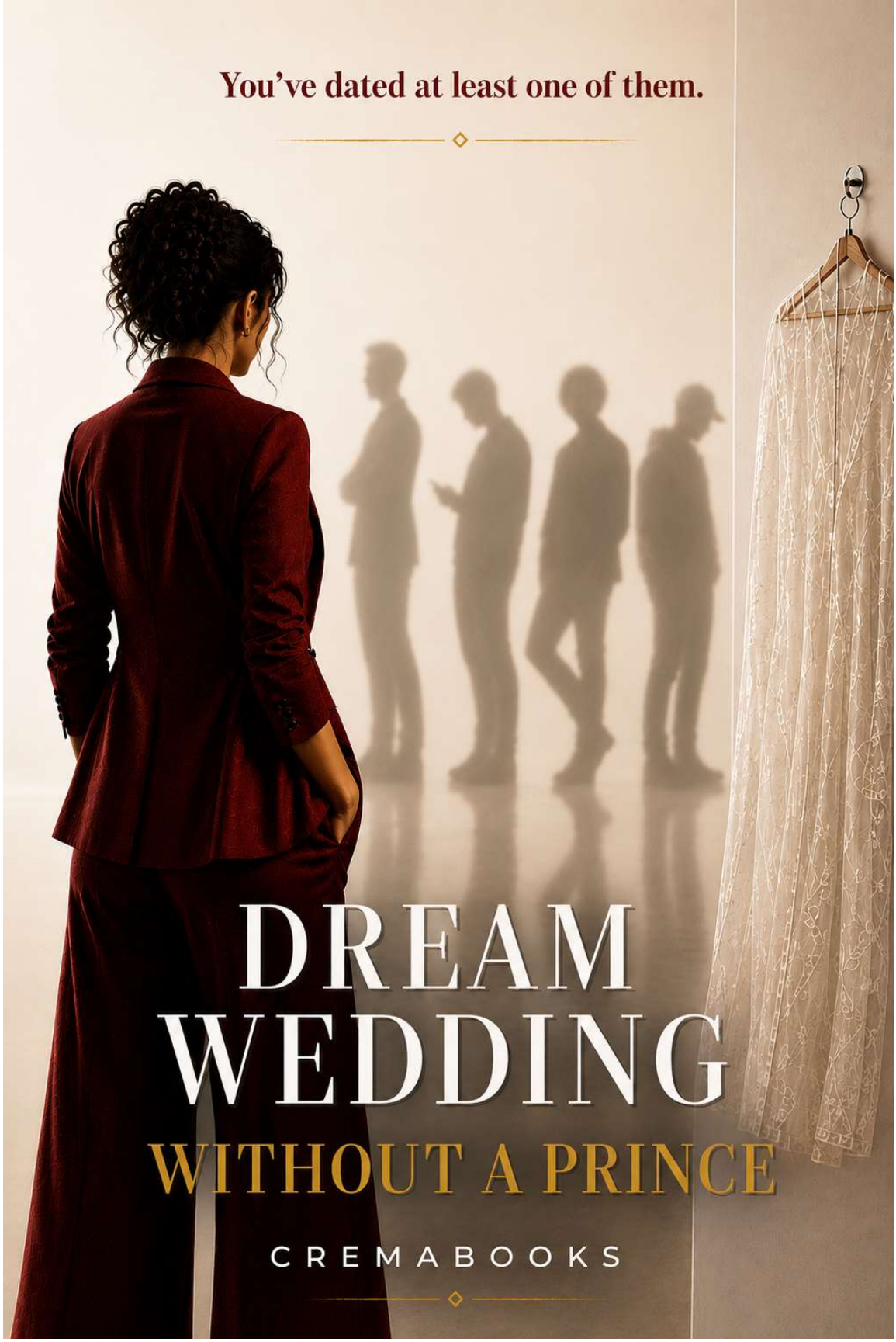

You've dated at least one of them.
DREAM WEDDING
WITHOUT A PRINCE
CREMABOOKS

A Dream Wedding

WITHOUT A PRINCE

AuthorDuo TJ

for CREMABOOKS.de

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Prologue

I woke up with a jolt—and suddenly it was crystal clear:

On February 22nd, 2022, I'm getting married.

There is no better date.

Sure, I was only four years old. But some things you just know.

Now, 27 years later, six months to go.

So many frogs kissed. Not a single prince found.

I'm done searching.

I want to celebrate.

Venue: booked.

Menu: tasted.

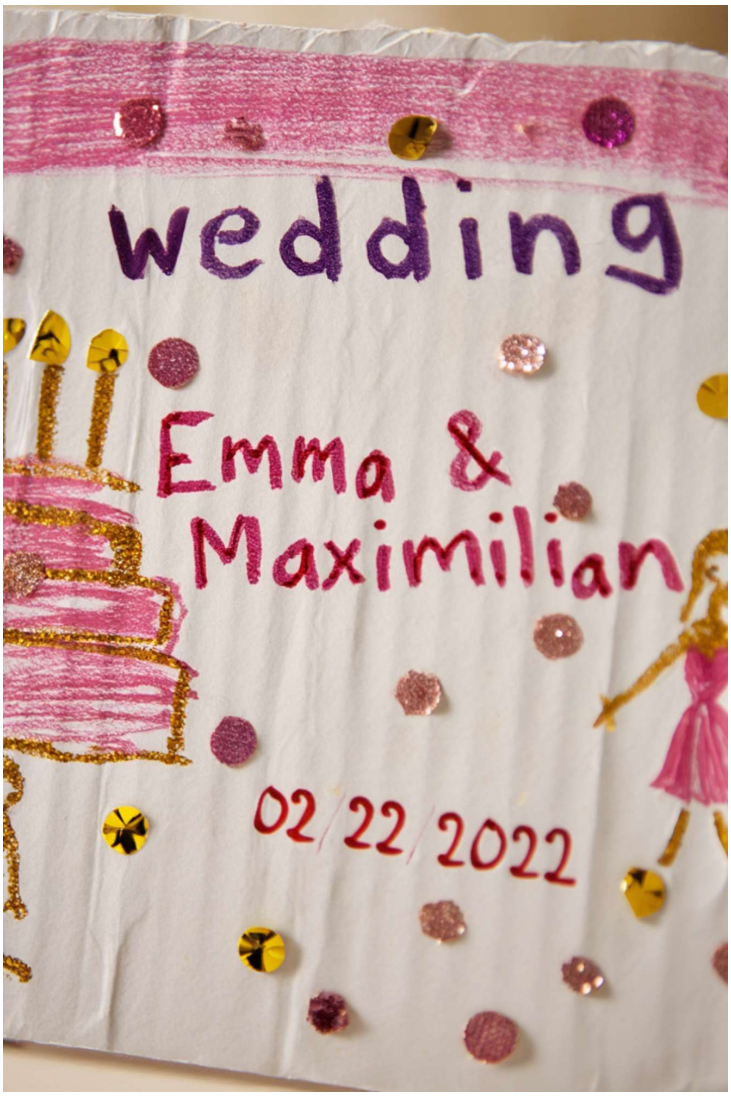
Invitations: overdue.

Should I invite the frogs?

Obviously.

Let's go.

11 frogs. 12 invitations.


wedding
Emma &
Maximilian
02/22/2022

Chapter 1

The Kindergarten Prince

Saturday, 1 p.m. The first card. I pulled open the desk drawer and there it was—wedged between paper clips and a forgotten lozenge, half-unwrapped and sticky. A scrap of cardstock, crumpled, colored in with crayons worn down to nothing. Glitter stones glued on crooked, a few already gone. The pink had faded to something almost beige. In wobbly kid handwriting, barely legible: »Wedding of Emma and Maximilian.« The second 'i' was backward. I laughed out loud. And then, quietly, felt something else. That's where it all started.

Sunshine Kindergarten, 1996. I was five and wore the same pink dress every single day, because princesses wore pink. That's just how things were. Maximilian was the only kid taller than the jungle gym—at least, that's how it seemed to me.

"Emma, your ball!" His voice carried authority as he pulled my golden rubber ball down from the highest branch.

I'd been aiming for the swing. It ended up in the birch tree.

"You're my hero!" I beamed at him. Maximilian flushed bright red, right to the tips of his ears.

"Then I'll just marry you," he said, shrugging like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Of course I said yes. Princesses always said yes when the prince showed up.

Now I sat at my computer, the card still in my hand. I set it down carefully—more carefully than it deserved, really—and opened a browser window.

It took a minute to find him. No flashy profile, no grand statements. Then a row of images loaded. Three workshops. Three countries. Always the same hands. Japan. The carved characters unmistakable. A table so simple you'd almost miss it—until you looked closer. Fine joinery. Precisely cut. Nothing hidden. Italy. An old workshop, dust suspended in a shaft of light. France. A studio with floor-to-ceiling windows and sawdust on the sill.

I scrolled down. Children's bare feet in sawdust. Like they belonged there. Like they'd always been there.

I typed: »Dear Maximilian, do you still remember the golden ball? I'm getting married on 02/22/2022—for real this time. Come by if you feel like hearing a story that turned out better than either of us imagined back then. Emma«

I hovered over Send for a moment. Then clicked.

The irony settled slowly, like dust. Back then I thought he was my prince just because he was taller than me. I was five years old and I had already decided that height was the same thing as safety.

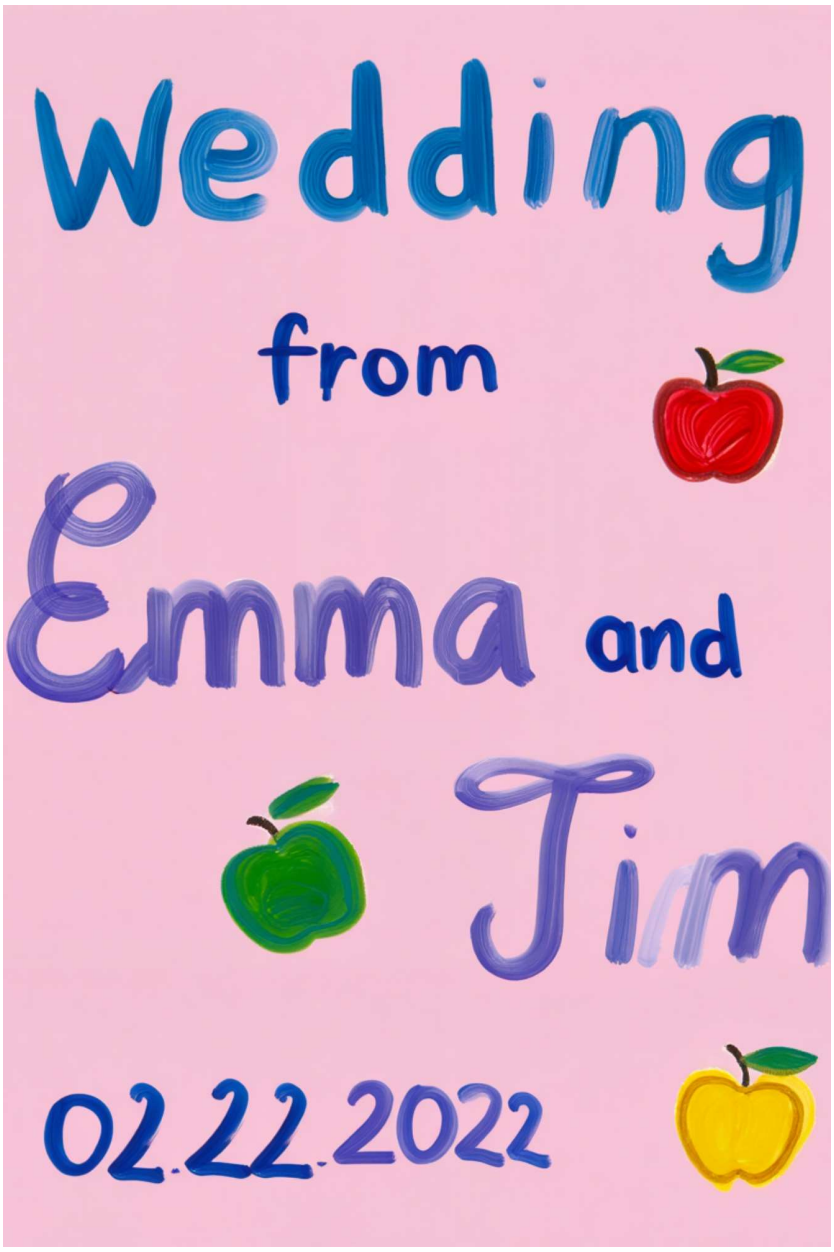
I wasn't looking for a partner. I was looking for a hero. Someone to stand between me and whatever I was afraid of, even if I didn't have words for the fear yet.

Maximilian had been a sweet boy. Helpful, kind, loyal in the uncomplicated way children are before the world teaches them otherwise. But he'd only wanted to marry me because I'd basically asked him to. And I'd asked him because he'd been taller than the jungle gym.

Neither of us knew what we were doing. We were five.

My smile softened.

Oh, Tim. You were eight, and somehow you still didn't stand a chance.


Wedding
from
Emma and
Jim
02.22.2022

Chapter 2

The Apple Prince

Tim Waldmann. Second grade, third seat, second row. Every morning he waited for me at the school gate. In his lunchbox: two apples. One for him, one for me.

"For the prettiest princess in the world," he'd say, going beet red.

I thought it was sweet. I did, genuinely—back then. So I drew him an invitation. More professional this time, markers instead of crayons, and I'd figured out that hearts didn't have to be lopsided. »Wedding of Emma and Tim« in big looping letters. Little apples drawn carefully around the edges, each one with a tiny leaf.

I still have that card. The apples look more like green lumps. But I drew them with complete seriousness.

Linden Square Elementary, 1999. I was eight and wore pigtails with pink scrunchies. Tim was my first fan.

“Emma, wanna go out with me?” he asked one day at recess. We were standing under the chestnut tree and he was strangling his apple with both hands.

“Sure,” I said. Why not? He was nice, he liked me—and Mom always said you should be kind to kind people.

“So we’re getting married then?” he asked hopefully.

I nodded. Getting married was just what people did when they liked each other. I’d seen it on TV. It looked straightforward.

I found his old card in my diary. Still just as pink, though the marker had faded to almost nothing around the edges. I held it for a moment before I set it aside. Then I opened his Facebook profile.

Tim had become a teacher. Elementary school, naturally. His profile pictures showed him surrounded by beaming kids holding up artwork. Single, as far as I could tell. Same gentle eyes. Same shy smile. But steadier now—like a person who’d figured out where they fit.

A 2019 photo: Tim at a workshop on bullying prevention. His expression was serious. Focused. Fully grown. Another: Tim with a group of kids doing crafts, smiling patiently while a little boy smeared blue Play-Doh into his hair without Tim even flinching.

I wrote: »Dear Tim, do you still remember your apples? You were the first boy who showed up for me every single day without being asked. That meant something, even if I didn't know it then. I'm getting married on 02/22/2022. No lunchbox this time, but 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.

I closed the laptop and just sat there for a second.

Because the truth was harder than I'd let myself think about. Tim had confronted me at a class reunion three years ago—not aggressively, not with drama. Just quietly, in the way of someone who'd been carrying something for a long time and had finally decided to put it down.

"Emma, do you remember elementary school?" he'd asked.

“Of course,” I’d laughed. “You were so sweet with your apples!”

He’d looked at me. Not unkindly. But clearly.

“You were kind of mean to me.”

The smile dropped off my face before I could catch it. “What?”

“You treated me like a vending machine. As long as I brought you something, you were nice. The one day I forgot the apple, you ignored me all day. And when Lisa said I was boring—” He stopped. Shrugged. “You just dropped me.”

My face went hot. I wanted to say he was wrong. I ran through my memories of second grade looking for evidence that he was wrong.

I didn’t find any.

Had I really done that? The honest answer was: yes. Probably. Almost certainly.

“I’m sorry,” I’d said. And I meant it in that specific, grinding way you mean it when you realize you’ve been the villain in someone else’s story.

“It’s okay,” Tim had said. “We were just kids. But I cried a lot because of you.”

Seven-year-old Tim. Crying. Because of me.

I sat with that image longer than was comfortable.

Tim had been perfect—attentive, loyal, consistent. He would’ve done anything for me. That was exactly his problem, and mine. Because at eight I didn’t want a partner. I wanted an audience. Tim had given me that, faithfully, every single morning.

When Lisa told me audiences were boring, I’d simply found a new one.

Tim had never been my frog. I had been his.

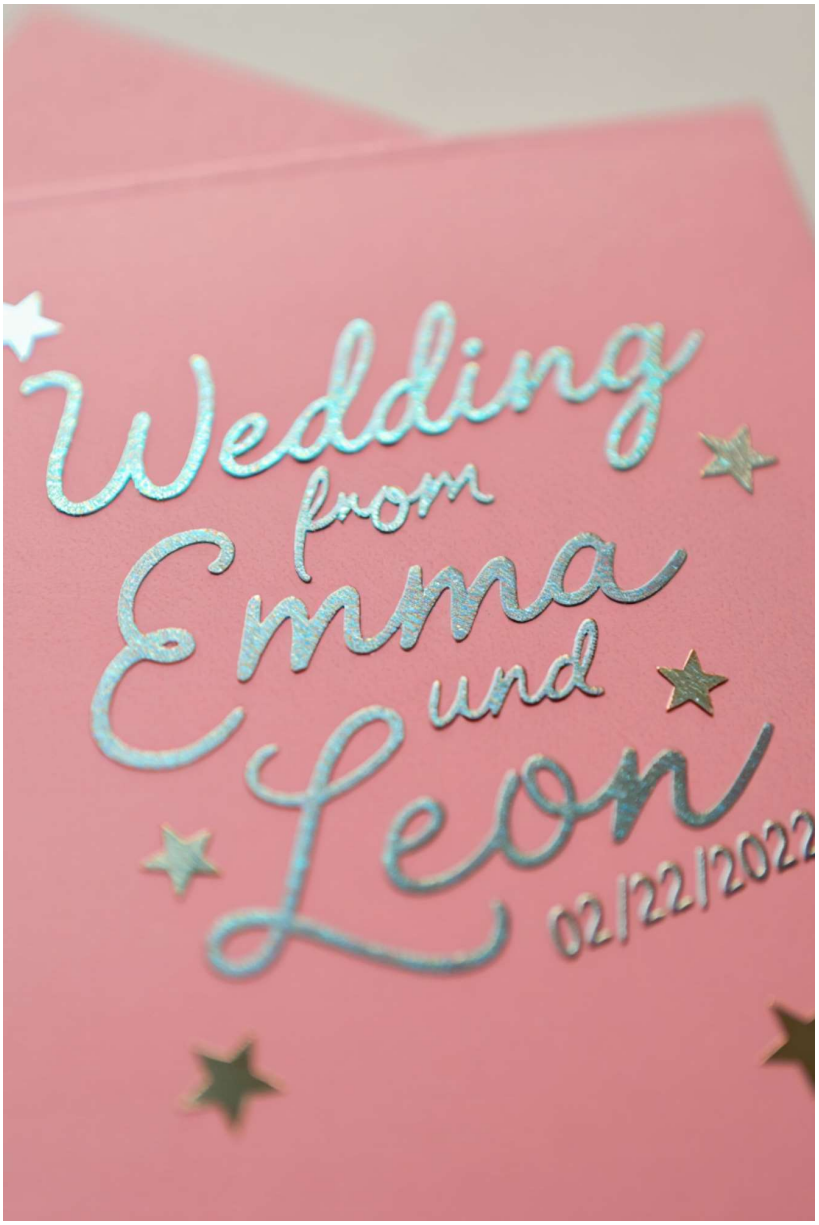
I was the one who hopped away.

Two cards. Ten left. I set Tim's in the pile and let myself feel the small, unpleasant weight of it for a moment. Then I reached for the next one.

Leon from fifth grade. The first boy who ignored me. The first one I chased.

My stomach tightened before I'd even turned the card over.

Oh, Leon. That's when the real trouble started.


Wedding
from
Emma
und
Leon
02/22/2022

Chapter 3

The Unattainable

I got up from the desk and walked to the closet. Way up top, behind the winter coats, it was still there—the old shoebox that had eventually become too small for all my wedding dreams. It was a full cardboard box now. »Wedding 02/22/2022« written in ornate letters on the lid with the same glitter pen I'd used for Leon's card.

I lifted it down carefully. It was heavier than I remembered.

I opened it. The smell hit me instantly—old paper and perfume that had long since stopped being any specific scent. Just: time. And something underneath it, faintly sweet, that I couldn't quite name. There they all were. Invitation cards to weddings that never happened. Each with a different name. Each in a different style, depending on how old I'd been, how certain I'd been. Leon's was at the very bottom, creased at the corner where I'd once folded it in half and then unfolded it, having changed my mind.

Glitter pen on pink cardstock. Full of hope and ignorance in almost equal parts.

The box had started in 2004, after Leon ignored me for the first time. I'd run home, cried into my pillow until I had a headache, and then—with the peculiar resilience of an eleven-year-old—decided that if I couldn't find the right prince, I would at least plan the perfect wedding.

Leon Kramer. Fifth grade, other class, untouchable as a rock star. While every other boy was still trading Pokémon cards, Leon leaned against the gym wall like nothing in the world could possibly interest him. Hair falling in his face. Designer shoes when the rest of us were still wearing whatever our parents had bought on sale.

Leon was the first boy who didn't notice me.

Obviously I fell for him immediately.

Beside him: his best friend Marco. Shorter, freckled, laughed too loud at Leon's jokes. Marco was… nice. But nice was invisible when Leon was standing right there.

Northside Middle School, 2002. I was eleven and deep in the phase where being ignored felt mysterious and significant.

"He's different," I told my best friend Jessi. "He's just… different from everyone else."

Jessi raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Jessi was smarter than me about most things.

I gathered everything I had and walked over to Leon one morning. I'd rehearsed it.

"Hi, Leon," I said.

He looked straight through me. Not meanly. Just—completely. Like I wasn't a person he'd registered yet.

"Leon?" I tried again.

"What do you want?" Flat. Annoyed. Still not quite looking at me.

"Nothing. Just wanted to say hi." My voice came out smaller than I'd planned.

He shrugged and walked away. I stood there for a second too long. Marco stayed behind.

“Hi, Emma,” Marco said. He’d gone red. “I like your jacket.”

“Thanks,” I said, already walking in the direction Leon had gone.

For months I tried everything. Positioned myself near him at lunch. Laughed extra loud when I heard he’d made a joke two tables away. Bought the same brands, which meant convincing my mom that yes, those sneakers were necessary.

Marco, meanwhile, saved me a seat sometimes. Lent me his notes. Asked how I was doing and actually waited for the answer.

“Leon’s kind of a jerk,” Jessi said eventually.

“He’s just shy,” I said. I’d decided this. It was important that it be true.

Leon was not shy. I know that now. He was seventeen emotions ahead of everyone else and he’d already figured out that scarcity creates desire.

In seventh grade, I gave up. Just—stopped. It wasn’t a decision exactly, more like exhaustion. I stopped angling

toward him, stopped laughing too loud, stopped pretending I'd bought those sneakers because I liked them.

Three weeks later, Leon sat next to me at lunch.

"How come you don't talk to me anymore?"

"Why would I?" I said. I was surprised by how easy it came out.

"I thought we had a good thing."

I picked up my tray and moved to a different table. And for the first time in almost two years, I felt something that took me a while to identify. Power. Small, strange, slightly guilty. But mine.

What followed was a year of ping-pong. I paid attention—he went cold. I pulled back—he came running. We'd both been wired with the same broken circuit: whoever wants less has the advantage.

Then he transferred schools. I felt relieved and bereft in the same breath, which made no sense, but feelings rarely do.

I found Marco's profile on a whim, scrolling through old contacts. Marco Weiss. Elementary school teacher. Married to… I stopped scrolling.

The face in the photo was familiar in the specific way that makes your chest do something sudden. It was Jessi. My Jessi. In a white dress, laughing at something Marco had said.

I sat with that for a long moment.

Marco had never been my frog. He'd been something I'd looked past, over and over, because Leon was standing in front of him. But Marco had become Jessi's person—and the photo made it clear that had been exactly the right outcome for everyone involved, including me.

I wrote Leon an invitation: »Dear Leon, I'm not sure you remember me. We were in different classes and I was the girl who once tried to say hi. You were very… busy. I'm getting married on 02/22/2022 and thought maybe this time you'd have a minute for a hello. No worries if not. I'm used

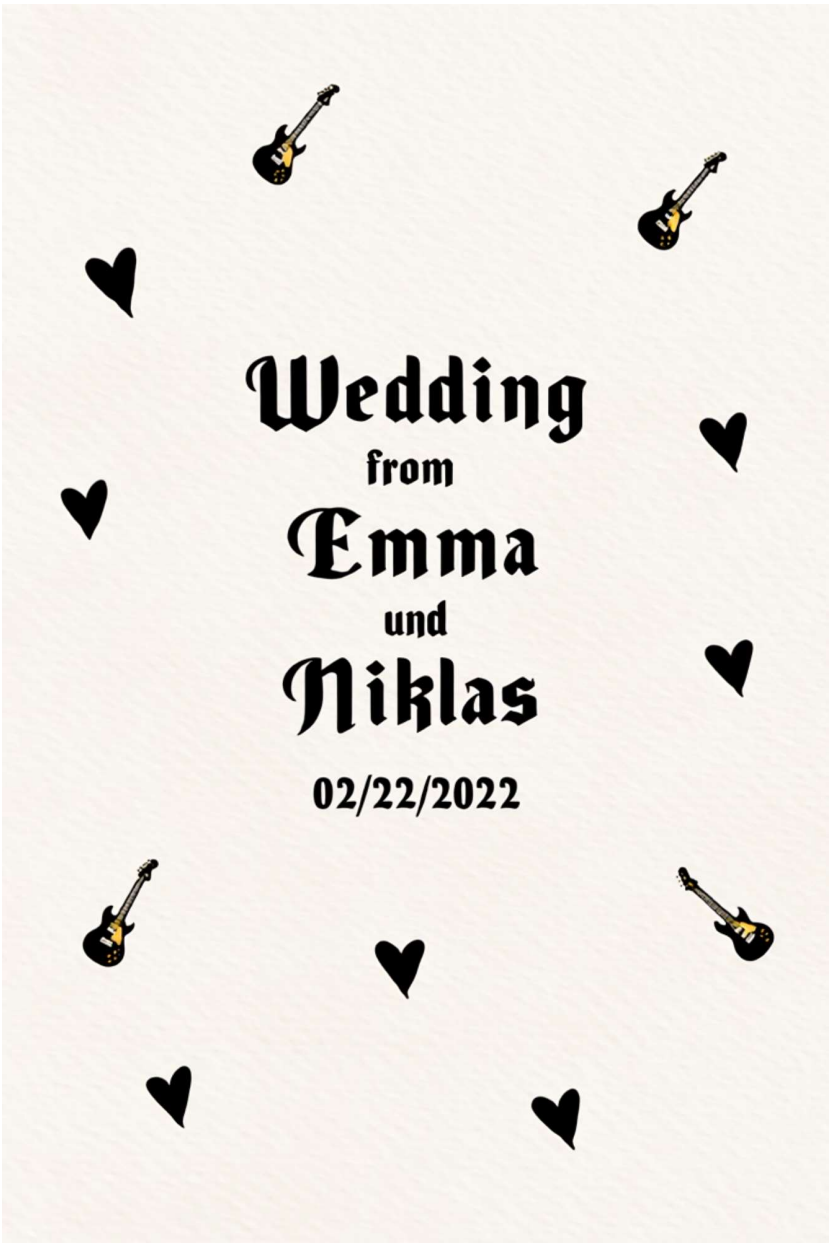
to it. Emma Weber. P.S. I made you an invitation card back then. You're finally getting it.« Send.

Three cards. Nine left. I placed Leon's old card with the others and reached for the next one. Black lettering on cardstock covered in hand-drawn guitar picks and lightning bolts, the ink slightly smeared on one corner where something had once spilled.

»Wedding of Emma and Niklas.«

I held the card for longer than the others.

Oh God. Niklas.


Wedding
from
Emma
und
Niklas
02/22/2022

Chapter 4

The Guitarist

Niklas Weber. No relation—but that had felt like a sign at the time. Same last name. Same initial. It had to mean something. He played guitar in the school band Dark Heart and always wore black T-shirts with names I didn't recognize but adopted as correct on the spot. Hair falling in his face. When he played, he threw his head back like someone who already knew he was being watched.

Niklas was my first real love. My first real lesson in what people are capable of when they want something from you.

Southside High, 2005. I was fourteen and absolutely convinced that intensity was the same thing as depth. Niklas was seventeen and had already had enough practice to know exactly where to press.

"Emma," he'd said after band practice, looking at me with those dark eyes like I was the only person in the room and also the only person who could give him something he needed. "Wanna hear something I wrote?"

My stomach did something embarrassing. Of course I did.

The rehearsal room was cramped and smelled like old amps and the specific sadness of cigarettes smoked by teenagers. Niklas sat on a stool, picked up his guitar, and played the most beautiful chord progression I'd ever heard. I held very still, the way you do when you're afraid of breaking something.

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

My heart didn't just skip. It held an entire Olympics and handed out medals.

The first weeks felt like a fairytale—the specifically intoxicating kind where you don't notice the forest getting darker. He wrote me poems on ICQ (»You're my dark angel«), sent romantic texts, played me new songs. He always had a new song.

"You're not like the others," he always said. "You actually understand me."

I believed him. I wanted it to be true so completely that I'd stopped noticing how much effort I was putting into making it true.

Then the hands. When I stopped them, he went cold the way the rehearsal room couch was cold in November—suddenly, completely, like warmth had never been there at all.

"My ex wasn't so uptight," he said one evening. Casual. Like he was mentioning the weather.

"You had an ex?" That landed in my chest. And something else landed with it, something I didn't want to name yet.

"Obviously. Sandra. She was a senior. We were together longer too."

My friend Melanie had said it too, when we'd been reading advice columns together the week before. »All my friends have already. It's completely normal.« The word normal had done a lot of work that year.

A few days later, while we were kissing, he pulled back just slightly.

“Do you love me?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Then prove it. For real.”

I tried to move his hands away. They came back. I tried again.

“Niklas, please.”

“What’s your problem?” He sounded genuinely annoyed. Like I was being unreasonable. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do.”

“But you don’t trust me.”

“I do, but…” My voice came out small and shaky and I hated the sound of it.

“Maybe you’re just not ready for a real relationship.”

That one landed right where he’d aimed it. In the soft place. And for a moment I almost agreed with him.

But something in me—something quiet and stubborn, something that wasn’t performing or trying to be anyone’s

dark angel—pushed back. Not loudly. Just: no. This feels wrong. It should feel different than this. Better. Safer.

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

I looked at him for a second. My hands had stopped shaking.

"And if you really love me," I said, "you won't push me."

Something shifted in his face. I'd surprised him.

"Then you're obviously not ready," he said. And left.

Three days later he was with Sandra. The supposed ex who'd supposedly moved away. She'd transferred to the other class. I found this out through three people in the span of one lunch period.

I cried for three weeks. Not just at night—at school, in the bathroom, once so badly while brushing my teeth that I had to sit down on the bathroom floor and wait it out. Fourteen is not a dignified age for heartbreak.

The song I found out about three months later, at a girls' night at Jessica's house.

“Oh, ‘Emma’,” Jessica had said, laughing in that way that was half-fond, half-appalled. “For me it was ‘Jessica.’ For Marie it was ‘Marie.’ He just swapped the name. Same chords, same everything.”

I sat there while that information settled. It took a minute. And then—underneath the betrayal, underneath the embarrassment—something small and strange: relief. It had never been about me at all. It had been a technique. I’d been one application of a technique.

That should have hurt more than it did.

I wrote him an invitation anyway: »Dear Niklas, do you still remember ‘our’ song? By the way—you played it for Jessica and Marie too. Same chords. I found out later. Efficient of you. I’m getting married on 02/22/2022. This time everything’s real—no techniques, no ultimatums, no swapped names. If you’re up for something honest, you’re invited. Emma. P.S. I hope the girls in your life now know that ‘no’ is a complete sentence. Some people need to hear it more than once.« Send.

Niklas had taught me the thing I've spent the most years unlearning: that love is something you earn by being enough. Small enough. Flexible enough. Ready enough.

It took a long time to understand that real love doesn't have an 'enough' at all.

Four cards. Eight left. The next one was white. Blank except for a faint ring stain in one corner, like from a sunscreen bottle set down carelessly on a hot day. Otherwise nothing. No name. No date.

Lloret de Mar. Carlos.

Something in my chest shifted—not quite warmth, not quite ache. Something in between, like a song you haven't thought of in years and suddenly remember every word of.



Chapter 5

The Unforgettable

I never wrote him an invitation. I'd tried, actually—sat down twice with the cardstock in front of me, pen in hand—and both times couldn't find the beginning. Some things resist being made into sentences.

So just the blank card stayed in the box. For him. A placeholder for something I'd never managed to name.

No hearts. No ornate letters. No fantasy of a white dress. With Carlos, for the first time, I hadn't thought about the future at all. Just the evening. The sand getting cooler under us. His voice in three languages, switching mid-sentence when one ran out.

Lloret de Mar, August 2007. School trip. Sixteen. The summer after Niklas, which meant the summer I was trying to remember how to take up the right amount of space. My classmates were burning their way through the hotel bar's wine list. I was walking along the waterline at dusk with my shoes in my hand, breathing in salt and distance.

“¿Hablas español?”

A warm voice behind me. I turned.

A boy, maybe seventeen, standing at the edge of the water with a bucket of shells he’d been collecting. Hands rough and brown from the sun. He was looking at me with an expression that was curious and a little careful, like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to talk to me.

“Un poquito,” I said, pinching my fingers together.

“Perfecto.” The careful look became a smile. “I’m Carlos.”

“Emma.”

“Emma.” He said it like he was trying out the sound. Like he’d remember it.

We walked. I’m not sure either of us decided to. He led me along the shore to a cove I never would have found—tucked behind a rock formation, no tourists, the sand there a different texture. Softer. The water a deeper shade of turquoise that made you want to stay until the light changed.

He sat down. I sat next to him. The shells clinked softly in his bucket.

"Mi papá… fisherman," he said. "I help him. But I dream…" He stopped, searching for the word. He pointed at the water. "Estudiar. Biología marina. In Barcelona."

"You want to study marine biology?"

"Sí." His eyes changed when he said it—something opened. "Dolphins. The deep water. I want to understand it." A pause. "But mi familia…" He gestured back toward the town. "They need me here."

I looked at the water. I thought about what it meant to want something you weren't sure you were allowed to want.

"Tell me about the dolphins," I said.

He did. For an hour, maybe more, while the sky slowly shifted from orange to a blue that felt like it had come from somewhere deeper than the atmosphere. He spoke in Spanish when the words were there, in English when they weren't, and we laughed at the gaps between them, at the places where we'd invent a word or mime something that

had no translation. We understood each other anyway. Or maybe we understood something more important than words.

On the fourth evening he reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. A small thing. The kind of thing that doesn't mean anything, except when it means everything.

His hands trembled slightly as he touched my face.

"¿Está bien?" he asked quietly.

"Sí," I whispered. My voice had gone somewhere soft. "Está muy bien."

His kisses tasted like salt water and something I can only describe as: the absence of pressure. Which sounds simple. Which was, at sixteen, everything.

For the first time in my life I said what I wanted. Out loud, without apologizing for it first. And he listened. He asked.

"¿Te gusta esto?"

"Sí. Me gusta mucho."

"¿Y esto?"

"Hmm… un poco más… like this."

He learned quickly. And I learned something I would take years to fully understand: that honesty in intimacy is not vulnerability. It's the opposite.

"Emma," he breathed. "Eres perfecta."

Under a Spanish sky, the ocean a presence rather than a backdrop, Carlos's honest eyes right there—in that moment, I actually was.

On the eighth day I had to leave. The bus was at six. Carlos walked me to the stop and stood on the sidewalk while the engine ran.

"¿Me escribirás?" he asked.

"No sé cómo," I answered. I don't know how to reach you. He didn't have email then. I didn't have his address. We both knew what we were saying.

He smiled. Not sadly exactly. Just—accurately.

"Está bien," he said. "Tenemos esta semana."

We have this week.

I watched him through the bus window until we turned a corner and he wasn't there anymore. And I didn't cry. I just held the week in my chest like something I'd been given and was careful not to drop.

Carlos wasn't my lost prince. He was something better than that. He was the version of me I'd forgotten existed—the one who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to say it. He gave that back to me without being asked. Without making it a transaction.

He showed me I mattered. And then he let me go.

That blank card felt different from all the others. It wasn't a wedding that didn't happen. It was something that was exactly what it was supposed to be.

Five cards. Seven left.

I reached for the next one. Cream-colored paper, handwriting that looked like the person had practiced it first. »Wedding of Emma and Jonas.«

Oh, right. Jonas.

My jaw tightened slightly, which told me more than I wanted to admit.


WEDDING
JONAS
&
Emma
02/22/2022

Chapter 6

The One Who Never Grew Up

There are men who are raised by their mothers—and men who never finish being raised.

Jonas was the second kind.

2008. I was seventeen, nearly done with high school, and convinced that what I needed was someone stable. After Leon's games and Niklas's manipulation, I wanted the opposite: grounded, consistent, someone who'd already done some growing up. Someone with a plan.

Jonas was 20 and had a plan. The plan was Gisela's.

We met at the gym. I was struggling with a cable machine. He appeared at my shoulder.

"You're doing it wrong," he said kindly. "My mom's a physical therapist. She always taught me the right form."

First minute. First reference.

"You like helping people," I said. Not quite a question.

"My mom always says a gentleman helps wherever he can."

Second minute.

He worked at an insurance company. Still lived at home. "Just saving up," he said. "Mom thinks it's smart to wait until you have a real cushion."

"And what do you think?"

"I think she's right. Why pay rent when you have a perfectly good home?"

He was kind. Genuinely. And he was attentive in a way that felt, at first, like safety.

The first date: he arrived in his mom's Mercedes.

"She offered," he said, proud in that way that hadn't quite figured out it shouldn't be pride. "She already likes you."

"She doesn't know me."

"I've told her about you. She says you sound mature."

I was seventeen. I'd been graded by a woman I'd never met.

He'd chosen the restaurant. Or Gisela had. I didn't find out which until the second date.

His phone rang twice during dinner. He answered both times. On the third call:

"Sorry. That's Mom. She worries." He answered before I could say anything. "Yes, Mom. Yes, I'm fine. We're at dinner. Yes, the one you recommended. No, I'm not drinking—I have to drive. I'll be home by eleven. I promise. Love you."

He put the phone away and smiled at me like nothing had happened.

"She raised me alone," he said. "We're close."

"I can see that," I said, and meant it neutrally, and did not yet understand what I was looking at.

The following months had the rhythm of a three-person relationship. Jonas called Gisela every morning before work, every lunch from the parking lot, every evening before bed. She was the first person he talked to about any decision—what to eat, where to go, whether he should say yes or no to anything.

“Can we get away for a weekend?” I asked after three months. “Just us.”

“I’ll ask Mom if she has suggestions.”

“No. I want you to have suggestions.”

“But she knows all the good spots. She traveled a lot before —”

“Jonas.”

“What?”

“I’m not asking your mother on a trip.”

“She’s not coming!”

“She’s planning it.”

“She’s just helping.”

“She’s taking over.”

“You’re jealous of my mother,” he said. Genuinely baffled. Like this was a strange, unreasonable thing to be.

“Yes,” I said. “I am. That’s how far we’ve gotten.”

Gisela's loneliness had become the wall Jonas stood behind whenever I pushed for something that was only ours. He wasn't cruel about it. He genuinely didn't see it as a wall. He thought he was just being a good son.

After our first real fight, he called Gisela before he called me. The next day:

"My mom thinks you might be coming on too strong."

"Your mom only has your version."

"I tell her most things."

I looked at him.

"She's my best friend," he said. A little defensive. "I can't help that."

"I'm your girlfriend."

"Yes. She's something else."

The end came quietly, at Easter. Gisela had planned a family dinner and hadn't included me in the headcount.

“It’s family,” Jonas said. Apologetic, but firm in the way people are firm when they’ve decided something in advance.

“Am I not family?”

“You’re my girlfriend. That’s different.”“After five months.”

“You’re strong,” he said. “Mom needs more support right now.”

“And if I’m not strong? If I need support too?”

He looked at me like this hadn’t occurred to him. Maybe it hadn’t.

“You’re different,” he said. Which I think he meant as a compliment. Which was the saddest part.

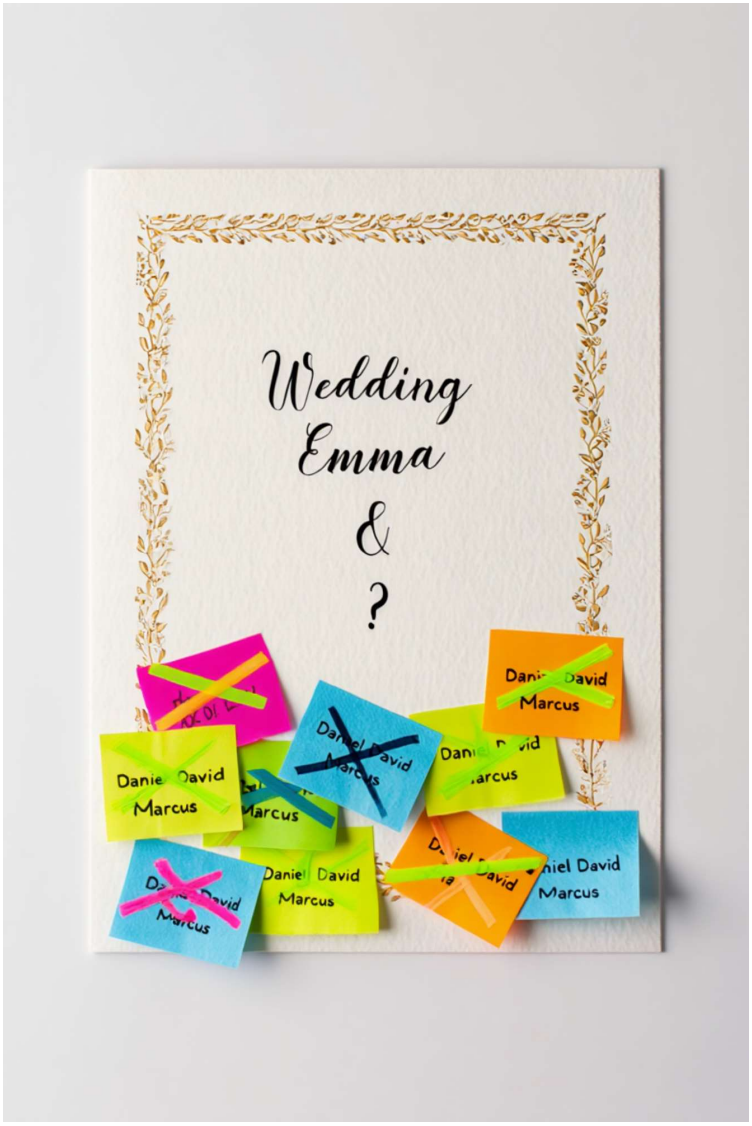
I had wanted someone stable. Jonas was stable—but the center of gravity wasn’t me, and it was never going to be. Some men are ready to be someone’s partner. Jonas was still practicing being someone’s son.

That’s not a crime. It’s just the wrong room for what I was looking for.

Six cards. Six left. The next one was written in neon marker on whatever paper had been closest. »Wedding of Emma and…« The name had been whited out. Written over. Whited out again.

Right. University. The years I thought moving out meant I’d figured myself out.

My smile went a little crooked.


Wedding
Emma
&
?
Marcus
Marcus
Daniel David
Marcus
Marcus

Chapter 7

The Intellectual

Some frogs become princes. Some stay frogs. And some make you feel, briefly, like you might be the frog.

Daniel was that kind.

University of Münster, 2010. I was 19 and still believed that complicated meant deep. Daniel was 22 and proof that you can read everything and understand nothing.

"Emma, have you read Nietzsche?" First sentence. University library. He'd sat down across from me without being invited.

"Um… no?"

"That explains a lot." The pity in his smile was almost gentle. "You can't really understand what's happening culturally without Nietzsche. It's like trying to read a map without knowing what north means."

I did not walk away. This is the part I find hardest to explain. He was condescending, and I was intrigued, and I think

both of those things were true for the same reason: I still believed that someone who made me feel a little smaller probably knew something I didn't.

Daniel looked the way people look when they've decided their appearance is a statement: dark glasses, wrinkled shirts, the specific kind of unwashed-hair that takes some effort to maintain.

The first months were a crash course in being wrong about everything. He took me to art galleries.

"Do you see the deconstruction of bourgeois aesthetics?" he asked in front of a canvas that looked like a sneeze.

"Um… yes?"

"No, Emma. You're looking at it superficially."

Superficial. His word of choice. My books were superficial. My music was superficial. My emotions, when I had the wrong ones, were superficial.

I started checking my thoughts before I said them. Rehearsing, editing. Wondering if they were superficial.

I don't say this to excuse anything that came after. I say it because it's true and I wish it weren't.

"Daniel," I said one afternoon, after we'd been together three months, "we… we've never actually slept together."

"Sex is a biological function," he said, not looking up from his book. "True intimacy comes from intellectual connection. Anyone can have sex."

"I also want you physically," I said. I'd rehearsed this.

"That's very primitive of you."

Primitive. Second-favorite word.

After Daniel came David. Daniel's roommate. Sports science, not philosophy. Soccer, not Foucault. He laughed at my jokes without analyzing them first.

Two weeks. Beautiful two weeks.

After which we had approximately nothing to say.

"So what do you read?" David asked, genuinely curious.

"Sartre right now."

“Is that a band?”

“Um. No. French philosopher.”

“Cool. I’m reading the new Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue.”

And that’s when it clarified itself, the thing I’d been circling around for years: I needed someone who could do both. Talk to me and want me. Challenge me and be present with me. Think and also feel, in the same body, at the same time.

Daniel had made me feel seen in my mind and invisible in every other way. David had made me feel wanted and slightly bored. Neither one was the whole thing.

After David came three more. Marcus. Stefan. Tom, with whom I had so little conversation that I genuinely still don’t know what he did for work.

Each of them filled something. None filled all of it.

I wrote Daniel an invitation: »Dear Daniel, I’m getting married on 02/22/2022. You’ll be relieved to know I’ve read Nietzsche since we parted ways. He had some good points.

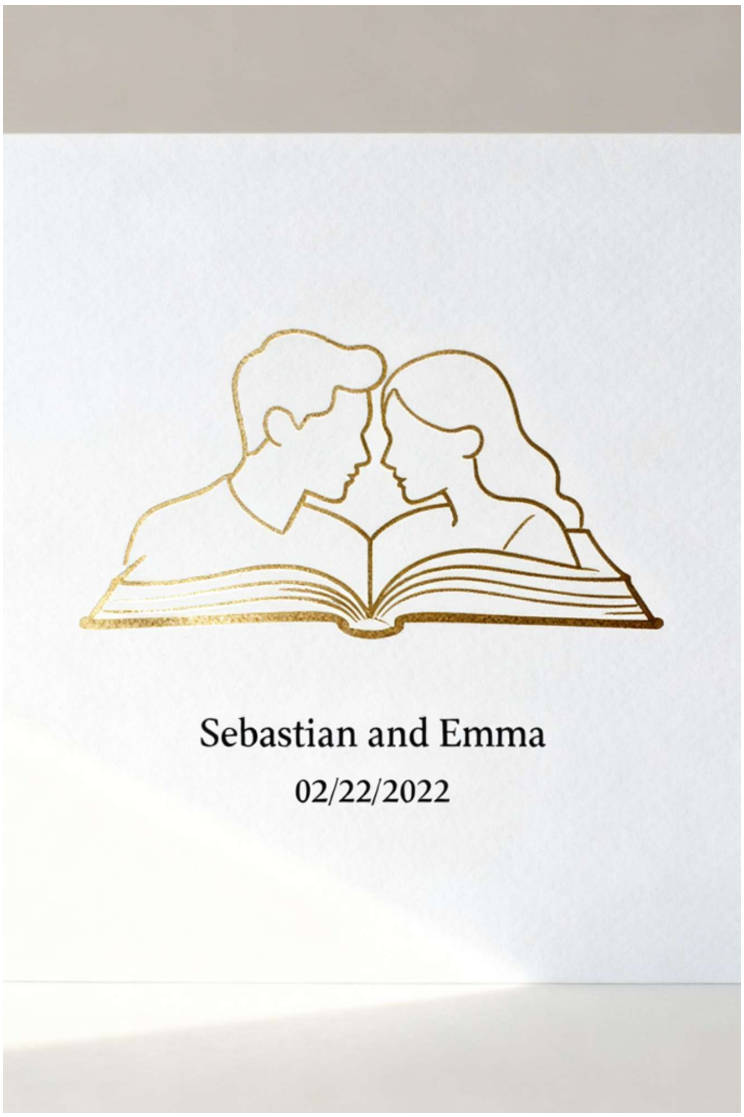
He also had some very exhausting ones. I think you would've liked him. I'm getting married without a partner, which you would probably call superficial, but I call honest. If you're curious, come. Emma. P.S. Some of my favorite books are still beach reads. I've stopped apologizing for that.« Send.

Seven cards. Five left.

The next was professionally printed on heavy cardstock. It smelled, faintly and unmistakably, of expensive cologne. The kind you put on before a meeting you're planning to win.

»Wedding of Emma and Sebastian.« In a font that probably had a very serious name.

Oh, right. The colleague.


Sebastian and Emma
02/22/2022

Chapter 8

The Colleague

The thing about Sebastian is that he wasn't obviously bad. That's the part that took me longest to untangle.

He was charming. He was competent. He was good at making you feel like you were in the right room, the right conversation, the right story. The problem was it was always his story. You were always a supporting character who happened to be useful in this scene.

Ad agency Creative Solutions, 2014. I was 23 and had just graduated and believed, with the particular confidence of someone who'd worked very hard and hadn't been tested yet, that I was good at things. Sebastian was 28, Account Director, and had already perfected the specific skill of making other people feel both flattered and slightly uncertain.

"You're the new junior account manager?" he'd asked on my first day, smiling in a way that managed to be both

welcoming and assessing. “Good. We needed someone who looks like they can handle things.”

I thanked him. I felt seen. Both of those things were already wrong.

He mentored me with genuine attention. Client meetings, industry events, the architecture of office politics. He was good at it. He explained things clearly and remembered what I’d told him and followed up. He was exactly what a mentor should be.

He asked me to dinner after two months. I said yes.

“We should keep this between us,” he said, after the first time we kissed in a parking garage after a client dinner that had gone late. “Office dynamics are complicated.”

That made sense. It genuinely did, and I want to be fair about that. I agreed, and we were discreet, and I felt, for a few weeks, like I was part of something private and therefore somehow important.

The sex was efficient. That's the word that's stayed with me, years later. Efficient. Like he knew what the expected outcome was and moved toward it without detours.

"Emma, could you finish the Morrison & Co. deck?" he said one Tuesday morning, sliding a USB drive across my desk without stopping. "I'm in back-to-back meetings. You know the account."

"That's your account."

"We're a team," he said. Still walking. "That's what teams do."

I did the deck. I told myself it was collaboration. I told myself I was learning something.

A week later he presented it. The client called it visionary. Sebastian accepted the compliment without flinching.

I sat in the chair beside him and kept my face neutral and felt something in my chest go very quiet.

My campaign came four months in. New client, real creative latitude, mine from the first brief to the final slide. I worked

late every night for three weeks. I was proud of it—genuinely proud, the kind that comes from having done something that surprised even you.

The day before the presentation:

"I've been thinking," Sebastian said, closing his office door behind me. "I should take the lead on this one."

Everything in me went still. "Excuse me?"

"The client is new. High-stakes. You're still finding your footing."

"That's my campaign."

"Your ideas, my delivery. That's just smart resource allocation."

He said it the way you say something that's been decided. Not cruelly. Just—finalized.

I sat with my hands in my lap in the meeting the next day and watched him present my work. The client loved it. Sebastian received the applause with gracious modesty,

which is its own skill, and I will give him credit for being very good at it.

I got a raise of fifty euros a month. He got a promotion.

"You should be grateful," he told me later. "You're learning. The exposure is valuable."

I looked at him for a long moment.

"You're teaching me how theft works," I said. Quietly. Not angrily. Just: accurately.

He blinked. And then his expression rearranged itself into something patient and slightly injured.

"That's not fair."

"No," I agreed. "It's not."

Three days later I saw him in the break room explaining the 80/20 networking rule to Julia, the new intern. She was nodding the way I had once nodded.

I thought about saying something to her. I didn't. I wish I had.

I quit six weeks later, took the portfolio I'd built and the lessons I'd paid for, and got a job as a content manager at a startup where no one cared about my handle-to-grip ratio on success.

Sebastian had taught me something important: the people who tell you they're investing in you are sometimes investing in you. And sometimes they're just collecting the interest.

A real partner wants you to grow. They're not threatened by it.

Nine cards. Four left. And each remaining one felt heavier than the one before it.

The Tinder era. I smiled—not the warm kind.


It's a
Match
Wedding
Emma und Alexander
02/22/2022

Chapter 9

The Swipe Prince

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

2017. I was 26, and I had, at that point, been searching in some form or another for twelve years. I don't say that to be dramatic. I say it because I think I was starting to feel it—the accumulated weight of all those beginnings that went nowhere, all that hope expended on the wrong people. I didn't call it exhaustion then. I called it being open.

Everyone said: try the apps. So I downloaded Tinder on a Wednesday night and spent forty-five minutes making my profile sound like someone who had her life together.

Alexander appeared the next morning.

Six photos, all exactly right. Outdoors but not aggressively athletic. Thoughtful but not trying. The kind of photos that say: I'm interesting but I don't need you to know it.

8:12 AM: »Good morning, gorgeous. Hard to believe this app actually works sometimes.«

8:14 AM: »Bold is my middle name. Dinner tonight?«

The first date was great. I want to be accurate about this. He was funny and curious and paid attention to what I said in the specific way that makes you feel like the conversation matters. I walked home thinking: maybe.

What I didn't know was that 'maybe' was his specialty.

A week later, a voice message: »Made you a playlist. Every song is for us.«

I listened to it on the subway. It was perfect—indie rock, a touch of melancholy, exactly calibrated to what I'd mentioned liking. I thought: he actually listened. I sat with that thought for three whole stops before I got to work.

His apartment was a design statement: gray walls, white surfaces, everything in its place. Candles lit. Wine opened. Two plates of pasta on the table.

"Carbonara," he said. "Family recipe." He poured the wine with a small, practiced smile.

It tasted professional. Excellent. The kind of carbonara that was consistent in a way that home cooking usually isn't.

I excused myself to use the bathroom. The kitchen trash was visible from the hallway. Three Deliveroo bags. La Tavola. Pasta Carbonara. The receipt: $29.90. Ordered 7:35 PM.

I came back and sat down. He looked at me expectantly.

"How is it?"

"Just like a restaurant," I said. I watched his face for a reaction.

"Thanks," he said. "Took me a while to get the technique right." He winked.

I said nothing. I finished the wine. I went home.

Three days later, Instagram. @alex.digital: »With this amazing woman. #grateful #connection« Photo: a blonde. Corner table. The same restaurant we'd been to, the same filter, the caption structure identical to the one he'd used two weeks prior for someone else.

My stomach dropped in the specific way it does when you realize you've been foolish and you'd suspected it and you'd ignored the suspicion.

I scrolled back through his feed. There I was. And before me: a redhead. Before her: a brunette. »Dinner with someone special.« Same table, different woman, like a rotation.

I stared at the screen for a long time.

I was number 247. Or close enough.

"Special like number 247?" I texted. I wasn't angry, exactly. I was tired.

The three dots appeared. Disappeared.

12:41 PM: »Okay, real talk: we never discussed exclusivity.«

"We discussed honesty."

"You're too sensitive. That's just social media."

"And what am I? Content?"

Read. No reply.

I put the phone down and sat in my apartment for a while. It was a Tuesday afternoon. The light was doing that thing where it comes through at an angle and makes everything look like something worth photographing. I didn't photograph it.

I thought about all the times I'd told myself: maybe this one. And how 'maybe' had stopped feeling hopeful and started feeling like a reflex.

Alexander had been easy to spot, once I looked. The real question was why I'd needed the receipt in the trash to look.

Ten cards. Three left. And each one felt like something I'd have to actually sit with.

The next was handwritten. Heavy paper, careful script, the letters evenly spaced in the way of someone who thought presentation mattered.

»Wedding of Emma and Florian.«

The know-it-all.

I put the kettle on first.


Wedding
from
Emma
und
Florian
02/22/2022

Chapter 10

The Spiritual Narcissist

After Alexander I'd made a decision. No more shiny people. I wanted someone real—with actual convictions, actual depth, someone who thought about things.

Florian definitely thought about things.

He thought about everything.

2019. I was 28 and hadn't been in a relationship in over a year, which had been good, mostly, and also lonely in the way that's hard to explain to people who haven't done it. I'd gotten used to my own company and stopped trusting my own judgment in approximately equal measure.

We met in a bookstore on a Saturday. I reached for a thriller. His hand appeared next to mine.

"Do you only read entertainment?"

I looked at him. He wasn't being cruel. He was genuinely asking, in the tone of someone who'd never considered that entertainment might be enough of a reason to do something.

“Sometimes.”

“There’s so much more,” he said. He had dark, attentive eyes and the kind of calm that reads as depth until you’ve been around it long enough. “Things that actually push you forward.”

I bought the thriller and one of his recommendations. I told myself: compromise. I should have told myself: warning.

The first date was at a café he’d chosen because it was “authentic, not commercial.” The coffee was excellent, I’ll give him that.

“I used to drink too much of this,” he said, wrapping both hands around his cup. “Now I drink it intentionally.”

“What does that mean, intentionally?”

“I ask myself if I actually want it. Or if it’s just habit. There’s a difference.”

I looked at my cappuccino. I’d ordered it because I’d wanted one. I was now not sure if that was intentional or habitual

and I didn't know how to tell the difference and I'd been awake since six and I just wanted the caffeine.

But I didn't say that.

This was the beginning of a pattern.

Florian had a considered opinion on everything: how to eat, how to sleep, what to watch, how to exercise, how to argue, how to rest, how to want things. He'd tried it all himself and arrived at the correct answer and was willing, patiently and at length, to share it.

"Most people live on autopilot," he said. Often. "They do things without asking why."

"And you always know why?"

"I try to. Otherwise you're just a sheep."

After three weeks I was checking my own motivations before I ordered food. It was exhausting in a very specific way—the exhaustion of always being slightly wrong.

"Wanna just get pizza tonight?" I asked after a particularly long Thursday.

“Delivery pizza?” He paused. “Do you know what’s actually in it?”

“I know it’s food and I’m hungry.”

“But—”

“Florian.”

“I’m just saying. Your body is—”

“I know what my body is. Right now it wants pizza.”

We cooked something that took two hours and was very nutritious. I ate it in near-silence, which he interpreted as contentment.

On our first real trip together: camping. It rained, continuously, for three days. The tent was not equal to the rain.

“Isn’t this incredible?” Florian said, while water found new ways in through the seams. “So immediate. So real.”

“It’s wet,” I said.

“But authentically wet. Not—”

“Florian, I want to go to a hotel.”

"Those places are so sterile. You don't get anything real from—"

"I'm getting a cold from this. A real, authentic cold."

He looked at me with genuine sorrow, the way you look at someone who's not quite capable of what you'd hoped.

That was the moment I understood: Florian wasn't interested in me. He was interested in who I could become under the right conditions. I was a project. A rough draft.

And I was so tired of being someone else's rough draft.

"Can we please," I said, very carefully, "do something without you telling me how it could be better?"

"I just want—"

"I know what you want. I'm asking you to want something different."

He was quiet. He was processing this as feedback, I could see it. Categorizing. Evaluating.

I drove to a hotel. He came, after a pause.

We ended two weeks after we got home. Not dramatically. Just clearly.

I wrote him an invitation: »Dear Florian, I'm getting married on 02/22/2022. To myself, which I think you'd describe as superficial, but I'd describe as overdue. I still use the 4-7-8 breathing technique you taught me. It works. That counts for something. Come if you want. Emma. P.S. I ordered pizza on the way home and ate it in the car and it was the most satisfied I'd felt in months.« Send.

Ten cards. Two left.

The next was simple, elegant, written in a hand so controlled it might have been printed.

»Wedding of Emma and Mark.«

I held it for a moment without opening my eyes. This one.


Wedding Invitation
Emma & Mark
02/22/2022

Chapter 11

The Perfect One

Some frogs disguise themselves so perfectly as princes that you only realize they're toxic when you no longer recognize yourself in the mirror.

Mark almost broke me.

I'm writing that as plainly as I can because it's taken me a while to be able to say it plainly.

2020. The year of masks—literal and otherwise. The year I was twenty-nine and more tired of looking than I'd ever admitted to anyone, including myself.

We met at a café. He was sitting across from me, reading something on a tablet, and he looked up and asked: "Excuse me—is this chair taken?"

That's all. That's how it started.

He wore a suit that fit like something designed specifically for him. He spoke in a voice that was quiet and controlled

and somehow made everything he said sound considered. Not rehearsed—considered. There's a difference, usually.

"I know how this sounds," he said, sliding his business card across. "Management consultant. BMW in the garage. You're probably thinking: typical."

"No," I lied, because he'd caught me thinking exactly that.

He smiled. Just slightly.

"I would too," he said. "But I try to be more than my job."

He remembered everything from the first conversation. What I drank, what I'd mentioned about my job, the name of the café I'd said I liked. On our second date he suggested a place near it. I thought: he was paying attention.

The first time I fell asleep at his apartment, I woke up and the room was quiet and the sheets were good and the city was doing its thing outside the window and I felt—for the first time in years—like I was in the right place.

I should have paid more attention to that feeling. To how desperate I'd been for it.

Three months later I moved in. He had a spare drawer ready. There was a space for my toothbrush. Everything fit.

At first.

Mark's apartment was perfect in the specific way of places that have never been lived in, only arranged. Glass and concrete and everything chosen with care. My books went in his shelves but they were the wrong size and it bothered him in small ways he expressed in small ways.

The first morning I made coffee, he turned the mug so the handle faced the other direction.

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

I liked it on the right. I'd always liked it on the right.

I moved it back. He turned it again, an hour later, not mentioning it. Just quietly correcting.

That was the beginning of the corrections.

»Emma, the toothpaste cap.«

»Emma, the dishwasher—the glasses go on the top rack.«

»Emma, you're overreacting.«

My name, in his mouth, started to have a different shape.

He didn't raise his voice. He never raised his voice. He just —adjusted. Consistently. Patiently. Like I was a piece of furniture that kept sliding back to the wrong position.

I started adjusting myself first, to save time. I played his music when I was home alone. I ate his version of breakfast. I stopped reaching for the things on my half of the shelf that I'd started to suspect were in the way.

And then one morning I caught myself checking, before I made coffee, whether I was doing it the way he'd want it done.

That scared me. Not enough yet. But it started.

Weeks passed before I saw Lara. She'd texted three times. I'd said I was busy, which was true, and also I'd been a little afraid of what she'd see when she looked at me.

"Cappuccino with cinnamon as always?" she asked.

I hesitated. And in the hesitation I was already doing the math—what would I have to explain if I said yes, whether it was worth ordering what I actually wanted when he'd be home at six.

"I take it black now," I said.

She looked at me.

"Since when?"

"A couple months."

She ordered my cappuccino anyway and slid it across the table without saying anything. I drank it. It tasted like myself.

Later, looking at my hands: "You used to wear red."

"I like simple now."

"He likes simple." Not a question.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Looked at my beige nails.

"Your jokes apologize," she said quietly. "Have you noticed? You'll say something funny and then add a qualifier. Like you're sorry for having an opinion."

I walked home and tried to think of the last time I'd said something without immediately softening it. I couldn't.

The box came into it a week later. I was in the storage unit looking for my winter coat and there it was on the shelf, the cardboard box with »Wedding 02/22/2022« written on it in my own handwriting. I'd forgotten it was there.

I sat down on the floor of the storage unit with the box open in my lap. Eleven cards. Eleven names. The glitter on Maximilian's card had mostly gone. Tim's apples had faded to almost nothing. Carlos's was still blank.

I sat there for a long time in the cold and the dust and tried to find myself in the cards. The girl who'd made all these ridiculous, earnest, completely sincere invitations.

She was there. Under everything. Still. Just very quiet.

I stood up. I went home. I packed a bag while Mark was in his office on a call, and I carried it to the front door, and I stood there for a moment.

"You're leaving." He was standing in the hallway. Not a question. A fact, delivered with that quiet control.

"Yes."

"Because of what, exactly? I haven't done anything."

And that was the truest thing he'd ever said to me. He hadn't done anything. He'd just gradually, patiently, rearranged everything until I was the only thing left that was still in the wrong place.

"When did you last listen to me?" I asked. "Not correct. Not improve. Just—listen?"

He was quiet. Processing.

"I do listen."

"Not to me," I said. "To some idea of who I should be."

"Emma." He said my name in that specific way, the one that was supposed to sound like reason. "You're being dramatic. I can change."

"I know you think you can," I said. And I meant it.

I opened the door.

"Without me you'll fall apart. You're too emotional. Too chaotic. Too—"

“Too alive,” I said. “I’m too alive for the apartment.”

I closed the door behind me.

I stood in the stairwell for a moment with my bag and my coat and my hands, which were shaking slightly. Not from fear. Just from the effort of all that held-in noise finally having somewhere to go.

I breathed.

Then I went down the stairs.

A few days later I sat alone in a café. Cappuccino with cinnamon. The cinnamon sat on top in a small spiral.

I didn’t reach for it carefully. I just drank it.

Mark had taught me the thing I hope I never forget: the most dangerous person is not the one who hurts you dramatically. It’s the one who makes you so small, so gradually, that you start to think the smallness is just who you are.

Real love makes you more. Not less.

I needed someone who’d leave the cup where my handle is.

Eleven cards. Eleven names. Eleven versions of myself I'd navigated through or gotten lost in or grown past.

I held them all. The glitter, the faded marker, the blank one. The professionally printed one that smelled of cologne.

Time for the last one. The only one that had never been about anyone else.


Wir sagen
Ja
Emma ???
22.02.2022

Chapter 12

The Dream Wedding

The room was beautiful. Not beautiful the way magazine photos are beautiful—everything at a distance, nothing quite touchable. It was the other kind. Flowers a little asymmetrical. The candles a different height. Books stacked between the centerpieces because I'd run out of vases and decided I preferred it anyway.

Cream roses, gold accents, and everywhere things that were just—mine. A playlist built from every phase of life, so that anyone who knew me would recognize themselves in it somewhere. A table near the door for the frogs.

"You're genuinely out of your mind," Lisa had said, three weeks before, sitting on my kitchen floor surrounded by invitation mockups.

"Probably," I'd said. "But I've spent fifteen years waiting for someone to marry me. I'm done waiting."

"You're marrying yourself."

"Who better?"

She'd looked at me for a moment. Then started addressing envelopes.

The morning of the wedding I woke up nervous. I want to say that plainly because I think it matters. I wasn't serene. I wasn't glowing. I lay in bed for twenty minutes wondering if this was the most embarrassing thing I'd ever done and whether I cared.

I decided I didn't. Or that I did, but not enough to stop.

I got dressed. I did my own hair, which took longer than expected and ended up slightly better than I'd planned. I drank coffee with cinnamon, from a cup I held by the handle on the right side.

Then I went to my own wedding.

The guests arrived gradually. Family, friends, colleagues who'd received an invitation that must have seemed very strange and had come anyway, out of love or curiosity or both. A few of the frogs had RSVP'd. Most had come.

Tim was there with his husband and their daughter, who immediately found the dessert table and stationed herself

there for the afternoon. Leon had brought his wife. Sebastian arrived late and looked uncomfortable in a suit that had gotten slightly too small, which I noticed with a quiet, private feeling I refuse to call satisfaction.

And then, across the room: Carlos.

I stopped.

He'd come without an invitation because I'd never been able to write him one. He'd come because he'd been at a marine biology conference in Berlin and had sat next to a woman at dinner who'd told him about her friend's strange, wonderful wedding.

"She invited all her exes," the woman had apparently said. "Calls them her frogs."

At the word 'frogs' something had clicked in him. That word. The specific weight of it.

He'd looked up the venue. Gotten a train. Shown up at the door and asked if there was room.

He was a professor now—marine biology, Barcelona—with the kind of gray at his temples that suits people who've spent a lot of time looking at something they love. His hair was still wild. His smile still had that careful quality, like he was checking first to see if it was wanted.

We looked at each other across the room for a moment.

Then we both nodded. A small thing. The kind that means: I remember. I'm glad you existed. That week was real.

Nothing more needed to be said.

I walked to the front of the room. My hands were slightly cold. I'd written these vows and rewritten them and then decided to just say what was true.

»Dear Emma,

Today I stand here and promise you something no one else ever has.

Not because no one cared. But because no one else was in a position to make this particular promise.

Unconditional love. From the only person who will be with you for every single day of your life.

I promise: you don't need a man to build your furniture. You have two hands and a YouTube account. But you're allowed to want one who'll sit on the floor with you and laugh when you read the instructions wrong.

You don't need anyone to rescue you. You're not in a tower. But you're allowed to want a partner in crime—someone who's in the mess with you, not above it.

You don't need a man to complete you. You were never incomplete. You were just—looking in the wrong direction sometimes.

You don't need to be anyone's project. Anyone's rough draft. Anyone's before-photo.

You don't need to make yourself quieter so someone else can feel heard.

You don't need to choose between being loved and being yourself.

Dear Emma, I promise you:

Never to beg for love again. If it doesn't come freely, it isn't love. It's a transaction.

Never to make your dreams smaller so someone else can feel bigger.

Never again to check the coffee mug before you pick it up.

Emma. You are enough. Not someday. Not if you fix this or change that.

Now. Exactly as you are. You are enough.

The frogs were teachers—every single one. They showed you what love isn't, so you'd recognize what love is when it finally showed up.

It showed up today.

It's you.«

The room was quiet for a moment.

Then someone started clapping. Then everyone did. Lisa was crying, which she would later deny. Tim's daughter had gotten icing on her dress and didn't seem to care.

I stood at the front of the room and felt, for the first time in a very long time, exactly the right size.

Six months later I met David. Not on an app, not at an event. In a bookstore—the one I always went to on Saturdays, the one with the good coffee in the back. We both reached for the same cookbook at the same moment and I said "sorry" and he said "go ahead" and I looked at the cover and said I'd wanted to try the lemon pasta and he said he'd already made it twice and it was actually easier than it looked.

We talked for forty minutes in the cookbook aisle. I bought the book. He walked me to the door.

He didn't ask for my number. He said: "I come here most Saturdays, if you wanted to talk about the lemon pasta."

I did come back. We talked about the lemon pasta. And then about other things.

Weeks later, in the café that had quietly become ours, I told him the whole story. The box, the cards, the wedding. All of it.

He listened. Actually listened—not processing, not composing his response. Just present, the way people sometimes are when they're not thinking about what they're going to say next.

When I finished he was quiet for a moment.

"Can I be the thirteenth?" he asked.

I looked at him. Careful, kind, not performing anything.

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

He thought about that.

"That," he said, "actually makes this a lot less pressure."

He wasn't the happy ending. He was—a possibility. An open door. Someone who brought their own whole self to the table and didn't need me to fill in any gaps.

That's different from a fairytale. It's better.

Sometimes love finds you when you've stopped leaving a space for it.

Sometimes the most important story you'll ever tell is the one you finally tell yourself.

Emma's Note

I got married today.
Yes. Actually married.
02/22/2022.

Obviously that date.

I've been sitting here for almost an hour now, still in the dress, shoes somewhere under the table, trying to write something honest.

And I think this is the most honest thing I can say:

I told you my version of the story.
And while I was living it, I believed every word.

The frogs were frogs.
The lessons were clear.
Everything felt simple when I was the one telling it.

But people are rarely that simple.

Maximilian probably remembers a girl in a sandbox asking him to marry her.

Tim remembers someone who expected love to work like a reward system.
Leon might not remember me at all. Which is also an answer.

And Carlos…

Maybe Carlos was never wrong.
Maybe we just met each other in the wrong country, at the wrong age, carrying completely different versions of loneliness.

That's the uncomfortable thing about growing older:

You realize some people didn't fail you.
You simply met each other before either of you knew how to stay.

People change.
People survive things.
People become softer. Or harder.
Sometimes both.

And sometimes the person you couldn't love ten years ago would meet a completely different version of you today.

Spoiler:
I wasn't always the hero of my own story.

Some of those men were hurting too.

Some were trying their best.

Some were simply wrong for me in ways that weren't anybody's fault.

And yes.

Some of them were genuinely frogs.

Let's stay realistic.

But I was also, sometimes, something less than a princess.

The world changes when you stop narrating your life

and start realizing everyone else thought they were the main character too.

If you want to know how these stories looked from the other side —

how silence, perfection, control, ambition, loneliness, or love felt inside their own heads —

their stories continue inside the CREMABOOKS universe.

Some truths sting.

Others arrive too late.

And some only make sense once you become someone new.

Yours,

Emma

THE LANGUAGE OF SILENCE

Some people never say "I love you."

Not because they don't feel it.
Because silence became their native language.

Carlos learns that leaving your old life behind
doesn't mean you stop carrying it inside you.

SHADOWPLACE

Jonas never really decides.
He lets life happen around him.

Until one day he has to ask himself:
am I still living my own life —
or just surviving inside someone else's?

HAMSTER IN A SUIT

Sebastian optimized everything.

His clothes.
His routines.
His future.

Just not the part of himself

that still wanted to feel alive.

CERANFIELD CHRONICLES

Every kitchen remembers.

The arguments.

The laughter.

The silence after goodbye.

Some rooms don't witness relationships.

They archive them.

THE DATING PROTOCOL

CONTENT WARNING

Emotional abuse, manipulation, psychological violence,

gaslighting

What starts as self-improvement

slowly becomes emotional programming.

And at some point Alex no longer knows:

which parts of him are real —

and which parts were trained into existence.

MORE STORIES FOLLOW

More frogs.

More perspectives.

More emotional truths.

The CREMABOOKS universe is still expanding.