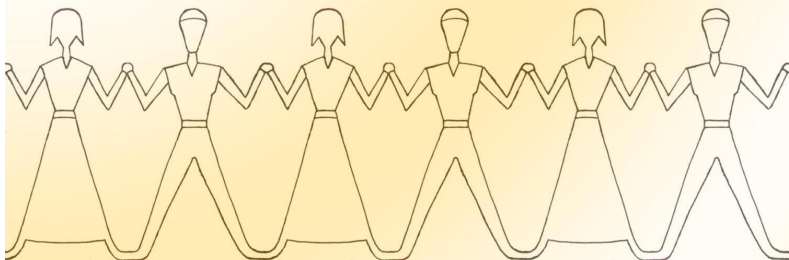


Lana Light
Sincerely About Us



Лана Лайт
Искренне о нас

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Аннотация

The English version and the Russian version. The most beautiful and important moments in life are those we share with other souls in human bodies. Since I have never been able to gather all of my dearest people in one place, I figured why not gather them under the cover of one book and introduce them to each other? This is also a way of sharing my deep feelings of appreciation toward each truly significant person I have met, as well as my thoughts on life, loss, love, and friendship. Happy reading!

Версия на английском и на русском. Самые прекрасные и важные моменты в жизни всегда те, что мы разделяем с другими душами в человеческих телах. Поскольку мне никогда не удавалось собрать всех самых дорогих мне людей в одном месте, я подумала, почему бы не собрать их под обложкой одной книги и представить их друг другу. Это также способ выразить мою признательность всем по-настоящему значимым для меня людям, а еще поделиться мыслями о жизни, утратах, любви и дружбе. Приятного чтения!

Содержание

Dedicated	4
Preface	5
Chapter 0. Origins	8
Chapter 1. My Sweet Cousin	12
Chapter 2. My Only Uncle	14
Chapter 3. My French Teacher	15
Chapter 4. My Lovely Opposite	18
Chapter 5. Alex the Teacher	21
Chapter 6. A Fellow Capricorn	25
Chapter 7. Infatuated	29
Chapter 8. My Soul Sister	36
Chapter 9. My Tender Knight	40
Chapter 10. The Warmest Winter in My Life	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

Лана Лайт
Sincerely About Us.
Искренне о нас

Dedicated

To the loving memory of Natasha who was one of the most creative and genuinely artistic people I've ever known and whose example showed me that I, too, could actually express myself in any way possible.

To my soul friends scattered all around the world: those I have already crossed paths with and those I am yet to meet.

Preface

“There are few things more powerful in the Universe than memory and connection.” – Oliver Queen to Barry Allen in *Arrow*

“Family isn’t just the people that you grew up with. It’s the people you find, the ones you love, ones that make you crazy, make you smile.” – Barry Allen to Sara Lance in *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*

“I guess when you're young, you just believe there'll be many people you'll connect with. Later in life you realize it only happens a few times.” – Celine in *Before Sunset*

I think our souls really rejoice when we get to truly connect with another human being.

Although there are billions of people on this planet, we don’t get to see most of them because we’re not supposed to bond with all of them on a meaningful level. And it could be for various reasons which don’t necessarily mean that most of these people are bad for us. It only means we are not supposed to and cannot click with everyone.

We’re all very different, we all have different personalities that are not compatible with everyone around us. And it’s fine. It’s even great because it makes those instances when we recognize

“our” person, creating that first thread of connection between us and another human, so much more special. Moreover, way too often these special moments don’t happen in grand settings but rather they are very fleeting, and if we don’t pay enough attention, they may pass us by without leaving any trace in our life and memory.

However, if and when we are mindful, suddenly a word, a scar, a smile, or an image bursts something bright in us into existence. This is pure magic to me. A second ago we might know next to nothing about this person but then BOOM! – we’re bound for life: as life-long friends, as a student and a teacher, as lovers, as travel buddies... We may not even realize it yet – or ever at all – but there’s a powerful invisible thread of energy, of instant recognition, of love and trust woven between our hearts and our eyes.

Even though we then have to leave this cozy bubble, we immediately KNOW in our heart of hearts that we’ll meet again. And again. And when there are enough threads between the two of us, we’ll feel this desperate strong need to stay close to this person for as long as possible, to nurture this budding connection, because it’s PRECIOUS and RARE. Surely, we feel that way not because we’re lonely, it’s just that all of a sudden we realize that it is simply better to be connected to this particular person and that we feel more abundant inside, more like ourselves than on our own.

I believe that we’re not actually seeking love and romantic

relationships in life. We are all looking for authentic connections with “our” people, our spiritual tribe who are commonly referred to as soulmates, with whom we can then experience the best and most beautiful friendship, love, romance, partnership, and companionship. And regardless of how long these relationships actually last, these connections mark us for eternity.

Chapter 0. Origins

When I think of you, five specific images immediately come to mind, and I hold them very dear to my heart because I believe they have shaped a lot of who I am.

The very first one is mostly how I imagine the situation to have unfolded. As winters in our home country are known to be really harsh, gloomy, and cold seasons, you must have wanted to bring more light and joy into your day-to-day life. That's why you gave me a name with the word "light" in it which I have always been grateful for. The idea of seeing the brighter side of things is something I've held onto even during my lowest and darkest moments. In addition, my name has led to a few funny incidents, like, when my baby nephews would look up in confusion or point at the ceiling upon hearing somebody say it.

As a child, I used to love looking through photos of baby me. Each time I came across one of them in particular, I felt a sense of adoration and care. In this photo a much younger you is seen squatting in front of me when I was sixteen months old, offering a fluffy dandelion. I suppose I always longed for your attention, but you were often busy working hard to provide for us. So this photo became the only tangible proof of your presence during my early years.

When I was very little, you had this awesome hobby of trekking in the mountains (it had started way before I was born).

Mom was never pleased about being left alone with two kids for 2-3 weeks at a time but I guess she couldn't fully comprehend what it meant for you. Having trekked in the Himalayas a few times myself, I absolutely get it, though. Now I truly understand why, when coming back home after another trip, you carried an aura of bliss, joy, and freedom along with you and were glowing from the inside through your thick bushy beard. I experience it all, too, whenever I'm out in nature, away from the noise and worries of city life. I'm sure you have passed this mountain-loving gene down to me, and it brings a smile to my face to know we have that in common.

There is one more thing that I often forget about, mainly because it has been an integral part of me for a very very long time. Strangely enough, it began with you. Despite spending most of my time with Mom as you worked from morning till night, I don't recall her ever reading to me. However, when I was between the ages of five and eight, you often read to me. Instead of short stories or fairy tales, you chose long captivating novels about pirates and sea adventures which took you many consequent nights to finish. This bedtime reading became my most cherished part of the day, something I always looked forward to.

Among those stories, there was one that stood out from the rest. It was significantly shorter and featured a young girl as the main character. Its airy and unique atmosphere captivated my imagination, leaving a lasting impact for many years to come. In fact, I was so moved by this tale that I wrote an essay about it in

high school, which became the first time I wrote something not out of obligation but out of genuine desire.

This beautiful and tender story taught me to have faith in what I believe in and showed me that even the most improbable dreams can come true. So, Dad, thank you for introducing me to *The Scarlet Sails*. This literary extravaganza will forever remain timeless and cherished in my heart.

Finally, what I will always owe you is my love for photography. It all began with my curiosity for the mystery and magic unfolding in our tiny bathroom when you entered it without turning on the lights and asked everyone not to disturb you in there. Though your photos may not have been artistic or sophisticated, they hold an immense value allowing me to relive some of the important childhood moments. Hardly any families we knew back then had photo cameras. It's truly remarkable that we did, considering the fact that my early years coincided with the extreme scarcity of even the most essential goods in our country. Anyway, you meticulously documented many of my dance studio performances, all my birthday parties, our family picnics in the park, as well as my teachers, classmates, and various school events. As I entered high school, you bought me my first easy-to-use automatic film photo camera! I put it to very good use, assuming the role you had once held. Later, just before I went traveling on my own, and this old camera had broken, understanding the importance of tangible memories, you got me another compact camera, a digital one this time. It became my

constant companion which I treasured dearly and kept by my side at all times: on the table during meals, next to my bed at night as I browsed through the day's photos before falling asleep, and always tucked safely in my backpack during the day. Those photos have much lower resolution than modern ones but the mere fact of having them transcends their technical quality. Each image allows me to relive some of the most cherished memories of my young adult life. I can't thank you enough for this gift.

Even though, just like you, I haven't become a professional mountaineer or photographer, these are my all-time favorite hobbies, even passions, and they are rooted in you, Dad. Love you!

Chapter 1. My Sweet Cousin

You're the only family member I've ever felt truly connected to. We met in the summer after my first year of school. You were about 14 at the time. What was remarkable about you is that you were a teenager who genuinely enjoyed spending time with your family: parents, grandparents, younger brothers, pets, as well as cousins.

When we arrived at your place, I vividly remember being showered with immense hospitality and warmth, something that I had never experienced before...

The entire time we spent with you, I felt cozy and snug. It was a new and very pleasant sensation for me. You would braid my hair and read bedtime stories to me in the attic of your countryside house. When I woke up in the morning, playful sun rays would greet me, and I would immediately rush downstairs to see you. I still have a couple of photos where I'm not looking at the camera but rather at you, with utmost admiration. They never fail to make me smile and be grateful to have you as my only female cousin.

We savored juicy watermelons and delicious river fish full of the tiniest bones, played happily with your dog, swam in huge pools of warm muddy water left on the riverbed after the Lena, this magnificent Siberian river, had partially dried up during the July drought, and then screamed at the top of our lungs as the

adults attempted to rinse the mud off us with the icy cold river water.

Those three weeks were by far the brightest and most wonderful time I had ever spent with my family, albeit my extended one. As we were about to leave, I realized for the first time ever that I really wanted your mom to adopt me so that I could stay with you a little longer. I cried my eyes out at the airport before our flight, holding onto you tightly as if hoping it would change anything.

The kindness and warmth you radiated set the bar very high for the type of people I wanted to have more in my life. But I'm glad you did because thanks to you I learned that such people actually exist, that I might meet them and experience more beautiful human connections.

Chapter 2. My Only Uncle

You were my mom's younger brother whom she adored. She never said that explicitly but I could see it in the smile that appeared in her eyes when she was talking about you. And I could definitely see where this admiration came from. Mom had moved out of your parents' place when you were still in elementary school, so she was happy to see the man you had grown up to be.

You were a loving husband, an awesome dad to your two boys, and a very hardworking, energetic man with entrepreneurial spirit during the times when everyone tried to be mostly discreet. But above all, I remember you as someone with an easy-going, light-hearted, and simply larger-than-life personality.

You took us swimming and gave us a ride in a canoe, let us run in your garden, hide behind berry bushes, play in a small garden pool, climb trees, and eat wild berries from their branches. You always had a joke up your sleeve and a broad smile on your face, even when your eyes showed how tired you were.

Mom said you were in a rush all the time: in a rush to live, to work, to spend time with your loved ones, to enjoy as much of this life, of its big and little moments as possible – as if you knew you didn't have much of it ahead of you.

You were gone way too early for such an amazing man, but I will never forget how much you loved your family and how much you loved life.

Chapter 3. My French Teacher

When I first entered your classroom at the tender age of 10, my classmates and I were welcomed by the most radiant person I had seen at school so far. That alone seemed like a promising start to tackling this new unknown “monster” in my schedule called French.

Surprisingly enough, after I'd been placed into the French one third of my class, my parents didn't object to the school's decision. They must have believed it was way better than studying German, while also planning for me to learn English, which was becoming more and more popular, as an extracurricular class. For me, it was all the same at first as I didn't understand the importance of one foreign language over another. However, it soon became clear, even to my young self, that I'd ended up in the right group: ours was much smaller than the English one, so we received a lot of individual attention, and we actually had consistency in this class while English teachers came and went, often leaving their students rather confused about what they were trying to learn.

I often looked forward to your lessons. You were always gentle and had the kindest and most charming of smiles. I didn't consciously realize it, but I could definitely feel that you had a deep love for your subject, you were immersed in the French spirit and, most importantly, eager to share it all with us. And

it WAS contagious. Although memorizing those endless verb endings and noun genders was sometimes very difficult, I was inspired to go on by the immense happiness I saw in your big brown eyes.

One of the most fun things you did was match our Russian names to their French equivalents. I became Claire, of course. This was the first time in my life that I had been called a version of my name that sounded unusual, allowing me to show a slightly different side of myself. The biggest challenge for me was the French R sound. I just couldn't – or didn't want to? – get it right for several months. However, you were always very patient with me and never pushed or pressured me. And so then, one day, it finally happened. Not only did I learn to pronounce the R correctly, but I also felt like something else changed inside me; I guess, in that moment, I shifted from learning the language analytically to acquiring it with all my being: feeling and sensing it rather than thinking. That's why, even to this day, I consider sound and speech imitation to be crucial steps toward mastering any language.

Many years later I accidentally bumped into you in our old neighborhood and to my surprise, you looked as young and dazzling as you did in our first lesson. Eventually, you shared with me that you had indeed been fresh out of university when you started working at my school; and fresh out of a couple of trips to France, which definitely contributed to you embodying its spirit. It turns out, even at such a young age, my intuition was

right.

This intense appreciation of France and everything French, which I gained from you, stayed with me even after we got a new French teacher and then into my university years when it was my turn to visit this beautiful country. All the impressions I got during my travels there seemed to find perfect resonance within me. It felt as though I was not only predetermined to love France with all my heart but also destined to be loved back. The time I spent in France was safe, filled with adventure, and absolutely unforgettable.

You paved the way for my love of languages and cultures and helped me take my first careful steps on this path. Exploring these two foreign languages (French and English), delving into their depths and peculiarities, as well as discovering my own potential for understanding and appreciating them, have always brought me immense joy and comfort. I will be forever grateful to you for doing that, but mostly for doing it with the charm and kindness of an authentically French woman you have always been in my mind.

Chapter 4. My Lovely Opposite

Being friends with you for over 20 years (can you believe this?!) sometimes makes me feel like we've actually known each other for much MUCH longer... Besides, every time we meet up (I wish we would meet more often), time behaves strangely: it pretends not to have existed for the past few months – or years – making us believe we only saw each other a couple of days ago. Or even better: catching up with you brings out my teenage self who can laugh unabashedly and be as lively and carefree as I used to be, and that is invaluable. It's also solid evidence that despite attending different high schools, then different universities, getting married, divorced, living in different cities, sometimes even countries, and having children, we haven't changed that much since we first met as 13-year-old girls.

Coming to a new class after having had the same classmates for 7 years and seeing a multitude of mostly unfamiliar faces on the first day of school was quite overwhelming for me. You were in the same situation, of course, but as an extrovert, you seemed to be handling our new environment much better. That's why your brown eyes not only reflected your intelligence but also a sense of calm and composure; combined with your pleasant smile, straight posture, and confident demeanor, you came across as one of the few approachable kids I had met. Given that there

were only about 9 girls out of 25 students, it didn't take long for us to become really close friends.

Surely, we had our differences: extrovert and introvert, lively and reserved, talkative and taciturn, confident and timid, Gemini and Capricorn, Spears and Aguilera, Nick and Brian (of the BSB); nevertheless, we always enjoyed each other's company. I think there's only one explanation for why we sometimes spoke ill of each other behind the other person's back: as hormonal teenagers, we simply weren't able to accept and embrace our differences for a while. But then, about 18 months into our bumpy friendship, we had such a lovely, long heart-to-heart conversation that it took the bond and trust between us to an absolutely awesome new level.

Another amazing aspect of our friendship is our similar taste in music and literature. For the longest time, you were the only person I knew who enjoyed and listened to a lot of foreign music, and had a solid command of English, enabling you to understand not only song titles but also lyrics, and even to sing along! This was in the pre-Internet era, so we had to listen to a song bit by bit, rewinding the tape a million times until we could have a more or less coherent version of the lyrics on our hands. The amount of green tea consumed in your kitchen or mine while discussing everything under the sun (mostly boys, of course) was simply astounding. And it must have been astronomical, the number of times you heard me say, "It's all gonna be alright!" whenever you shared your worries.

What truly matters, however, is growing up alongside you and our “gang” during the most turbulent years of our teenage lives. We spent time together, celebrated the turn of the millennia, drank cheap beer and even cheaper wine, gossiped, admired Keanu’s chiseled brows as he woke up at his computer as Neo, excelled in school, got philosophical, dreamed about what the future might hold for us, got shut out of a classmate’s apartment barefoot, buried time capsules that we couldn’t find a year later... Ed Sheeran had a castle on the hill while we had a rundown stadium to hang out in. You’re one of the few people who raised me up in a way, and these things will stay with me forever, much like you and our timeless friendship.

Chapter 5. Alex the Teacher

If I remember correctly, I first met you on your birthday (and I'm rarely mistaken about dates, especially when it comes to the birthdays of the most important people in my life). How do I know this, considering it was our first lesson together and you didn't say anything about it?

Apparently, I had been putting in a lot of hard work and showing even more enthusiasm for learning English. However, without the knowledge and practice that I lacked, it wasn't enough for me to enter that one particular high school. So, my English learning club hired you, one of the best English teachers in the city, as my tutor to increase my chances of passing those exams successfully (my family was too poor to afford lessons with you)... Fortunately, it all worked out and I was on my way to our first class, bringing you some paperwork to sign for you to get officially hired. I couldn't help but notice your full name and birth date on the first page and was genuinely surprised to realize you were okay with working on such a day. Back then, birthdays were almost sacred to me. Little did I know that when I grew up, I wouldn't care about my birthdays, either.

Though I was extremely enthusiastic about learning English, I had next to zero speaking practice and struggled to string a couple of words together. However, you were incredibly patient, friendly and always encouraged me to find alternative ways to

express my thoughts when I would get stuck on a single word and couldn't move forward. After four months of weekly lessons with you and a lot of studying on my own, I was able to grasp certain grammar concepts, expand my vocabulary, write and memorize a few simple texts, and most importantly, start to overcome my shyness and actually be able to answer topic questions. I was amazed at how clear everything became after your simple yet brilliant explanations.

Entering the exam room, I was pleasantly surprised to see you as one of the examiners. It immediately lifted my spirits and put me in a much better mood than before. I truly believe that I have the Universe to thank, as when it was my turn to speak, the seat in front of you got vacant and not the other teacher. The simple fact of having a familiar face to talk to reduced my nervousness and boosted my confidence, even if only slightly. It was enough to pull myself together and answer all the questions calmly, although a bit awkwardly. You were fair and unbiased, but somehow I got the feeling afterwards that I had done pretty well and had a real chance of getting accepted. And I was accepted! This was my first accomplishment that held more significance for my life than words could ever express.

When the high school year began, I was no longer surprised to find myself in your group, I was thrilled! At the time I had no idea how academically challenging studying would be, but I was ready for it because I knew deep down that we had the most patient, talented, engaging, and simply fun teacher we could have.

Over the next two years, we had English classes every other day four hours at a time. I also spent countless hours doing grammar exercises, memorizing new vocabulary, writing essays, and coming up with what I would tell about my previous day in the next lesson. I was like a sponge, absorbing everything you and my group mates said, and was constantly in awe of how effortlessly you could speak another language and how much you knew about other cultures. I wasn't simply motivated, I was actually inspired to work harder because I saw it in your eyes how much joy speaking another language could bring. It all clicked; I was definitely in the right place doing what I loved and would always enjoy: exploring other languages. Your classes continued to pave the road for my love of languages, which had been initiated by my French teacher in middle school.

Also, it was during your classes that I first realized, even if only subconsciously, that teaching could actually be very fun. One just needs to find the right subject or topic, the right students, and the right environment to make this process truly effective and enjoyable for everyone involved. For now, I have found my own perfect combination and I thank you for showing me how it could be done.

I have always cherished the heartfelt words you wrote in my graduation yearbook. In your little note, you expressed how wonderful it had been to know me for 2.5 years and to watch me grow from a shy child into a lovely young lady with more confidence in herself. It was the best compliment I had ever

received from an adult and a teacher. It meant that you saw us not just as students, but as individuals with vast universes of feelings, personality traits and aspirations, and that was truly invaluable.

I want to express my eternal gratitude to you once again (in addition to all the Facebook messages I've sent on your birthdays over the 20+ years of knowing you) because I never get tired of doing it. Thank you for becoming a role model of a teacher and a person for me, for believing in me, and for encouraging me to express myself since our very first lesson together. This gratitude extends to a more recent moment as well when I shared with you my intention to write a collection of memoir-like essays, similar to those you assigned us in high school, and you were genuinely curious to read it. Well, here it is. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Chapter 6. A Fellow Capricorn

I first saw you at the desk that I was going to share with you for the next two amazing years at our incredible high school. On that September day, I was excited and scared about all the unknown things that were yet to come but I tried to keep my cool as much as I could. The only familiar face at that point was our teacher's, but very soon, sitting next to you, I felt that you were friendly, as if you were eager to get to know me. I think we became friends as soon as we started talking. How could we not because as you later told me, you recognized me the moment I entered the classroom because you had seen me in a dream before. So, when I took a seat next to you, you knew right away that we would become very good friends.

You became my rock in this new place, and in a matter of just a few days we were inseparable like Siamese twins. Although you excelled in most subjects, especially English (oh, I was in awe of how fluently you spoke and how seemingly effortless it all was for you), I turned to you mostly for emotional support and inspiration, rather than help with homework. I still can't quite comprehend how we managed to talk for hours and hours on end, both in person – in class and during breaks – and on the phone almost every night. My parents must have been really unhappy about the growing phone bills, but I couldn't help myself because I had found someone who got me so well that, despite not

sharing all of my interests, tolerated me with my unwavering love for *The X Files*, romantic novels, foreign pop singers, and boy bands. However, we did share a love for learning and a unique sense of humor, and most importantly, we just enjoyed each other's company. We also knew all too well what it meant when no one really cared about our birthdays; being born almost a year apart, both in late December, we had witnessed our friends focusing more on the upcoming New Year's than celebrating our birthdays. So, in our final year of school, we joined forces and had an unforgettable birthday party with a bunch of our friends just two days before the biggest Russian holiday. It was fun for both of us to be celebrated that way.

During those two years in high school, we went through thick and thin together: there was a lot of studying, laughing and crying, eating desserts at our favorite café, sharing stories of sleepless school nights spent writing essays in Russian or English or attempting to memorize math, chemical or physics formulas that seemed incomprehensible to us, exchanging thoughts on movies, sharing our own romantic stories and dreams. And countless jokes told and laughed at uncontrollably.

Sometime during the winter of our second and final year of high school, you pulled off such an incredible psychological prank on me that I still mentally applaud you for it today. I don't think it was intentional, though, you just went along and played off my reactions. Here's how it happened.

Everything started with a phrase you said almost dismissively,

“We’re going to your place after school anyway.” I must have raised my eyebrows in surprise and responded, “We haven’t discussed it yet, but sure, let’s go, it’ll be fun.” You were equally surprised and said, “But we did talk about it, yesterday.” Since we lived very far from each other, about an hour bus ride through town, these kinds of trips hardly ever happened spontaneously and always took a while to arrange. So, naturally, I replied, “No, we didn’t. I’d remember.” That’s when you unabashedly got carried away, “We did, at my place.” My eyes and internal doubts grew bigger by the second. I exclaimed, “Your place?! I’d definitely remember if we had gone to your place after school yesterday. But I don’t remember because it never happened. I went straight home, did my homework and then we talked on the phone as usual. That’s all.” You kept insisting, providing some bulletproof evidence that sounded more and more plausible, while I, though initially convinced that nothing of the sort had happened, felt like I was quickly losing my mind... Ten minutes later, when the next class began, you still hadn’t cracked even a tiny smile, leaving me puzzled and confused. The best part about it all was that you never told me the truth, though I assure you I knew then and know now for a fact that there was nothing wrong with my memory. (You may try and convince me otherwise – again! – but I’m not going to give in this time.=))

As a teenager and then young adult, I always needed just one truly close friend in my life as it brought me emotional comfort and a sense of security, even invincibility, in any extrovert-

oriented (aka social) setting. So, when you left after school to study at a university in another city and did it with such seemingly carefree ease, it broke my heart more than the recent romantic breakup. It meant that I was left alone in my day-to-day life, which was truly unbearable for my younger self. While I did have other good friends, I didn't have the same quality of connection with them. It also meant I had to adapt to everything on my own, and that was really difficult, but it became an important life lesson, of course.

Although we used to be very close friends, you've always been a mystery to me. While you were honest and open, it felt like you held back more than I did. And again, it often discouraged and hurt me, being someone who values close friendships. However, after all these years, it doesn't really matter anymore. What's important is that you were there for me in high school, sharing the experience of the craziest two years of our lives, and that, as you used to say, will stay with us "for all lifetimes."

Chapter 7. Infatuated

What a yummy-looking apple! I exclaimed to myself as I was browsing through a grocery store to buy some food for our 30-hour train ride back home. Little did I know at that moment that the fruit would play a pivotal role in the future events of my life. But I'm getting ahead of myself so let's rewind to about a week before.

In late October of that year, I was extremely excited about two things. One was going on a school trip to the cultural capital of our country with my friends and schoolmates (supervised and accompanied by two awesome teachers, of course). And the other was getting Aguilera's brand new album, which promised to be more sincere and provocative than her first one. I couldn't wait for both of these things to happen. So, as soon as I spotted the album in a music store, I purchased it and spent my days and nights listening to it on my *Walkman* (yes, it was THAT long ago: I had a portable CD player with wired earphones but no mobile phone yet, LOL). And a couple of days later, we boarded the train, marking the beginning of the best journey of our high school years.

Although our group was quite small – just under 20 people – I didn't know everyone at first, because about a third of us were boys from a class we hardly ever crossed paths with in the school halls before, or after. However, the train ride was quite long, so

we soon learned everyone's names. Despite this, we still stuck to our usual circle of friends, laughing hysterically, cracking joke after joke, and enjoying the time away from our parents.=) Juice and chocolate were basically all we sustained ourselves on; I have no idea how or why nobody ended up with the most severe stomach ache.

We arrived safely in the city and checked into the student dormitory. When we weren't going on the pre-arranged tours, which were delightful and interesting, we explored the nearby streets, bridges, shops, and cathedrals on our own, while enjoying juice and soda, eating chocolate, laughing, talking, taking photos, and listening to music. I loved the *Stripped* album so much that it was playing on my CD player non-stop, and when it wasn't, the melodies and lyrics kept playing in my head. One song caught my attention more than the others. I had to look up the translation of its title because it was a completely new word for me. When I understood its meaning, the lyrics made so much more sense and even brought a new level of appreciation for the song. But not only that. I felt like the song was written for me and about me (as all teenage girls do, apparently=)), because this curiosity and attraction had truly taken me by surprise, and I was being carried away by this new, unfamiliar thing that suddenly had a name, "infatuation".

You immediately stood out to me among your classmates. Your skin wasn't as deeply cinnamon-colored as Aguilera puts it in the song, but you were definitely not as pale as the rest of us.

And your brown eyes, paired with your gorgeous kind smile, truly hypnotized me every time they met mine in the dormitory halls. We were clearly aware of each other, but we never really spoke, and I envied your friends who interacted and laughed with you so freely. Besides, it was all quite foreign to me: I could hardly keep my cool when you were around, while simultaneously falling apart on the inside, and I was actually breathless a couple of times when I saw your eyes light up after noticing me. But you never made it any easier for me: you simply passed by, smiling as broadly and openly as only you could.

So, when I had lost almost all hope because by the time we got on the train to go back home, we had only exchanged a few *Hellos*, I couldn't believe my eyes when I passed your compartment with the freshly-washed apple in my hands and saw you reading by yourself, with all your friends mysteriously gone. I'm not sure what came over my normally timid self at that moment, but I stepped in and asked if you wanted me to share the apple with you. Getting an enthusiastic "Sure, yeah!" from you, I lost all the fear and dared sit down next to you. I'm smiling now because, surprisingly, talking with you turned out to be very easy and enjoyable. The apple, that we had cut in half, was really big and crunchy, which gave me a valid excuse to stay and chat longer. Sitting so close to you, I immediately noticed a faded weird-looking scar on your left hand. When I blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "It looks as if you ironed your hand" and you replied in a nonchalant but slightly shocked manner, "I

did, actually, when I was about three or four”, I think we both knew right away that we had just bonded in a way that neither of us could have predicted or explained.

Shortly after we came back home from our trip, you invited me to your birthday party. I was over the moon with happiness. The party was loud and crowded, but I only noticed it when you briefly left my side. For the most part, I felt pretty comfortable. My heart beat like crazy whenever you held my hand and pulled me close. When I buried my face in your shoulder, unable to speak, you always found the right words to make those awkward moments more bearable and with time even enjoyable.

School suddenly turned into a game of *Us VS the Schedule* with us trying to meet each other whenever and wherever possible, even though we spent most of the time in different buildings. I was walking on air, singing to myself, easily coping with the most challenging tasks and tests, always smiling and feeling warm inside; it was truly the greatest winter of my school life.

One day, you promised to meet me after classes. It made me really happy since it didn't happen too often. As we walked toward the bus stop, you said you didn't want to give me false hopes anymore because you believed I was too good for you... It was surprising, considering you were never a typical “bad boy”; quite the contrary, you were very kind and had gentle and suave manners that were quite exceptional for our age. I guess the look of disbelief and total confusion on my face made you take my bus and ride with me for a while to make sure I was okay. You asked

me over and over if I was going to get home on my own, and when I actually spoke instead of just nodding, you said casually, “See you at school!” and got off.

I don’t really remember the rest of my journey home but I remember clearly walking up the stairs to my apartment, realizing that it hadn’t been a dream and that we were really done. In that moment I had to pause on a step because this thought hit me right in the heart. The pain was tangible, as if some string had abruptly snapped in it. That’s how I learned what it feels like to be heartbroken... I’m glad it first happened the way it did, though. Even if the reason might not have been entirely what you told me, you were tactful and discerning enough to have mercy on me and choose the words you did, so that my self-esteem wouldn’t wobble and fall apart.

That final spring stretch of the year was pure torture. Noticing you in the halls and not being able to come up to you, hug you, and talk made me lose my sleep, appetite, and cheerfulness. At some point, seeing how bad I was, you lent me your watch, which was huge and too loose on my wrist but which I still loved, on the condition that when I gave it back, I would consider it was really over between us and move on. I wore it every day and felt better. Indeed, when you asked for it back after a while, I returned it with a heavy heart but I was more prepared to accept that we were no longer together.

By the end of the school year, I had resolved to have as much fun with my friends at the graduation party as possible.

We all dressed up and had our hair done really beautifully for the prom, where we took lots of photos and danced the night away. However, the single best part of the evening, etched into my memory as one of the brightest and purest moments of joy in this lifetime, was when I suddenly felt your strong arms envelop me on the dance floor. It was so sweet and intense that my whole body still remembered the warmth of being in your arms and dancing together a good few years later. Truly, it is the best gift I have ever received from you.

The rest of the summer, with its university entrance exams, was incredibly stressful and busy. In other words, I had no time or emotional energy to think of anything other than starting this new chapter of my life. However, a few months later, I got my first ever mobile phone, which had the numbers of my parents and a few friends, but it was missing... yours. By hook or by crook, I managed to get hold of it and had to gather all my courage to text you. To my surprise, you were pleased to hear from me, and I was overjoyed! Word after word, walk after walk around the university campus, everything felt both familiar and fresh. Once again, I became completely helpless in my growing infatuation, and I simply couldn't stop what I had started.

Back then, I was bitter and confused about our relationship not developing into something bigger and better, about it breaking off where others only get going. But when I came to think of it more, I found it perfect: we both got what we needed to move forward without any fears or anxiety, knowing the best of each

other and leaving out the worst.

You have always been genuinely happy to see me and hugged me like the dearest of friends; and I've always mirrored it back. You often invited me to house parties (both yours and your friends'=)), took me to dance clubs and for long night rides in your car, and even shared a huge bucket of ice cream with me once when I was at my lowest. You were considerate and protective of me, and I appreciate it enormously. Over the years, I have often had basically the same dream with slight alterations in the setting: I come to a crowded event, where I know absolutely no one, and almost start panicking, but suddenly I see your brown eyes smiling at me in the middle of that human ocean, we hug each other, and everything becomes right with the world. Thank you for that and for everything we have shared in real life. It's so easy and enjoyable to think of you; I always do it with a smile on my face – and in my soul. There was almost nothing complicated about the time I knew you and spent with you. It's something I'm going to keep safe in my memory forever.

Chapter 8. My Soul Sister

Whenever I think of you, I immediately feel all warm and fuzzy. That is the effect you have always had on me, right from the very first time we met.

I returned home from my first two-month summer trip to France and started a third year at university. Life seemed too dull and mundane in contrast to the excitement and new experiences of traveling abroad. A good friend of mine, whom I have known since before high school, once took me out to a new café that she liked for its warm and cozy ambiance and delicious desserts. It didn't click in my mind at first, but I bet she wanted to cheer me up and lift my spirits, so I greatly appreciated her thoughtfulness.

The place was called Chocolate. As we were walking there, she told me they had the best chocolate cake in town. I smiled because this girl always discovered the best cafés, stores, bookshops, hairdressers, and people. She also mentioned that her new classmate from university would be joining us, insisting that she was the coolest and most interesting person she had ever met: intelligent, kind, and polite. I never doubted my friend's ability to form accurate impressions of people, but I certainly didn't anticipate what happened next.

When we arrived at the café, you were already there. My friend sat next to you, and I took a chair opposite you. We introduced ourselves, and even before we ordered our coffees

and cakes, I knew that I liked you, just like my friend did. I vividly remember looking at you across the table and having the weirdest impression: your eyes matched your light-brown hair, which immediately made me realize deep inside that I wanted to be friends with you! It has been over 18 years since that rainy September evening, but I still can't quite comprehend how this connection formed in my mind, and even more so, how it made any sense, but it did. It made perfect and undeniable sense. I believe it was one of those signs that clearly indicate we have just met a kindred soul, or a soulmate if you will.

Our conversation flowed smoothly as if we had known one another for years. Your favorite dessert turned out to be chocolate (a coincidence?), we all liked good books and movies, and you even attended the same dance studio as I did. You exuded an incredibly welcoming and cozy energy that made it easy to trust you and share everything that was on our minds and in our hearts. There were no awkward silences that often occur when a newcomer joins an already established close friendship.

By the time I got home that evening, I was certain that I wanted this newfound connection to grow and decided not to wait for another opportunity to meet you. So, under the pretext of coordinating our dance studio schedules, I asked my friend for your phone number, hoping to spend some time talking with you before or after classes. I must have called you that same night. Although I was very determined to take a chance and directly asked if you wouldn't mind going to the dance classes

with me, I also felt nervous yet hopeful that you would agree. Was it because you enjoyed my company or simply couldn't say no to a new acquaintance? I'm not entirely sure, but I'm so glad that you graciously accepted. I'm even happier that my somewhat stalker-like approach didn't scare you off. Anyway, this marked the beginning of our beautiful long-lasting friendship.

In the following 5 years, we spent an insane amount of time together, attending the same dance classes and festival rehearsals, swimming, drinking coffee, eating desserts, taking long walks in the city, making mulled wine, watching movies, taking photos, always enjoying each other's company, and talking. Or, more accurately, talking, talking, and then talking some more. I quickly realized that not only were you an active listener – like me – who always showed genuine interest by asking insightful questions, but also the only person I knew I could share my innermost thoughts and feelings with, without being judged or frowned upon. To this day, you are the only friend whom I have ever trusted to share ALL of myself with. It's priceless. You have always understood, supported, and encouraged me by giving me your time, warm energy, bright smiles, and by saying simple yet wise and powerful words when I needed to hear them the most. Moreover, it always amazes me that we have stayed on the same wavelength, exploring similar concepts in life, even after we moved to different cities and countries. Whenever we meet up or talk on the phone, I get washed over by this familiar feeling of mutual trust, of being completely understood and seeing myself

mirrored in you. On top of that, it seems as if no time has passed at all, and we effortlessly pick up our conversation and friendship right where we left off. My love for you and my appreciation of you, your presence in my life go beyond any words. You are the sister I have never had, or how I like to think of it, my spiritual sister. And I believe our strong soulful connection is evident, since for a while, we were even considered biological sisters by those who didn't know us well.

My dear friend, I am infinitely grateful to have found you and to know that I can always be absolutely sincere with you, telling you all about my life experiences and my perception of them, and always count on receiving truly empathetic feedback. That's why I have always felt relaxed and uninhibited with you, in the way only close friends can be. And I have missed it all so much: your non-judgemental attitude, the laughs that we shared, the very special bond that, as I feel, we have always had. You are a gem of a person, and I love you endlessly. May you be as happy in life as our friendship and interactions make me.

P.S.: By the way, I need to mention that your eyes are actually darker than your fair hair. The lighting at Chocolate must have played a trick on me... It's as if some higher power was at play, orchestrating our meeting and making sure that we truly noticed each other. It's a memory that always brings a smile to my face.=)

Chapter 9. My Tender Knight

Coming to a volunteer camp in your homeland, I was really excited to be back there and also to meet new people with whom I would spend the next few weeks, working and living side by side. Initially, I wasn't supposed to come to this particular camp, but the other camp that I had chosen got canceled at the last minute. Since I had been to this one before, the organizers gave me this place as an option, which I gladly took because I had absolutely loved it the first time around.

So there I was, standing in the courtyard of our guesthouse, basking in July's warmth and sunshine and taking in everything around me, which I never thought I would see or experience again: the stone house, the kitchen, the spacious common room, the big gates, the outdoor dining area, and the serenity of the surrounding countryside. I was filled with anticipation to go to the work site and see how what we had built the previous year looked now. I couldn't contain my excitement to share everything I knew and remembered about the place with someone in the new group. Discovering that you were one of our supervisors, I decided to turn to you.

Honestly, at first, I was rather hesitant about approaching you. I had never seen anyone with a stripe of spiky hair on their head in real life before; combined with a black T-shirt and a pair of jeans in the middle of a hot summer, you seemed rather tough to

me. However, when I gathered enough courage and talked to you, I was immediately disarmed by your warm smile and enormous gentleness.

This striking contrast between your appearance and behavior piqued my curiosity, so it was only natural for me to try and know you better. The more we interacted, the less of your outer armor I saw and the more your inner vulnerability shone through.

Whenever you had a chance, you would eagerly grab some paper and pencils to add yet another picture to your ever-growing collection of amazing drawings. One afternoon, as we stood in the courtyard, you decided to show them to me. What caught my eye in them, apart from your impressive skills, was an endearing combination of grim elements and overall hopeful romantic themes. In that exact moment, you became incredibly precious to me, and I instantly knew that I wanted – I needed! – to be friends with you for as long as possible. It took me only a second more to notice something else in your artwork; I couldn't help but blurt it out because it was so obvious to me, "But it's you, here and here, right? There's a depiction of you in almost every sketch!" You seemed equally taken aback by my words, as no one had ever even considered it before... I felt a sense of heartache for you, unable to comprehend why there were so many insensitive blind people in your life because in my opinion, your pictures spoke louder than words.

As time went by and our volunteer work progressed slowly but surely, our group kept sharing meals, stories, board games, short

trips to the nearby lake, and tours to the nearest towns. Little by little, I learned that you were very passionate about music, very picky about it even, so it took me quite a while before I decided to share the music of a local band with you. I had discovered it on my own and loved it so much that I would have preferred to keep it to myself rather than hear any negative feedback about it. How happy and even proud I felt when, as you were listening to each new track on the album, I saw you smiling and sort of approving of my choice. Was that the moment I won you over? I never knew, and it hardly mattered, because it felt like we had clicked effortlessly on some very deep level anyway.

I always had very tender feelings for you, and you were always sweet and kind to me, even when I made hilariously awkward language mistakes that made everyone, including you, laugh uncontrollably. I loved how respectful of the language you always were; as a passionate language learner myself, I appreciated it in you, in what and how you spoke a lot.

We listened to music and watched movies together, discreetly competed to see who would take a better photo during our walks... Although I had already been dabbling in photography for a couple of years, it was your appreciation for beautiful photos in general and your praise of some of mine in particular that really made me catch this photography bug. (Once, you were so excited about a photo I had taken that you half-jokingly exclaimed, "I should have taken it myself!"=)) Thank you for that, because it helped me capture important everyday moments

of my life in a more tasteful way than I would have done otherwise.

What has always stood out to me in my memories connected with you is that I felt more treasured and beautiful in your eyes, as if you saw something adorable in me I didn't realize was there. You never said it out loud, but somehow it was clearly felt in the gentle way you treated me and in the many photos you took of me as if trying to capture those moments of our life forever. By the way, no one had ever taken so many photos of me before, so it felt strange, flattering, and nice. But I did the same, whenever our group was out and about on some tour or afternoon walk, I made sure you were in the frame of as many photos I took as possible. However, it's not just about the quantity of photos that matters, but all the attentiveness to each other that shows clearly in them and through them in my memory. We had connected and, without realizing it, had an invisible but very powerful tether formed between us which made us always look in the direction of each other.

Later on, you showed me the capital through the eyes of someone who had lived, studied, and worked there. Honestly, I couldn't have asked for a more captivating and personalized tour of this magnificent city. You took me to charming little streets and shops, to a museum and a castle I didn't even know existed. Thanks to you I got to see the city from within, with its gems of places off the beaten track. These walks have been tucked away securely in the sunny corners of my memory, and nothing can

replace them there, ever.

It was always very easy and comfortable for me to be by your side. For me it felt like we had known each other much longer than those few weeks; it just so happened that we had grown up countries and time zones apart. So, this wonderful adventure of ours always had but one flaw: we both knew from the beginning that at some point I would have to leave and go home, making it all very nonchalant. The time was treacherously limited and our relationship was never supposed to last long. Or was it?..

Anyway, we fully embraced this opportunity to be happy kids living in the moment. However, I wished back then and wish to this day our story would have continued and evolved into something as beautiful and strong as my feelings for you were. And yet, I will always cherish my memories of the time I spent with you, a tough-looking young man with the kindest and warmest of hearts.

Chapter 10. The Warmest Winter in My Life

How can I even begin to describe what turned out to become the warmest and most magical evening in the middle of a full-blown snowy winter? And we didn't even make any conscious effort for it to happen.

It was quietly snowing that early evening in January. The city was dark, of course, but at the same time it was shimmering with the light of street lamps, shop signs, fairy lights hanging everywhere, sparkling fluffy snowflakes in the air, and the smiles and holiday spirit reflected in the eyes of everyone who passed me by.

Even though I was quite jittery coming to meet you, it all vanished the moment our eyes locked on each other and we immediately started walking and laughing, as if we had long been good friends. Our laughter came naturally, helping us overcome our initial nervousness.

We hadn't planned to do anything specific on our first date that winter night, and we didn't. We simply drank coffee, a lot of coffee actually, as neither of us wanted to leave that cozy café or the evening to end. We talked and laughed non-stop, gazing into each other's eyes (yours were – and still are – stunningly blue), not quite realizing that the bond between us was growing stronger

with each passing minute and each smile we shared. What we both did feel, though, was the out-of-this-world magic unfolding around us. You were good-natured, lovely, and humorous, and we clicked instantly. Honestly, I never fail to smile dreamily, reminiscing about those first few hours together, because they marked the beginning of the warmest winter and spring in my life.

Laughter, music, tea, walks, hugs, tenderness, and breakfasts. Your friends and your cool mom, who never entered your room without knocking, even though there was no lock on the door. Lunches we shared when I met you for a break from work downtown. Boundless joy, serenity, and the feeling of being at home. Photographs, butterflies in my tummy, the time we whiled away together, and the miracle of love between and all around us... I'm grateful to you for all of that and so much more.

I don't remember ever feeling cold next to you, whether we were walking along the city streets or cuddling while waiting for a bus in freezing winter temperatures, or lying in bed. I felt cozy and snug all the time.

Once, a few days into this magical journey, you suggested that I listen to a song by Depeche Mode. I'm so happy you chose "Home", which is performed (and written) by Martin Gore instead of Dave Gahan, whose voice is much rougher and lower. This allowed me to have the gentlest possible introduction to their music. The lyrics of this song perfectly reflected my thoughts and feelings about the time we were together:

And I thank you
For bringing me here
For showing me home
For singing these tears
Finally, I've found
That I belong here.
Feels like home,
I should have known
From my first breath.

Martin Gore's voice here is so hauntingly beautiful that it effortlessly takes me back to moments with you whenever I hear this song. I truly felt at home in your arms, it was where I belonged. And to paraphrase another amazing song by Depeche Mode, something beautiful was happening inside for me, and even though eventually I lost myself in you, in us, that's also how I found myself. Inside this heaven of ours, I was hypnotized and content, I felt whole and believed that everything was right with the world.

One more anthem of that time for me was, of course, "Enjoy the Silence" (performed by Depeche Mode and written by Martin Gore as well), with these particular lyrics standing out:

Feelings are intense
Words are trivial

... Pleasures remain
So does the pain
Words are meaningless
and forgettable
All I ever wanted
All I ever needed
is here, in my arms
Words are very unnecessary
They can only do harm.

My favorite part was definitely cuddling with you. I could never find the right words to express what exactly I was feeling in those moments, until I stumbled upon this quote, reflecting my feelings and sensations in the most wonderful and accurate way. Here's its loose translation: "If two lovers sleep or simply lie down holding each other tightly, they become tattoos on – and even under – each other's skin. Forever." Indeed, even though we went out a lot, hung out with your friends, watched movies, and listened to music together, all this "doing" paled in significance compared to just how magical and otherworldly being physically next to you felt.

I remember often sitting at my desk or on my sofa, without thinking about anything in particular, just staring off into space, while actually being completely consumed by my intense feelings and emotions. During those few months, it felt like I was floating instead of walking on solid ground. Every night, I went to

bed not really wanting to fall asleep, because I knew I would temporarily stop feeling this love, something I never ever wanted to happen (how ironic). However, as soon as I opened my eyes each morning, the very first thing I always became aware of was this enormous love inside me, mixed with joy, airiness, and fullness of life.

I realize now, many years later, that the true reason why I wanted to be close to you all the time was not a lack of self-sufficiency at all (as a friend of yours insightfully pointed out to me once, leaving a harsh long-lasting impression on me), but my subconscious wish to share this all-encompassing feeling of mine with you, to let you sense how deep my feelings ran, to shower you with them, because I was overflowing. Even though I was attracted to and loved other people in my life, with them I felt either safe, calm, adventurous, curious, joyful, or authentically me (the second best feeling, by the way), but NEVER SO overwhelmingly in love, elated, and airy. My soul was blooming. That time with you was my personal bubble of intense genuine happiness, which I hadn't experienced before and didn't experience long afterwards. The electricity that ran between us did leave us with unremovable tattoos under each other's skin, and the bliss I lived in marked me for a lifetime. I will always know as I knew then that "loving you was the happiest I've ever been." (Thank you, Shawn Mendes, for this lyric in "When You're Gone".)

We are bound by a thousand songs.

We are bound by delight.

We are bound by my broken heart.

We are bound by the city streets.

We are bound by the falling snow.

We are bound by a fleeting spring.

We are bound by the sweetness of our kisses.

We are bound by our first “Hi!”.

We are bound by my tears.

We are bound by the invisible threads woven together
lifetimes ago.

No matter how hard I tried to break those ties of ours...

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