jokes apologise."

My phone vibrated. Mark.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

"Yes," I whispered, "I have to get this"

"Where are you?" His voice sounded calm. Too calm and with that certain undertone.

"At the café. With Lara."

"You know what she's like. She drags you down. Finish your drink, come home."

When I came back, Lara was silent.

She looked at my hands. "You used to always wear red nail polish. Now everything is so... beige."

I smiled. "I like it simple."

She shook her head. "No. He likes it simple."

On the way home I asked myself when I'd stopped wearing red.

After six months I began to doubt my own perception.

It had nested itself in my head.

When we argued, he stayed calm.

"Not so loud," he said, nodding towards the door. "The people." I lowered my voice.

"You drove me to it." I was the hysterical one. He was the reasonable one.

When I got loud, I was oversensitive.
When I stayed silent, I was resentful.
When I cried, I was too emotional.
When I laughed, I was silly.

Mark said: "You used to be happier."

I said: "I'm tired."

He said: "You should be happy. We have everything. Look at yourself, others would be glad to have what you have. Great man, great car, great house."
I said nothing more.

I began to breathe more quietly.

Not because he demanded it.

But because that way I took up less space.

I drove to Jessica's birthday party.

Mark didn't want to come.

"I don't know these people," he'd said.
"And honestly, your old friends are a bit... much for me."

Much. The word echoed.

At Jessica's it was loud, chaotic, lively. Laughter everywhere, hugs everywhere. I stood in the doorway and felt like a stranger.

"Emma!" Jessica pulled me into the kitchen.

"I've missed you so much! How are you?"

"Good," I said automatically. "Mark and I..."

"Ah yes, Mr Perfect," she interrupted me, smiling. "How's it going?"

"Perfect," I said.

She looked at me. For too long.
"Really?"

I nodded. But my hands were shaking. Later, at the dessert buffet, Sarah handed me a plate. I shook my head and only took a carrot stick. Mark thought I was too fat anyway.

"You look tired," Sarah said, whilst taking a piece of cake.

"I am."

"From work?"

I hesitated. "From... everything."

Sarah took a bite. "I was with someone like that once. Perfect job, perfect flat, perfect plans. But I kept getting smaller."

"How did you realise?"

"My sister asked: When did you last properly laugh? And I couldn't remember."

I swallowed.

"When did you last laugh properly from the heart, Emma?"

I didn't know anymore.

On the way home I drove more slowly than usual. I turned into a side street and parked.

At the bus stop hung a poster: "Lloret de Mar, Your A-level Trip 2021!" Beach, turquoise sea, sun.

My hands cramped on the steering wheel. My heart inside me.

My phone vibrated.

Mark: Where are you? You said 11 p.m.

I looked at the clock. 23:12.

Mark: Emma?

I stared at the poster. Then at my phone. I used to apologise. I used to speed up. I used to think: He cares.

Now I thought: He controls.

Something inside me broke open, a tightness in my chest that didn't come from fear, but from realisation. All the voices that had made me smaller. All the hands that had adjusted me. All the looks that had tested me.

But this time I felt: That's not me. That's him.

Me: I need another moment.
I sent it. My heart raced.

Mark: Another moment for what?
I didn't answer.

For the first time I didn't answer immediately.

It felt like the first breath after a long dive.

The final turning point came a few days later.

I was searching the cellar for my winter coats and found a box:
My old wedding invitations.

Eleven cards. Eleven names. Ten disappointments plus another one?

I sat down on the cold floor.

Between the cards lay a reflection: a woman who had forgotten herself. Beige nails where red should have blazed; quiet smile where laughter wanted to explode.

I'd spent years searching for the right man, and in doing so forgotten to be the right woman for myself.

Upstairs I heard Mark's voice.

He was speaking to his mother. "No, Mum, she doesn't understand me... I'm trying, but it's never enough... Dad would have managed this better..."

His perfection suddenly sounded like a plea.

I understood: He didn't love me. He was trying to fix through me what his parents had broken in him.

I stood up. The box in my hands felt heavy, but not as heavy as the burden I'd carried these past months.

This time I didn't wait until the poison paralysed me.

I packed my bag without hesitating, without second-guessing myself. This time there was no back and forth.

My decision, my path.

I had recognised the poison, and that was my healing.

"You're just giving up on us?" he asked as I took my bag.

"No," I said. "I'm giving myself back to me."

"You're exaggerating. You're always so dramatic."

"Maybe. But at least I'm me again."

"Emma, wait." His voice became softer.

I knew this. "I... I can change. I know I was sometimes... controlling. But that's only because I don't want to lose you."

I wouldn't go back. Never again.

"This isn't love, Mark. This is fear."

"Please. Let's talk about this. Really talk. I'll listen to you."

I turned around. "When did you last truly listen to me? Not corrected, not commented, not improved, just listened?"

He stayed silent.

"Exactly," I said quietly. "I'm leaving now."

"You won't cope without me," he said, his voice harder now. "You're too... chaotic. Too emotional. Too..."
"Too alive,"

I interrupted him. "I'm too alive for you."

A few days later I sat alone in a café. Cappuccino with cinnamon, steaming. The glances of others glided past, invisible. I smiled into my cup, and tasted freedom.

I wrote him the invitation:

"Dear Mark,
I'm getting married on 02/22/2022, and have finally found what I've been searching for.

If you can find time between your optimisation projects: You're invited. Feel free to bring your new girlfriend. I bet she's just as 'perfect' as I was supposed to be.

Emma

P.S. I understand quite a lot now. For instance, that 'You don't understand' isn't an argument, but an insult."

His reply came the next day:

"Dear Emma,

I respect your decision. You were an important phase in my life, even though we ultimately weren't compatible. I hope that you find what you're looking for, even though I believe your expectations are unrealistic. I won't be coming to the wedding, that would be odd.

P.S. Sarah, by the way, isn't 'perfect', she's mature. That's a difference you might understand one day."

Even his congratulations were a final attempt to keep me small.

Mark had taught me the most important lesson:

The most dangerous frog is the one that convinces you that you're the problem.

True love makes you bigger, not smaller. Whoever systematically makes you doubt yourself doesn't love you. They love the control over you.

I didn't need a perfect man.

I needed someone who finds my imperfection perfect. Someone who leaves the cup where my handle is.

Eleven cards. Eleven lessons. Eleven scars.

I looked at them, colourful, torn, real.

And knew: It was time for the final invitation.

The most important one.



Chapter 12: The Dream Wedding

The room was perfect.

Not perfect like Mark's sterile flat, but perfect like a warm home.

Cream-coloured roses, gold accents and little details everywhere that belonged only to me: books as table decorations, a playlist with songs from all phases of life, and yes—even a table for my 'frogs'.

"You're mad," Lisa had said when I told her about the wedding. "Seriously?"

"Why not? I've spent years waiting for someone to marry me. Time to take the initiative."

The guests arrived one by one. Family, friends, colleagues—all with a mixture of curiosity and admiration on their faces. And then he sat there: Carlos.

He had come. But not because he'd received an invitation. I'd never been able to write one to him. He had come because fate sometimes still has surprises in store.

Later he told me the story: He had become a marine biology professor, just as he'd dreamt back then.

At a conference in London he sat next to a woman who told him about her friend's crazy wedding.

"Imagine," she'd said, "she's getting married and has invited all her ex-boyfriends. Even my husband—she calls him 'one of her frogs'."

At "frogs" it clicked for Carlos. The word, our word from back then.

He'd asked questions, done some research, and when he heard my name, he was certain: that could only be the shy girl full of passion from Lloret de Mar.

He sat there now, with his full wild hair, still with that warm smile that had taught me back then what real tenderness meant.

We nodded to each other—nothing more was needed. He had come to see what had become of the shy girl full of passion.

Tim sat at the table with his family, Leon came with his wife, Sebastian looked uncomfortable in his too-tight suit. Even Alexander was there, trying to chat up the waitress.

The moment had come.

I stood up, went to the front, and began my wedding vows.

"Dear Emma,

today, after years of searching, I stand here and promise you something no man has ever promised you:

Unconditional love.

I promise you:

You don't need a man who assembles IKEA wardrobes for you—you have two hands and YouTube.

But you're allowed to wish for one who likes building wardrobes with you and laughs about your shared terrible DIY skills.

You don't need a man who tells you how to think—your head works splendidly on its own.

But you're allowed to wish for one who offers new perspectives without labelling yours as wrong.

You don't need a man who rescues you—you're not a princess in a tower.

But you're allowed to wish for one who's your partner in crime, not your rescuer.

You don't need a man for financial security—you earn your own money. But you're allowed to wish for one who wants to finance shared dreams.

You don't need a man to complete you—you were never incomplete. But you're allowed to wish for one who makes the beautiful even more beautiful.

You don't need a man for sex—you know your body best. But you're allowed to wish for one who combines tenderness with passion.

You don't need a man to be happy—your happiness comes from within. But you're allowed to wish for one with whom you can laugh, cry, cook, travel and dream by the fireplace.

You don't need a man to be valuable—your worth is not up for discussion. But you're allowed to wish for one who recognises your worth and celebrates it every day.

Dear Emma, I promise you:

Never again to beg for love. If it doesn't come willingly, it isn't real.

Never again to make your dreams smaller
so a man can feel bigger.

Never again to believe that being
difficult is bad—you're not difficult, you
just have standards.

Never again to forget who you are just to
please someone.

I promise you:

To stay open to a man who doesn't try to
change you, but to grow with you.

To be ready for someone who
understands equality and lives
partnership.

To recognise when true love comes—it
will feel like coming home, not like
fighting.

Emma, you are enough. You always were
enough. You will always be enough.

The frogs were all teachers, not wasted
time.

They showed you what love isn't—so you
can recognise what love is.

I hereby marry you—my best friend, my wisest adviser, my most faithful companion.

I take you, Emma, as you are:

with your quirks,
your dreams,
your fears and
your wonderful, chaotic, authentic way.

For all time. For eternity."

The room was silent. Then someone started clapping—it was Carlos.

One by one everyone stood up. Even Sebastian applauded, albeit confused.

I had married myself.

For the first time it felt like forever.

THE END

P.S.:

Six months later I met David.

Not on Tinder, not at an event, but in a bookshop, where we both reached for the same cookbook.

He laughed at my story about the twelve wedding invitations and asked:
"Can I become the thirteenth?"

"Only," I said, "if you understand that I'm already taken—by myself."

"That," he said, "just makes you even more interesting."

Sometimes love finds you when you stop searching.
Sometimes the most beautiful ending is only the beginning of a new story.

Live BRIGHTLY.

Love LOUDLY.



AUTOREN-DUO

ESTD 2025

Other books by the author duo

