

Sand Dollar

A STORY OF UNDYING LOVE

*"If someday you should ever think of me and miss me,
know in your heart that I'd want you to find me once again.
No matter how distant in time or space. . . FIND ME."*

Sebastian Cole

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This book is dedicated to our loving parents. We are grateful for everything you've done for us throughout our lives. By giving us love and support, honesty and integrity, we are who we are today thanks to you. And we love you for it.

Prologue

Of all the guests congregated inside Touro Synagogue, no one was more delighted than Miriam Hartman, mother of the groom. She was sitting in the front row with tissues in hand, her husband to her right, the bride's mother — a close friend — to her left. *If only Noah had married a nice Jewish girl like Sarah all those years ago, Miriam thought, his life would have turned out perfect, just the way she had planned. Instead, his life was ruined by that shicksa Robin he had insisted on marrying against her wishes. She and Jerry tried to nip it in the bud before it was too late, but Noah was stubborn, some nonsense about butterflies and the way she looked at him. For the life of her, Miriam could not understand why Noah never listened to his mother, because after all, she only wanted what was best for him. And at this point in Noah's middle-aged life, Miriam concluded, Sarah was best for him. With all the bad decisions he had made throughout his life, proposing to Sarah appeared to be the only redeeming one.*

Relishing in subdued victory, there was no need for Miriam to ever take credit for the role she had played in getting the two of them together. For all Noah knew, running into Sarah at the premiere of **Sand Dollar** happened by chance, or perhaps even divine intervention — if you believe in that sort of thing. However, there was nothing divine about it — not that time anyway — because Miriam had secretly planted her there.

Miriam was wearing a wide-brim chapeau with beige satin sash, tulle, and rose clusters. She had on a brown silk Carolina Herrera gown with sparkling gold beads and lace trim, an exquisite emerald butterfly-shaped brooch pinned on the shoulder. A spectacular 22-carat emerald-cut diamond engagement ring eclipsed her finger, and long crystal-shaped emerald earrings dangled beside her slim neck. Sitting beside her, her husband Jerry resembled an eighty-year-old James Brolin, tall

and thin, with manicured white hair and a commanding presence. He was wearing a black Brioni tuxedo accessorized by the black cane resting against the side of the pew.

The synagogue was filled to capacity by half the membership of Spring Valley Country Club, all wearing tuxedos and gowns for this black tie affair. It was a who's who of Rhode Island's most prominent Jewish community. Up on the *bema*, two thousand large white rose-heads adorned the white *chupah*. Standing underneath it, the rabbi gave Jerry a friendly nod, acknowledging the temple's most generous benefactor. Just to the right, Noah was standing beside his best man, his brother Scott. They were wearing white formal tuxedos with tails on their jackets, white bowties, and white *yarmulkes* on their heads.

The conductor raised his baton, and the ten-piece orchestra started playing **Canon In D**. Heads turned as all eyes focused on the first bridesmaid walking slowly up the red-carpeted aisle in a wine-colored gown. After all six bridesmaids took their place on the *bema* to the left of the *chupah*, the superlative performance of Pachelbel's masterpiece was concluded, and there was silence.

As the orchestra began playing **Here Comes The Bride**, all heads turned back down the aisle toward the entrance with anxious anticipation. Sarah was a beautiful, young woman, no doubt the most beautiful bride this congregation would ever see.

Fifty pounds overweight with a silver cross bouncing around her neck, Robin rushed through the front door into the synagogue in ripped jeans and a Block Island T-shirt. Stopping dead in her tracks, her eyes scanned the room. All five hundred congregants sitting in the pews were staring directly at her. Turning her head slowly to the right, she suddenly was aware of Sarah standing just a few feet away in a long, white wedding gown, a mortified look on her face behind her sheer, white veil. The orchestra's music came to a grinding halt.

Noah's smile, which had been filled with anticipation, turned to curiosity as he raised his hand above his eyes to see who had just entered, his jaw dropping at the sight of her. He looked at his brother standing beside him, speechless.

With a look of embarrassment, Robin turned around and escaped through the large, wooden front door. The guests started buzzing and

heads turned as they tried to make sense of it all. Glancing around nervously, the maestro looked at Miriam for guidance, who motioned with her hands for him to continue. He raised his baton, and, to the tune of **Here Comes The Bride**, Noah ran down the aisle toward the door. "Don't worry," he blurted out to Sarah as he ran past her. "I'll be right back !" With a bewildered look on her face, Sarah pulled off her veil and looked across the synagogue at her bridesmaids. The chatter from the surprised guests grew steadily as everybody stood up and headed for the exit. With a rustle of expensive silk, Miriam fainted to the floor.

Noah ran down the flight of red-carpeted granite steps, past the line of white stretch limousines waiting out front. He caught up to Robin walking quickly down the sidewalk.

"Hey... what the hell are you doing here?" he exclaimed, grabbing her arm.

"I'm sorry, Noah," she said, wiping a tear from her eye, turning to look at him. "I never should have come here. I'm such a fool." Shaking her head, she glanced at the white stagecoach with two white horses. "Go back to your fairy tale wedding," she sobbed, running across the street.

Noah continued his pursuit, dodging traffic and catching up with her on the other side. "HEY !" he yelled, walking briskly behind her, grabbing hold of her again. "You still haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

She looked at him lovingly. "It's not your fault... There's no reason why we couldn't have stayed married. The medication... the psychiatrist... God, I don't even know where to start," she said, covering her mouth and looking off.

"I don't believe this," Noah said, shaking his head. "Don't tell me *you're* the one who needs closure, because if you do — "

"No... no, that's not it. I made a big mistake... I never should have left you."

"Let me get this straight. You came all the way down here just to tell me you made some kind of big mistake?" She nodded. "A mistake," he repeated, throwing his hands up in the air, looking away. "A mistake?" he questioned, looking back at her, seeking confirmation. "Don't you think I know that already? Huh? I wanted to hate you so bad, but I couldn't stop loving you long enough to hate you. If there were any way I could have

erased your memory from my brain, I would have done it in a heartbeat. But not a chance of that... not with my heart refusing to let go. I would have given my *left lung* just to hold you in my arms for one more day, just one day. Thirteen years... and not a day gone by that I didn't pray you'd come back, look into my eyes, and say the words that you just said to me," he said, turning his head away, looking across the street at Sarah and the rest of the wedding party filtering out of the building.

"NO... No, I can't do it. Sarah's a good woman and a good friend. She'd never leave me; she loves me. I'm sorry, Robin," he said, looking back at her. "You're too late. In case you haven't noticed, I'm getting married today," he said, turning and walking away, forcing himself not to look back. Anxious to rejoin his bride waiting for him on the other side of the street, he stopped at the corner and waited for a few cars to pass. Stepping from the curb, he heard Robin shout.

"What did you just say?" he asked, his foot landing back on the sidewalk as she ran toward him.

"I remember," Robin said, out of breath as she reached him.

"You *remember*?" he said incredulously. "What could you possibly remember?" he asked, staring at her, waiting for the answer.

The beauty from within her soul shined brightly through her loving eyes as she looked deep into Noah's now melting eyes.

"I remember — I love you," she said in a soft voice, nervously biting her lip.

There it was... she actually looked him in the eyes and said it. As Noah heard these words coming out of her mouth, tears formed in his eyes. After all these years, Noah finally got the closure he so desperately needed.

Letting out a scream of anger, he turned and walked straight out into the street in front of a taxicab coming to a screeching halt, almost hitting him.

"GODDAMN YOU !" Noah screamed at her, slamming the hood of the taxi with his fist.

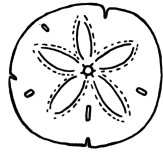
"HEY !" yelled the taxi driver out the window.

"How do you do that?" Noah asked her. "How do you just stand there and tell me you love me? Like... like the last thirteen years never existed. Like you somehow traveled back in time to when I last held you

in my arms, and... and everything's still the same, just the way you left it. What do you expect me to do, Robin? What do you — " The lump in his throat prevented him from saying anything further. He shook his head and looked away, a tear rolling down his cheek as Robin opened the taxi door and jumped in.

Cars were beeping their horns, blocked by Noah standing in front of the taxi in the middle of the road. He looked over at his bride on the other side of the street, and then looked back at the woman he truly loved, crying inside the taxi.

Now what? he thought.



FRAGILE:
Handle With Care

Look at me. Not too shabby for an eighty-year-old man, huh? I'm feeling pretty good, although I can't seem to remember how I got here or how this bandage ended up on my forehead. I hope I get out of here soon; I'd like to go home. After all, today's our anniversary.

I lean closer to the mirror, turning my head to the side and touching the edge of the white medical tape holding the square gauze to my forehead. Let me just pull the tape up a little bit over here and see what this looks like. I hear a knock at the door. Better get back in bed.

I scurry out of the bathroom and run back to my hospital bed, jumping in with relative ease. There's a second knock, this time louder. "Come on in," I say, pulling the white cotton sheet up over my hospital gown.

An orderly in blue scrubs enters my room pushing a cart full of folded, white linen robes. He looks about sixty-five, with dark skin, gray hair, and a five-o'clock shadow. A pair of glasses and a photo ID card hang down around his neck.

"Noah Hartman?" he asks, putting on his reading glasses to check the name on the clipboard.

"The one and only."

He pushes a table on wheels over my lap and places a tray of food on it from beneath his cart. I sit up to take a look as he removes the lid, revealing a nicely prepared dinner.

"Mmmm, smells great." I'm hungry, so I take a bite. "Now *that's* good," I say, pointing at the food.

"I'm glad you like it. I made it myself," he says proudly in a deep, soothing voice, hanging the clipboard back up on the side of his cart.

"Hey, how'd you know what I wanted, anyway?"

"You filled out a meal card, remember?"

"No, not really..." I think to myself, trying to put the pieces back together. "The last thing I remember, I was standing in the ark... something important to tell her. But after that, everything's just a blank," I say, taking a sip of wine from the plastic cup. "So, you must be the cook here at the hospital."

"Who, me? Nah... I work second shift doing whatever's asked of me. Right now it's serving dinner and passing out these robes to the patients."

I try to hold back a sneeze, but it's no use, I sneeze anyway.

"Bless you."

"Thanks," I say, accepting a box of Kleenex from him. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"I get that all the time. Got one of those faces, I guess. But I have been known to volunteer at the Hartman Foundation from time to time. Maybe you've seen me there, although I doubt you'd ever recognize me if you saw me. I've got to tell you, Mr. Hartman, you've done a wonderful job down there."

"Eh, it was nothing, really. And please... call me Noah."

"*Nothing?* Don't be so modest. The Foundation has helped thousands of families in need. I wouldn't exactly call that *nothing*."

"Like I said, you do look familiar..." I say, staring at him. "So, what'd you say your name was again?"

"Josh... Josh Numen," he says, extending out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Josh."

"The pleasure's all mine," he says, smiling with warm eyes. I return the smile. "Oh... before I forget, I believe this is yours," he says, handing me a delicate photograph, being careful not to tear it. "Careful, it's a little soggy. They found it in one of your pockets. Don't know if it means anything to you."

Mesmerized, I stare at the old photograph, the impression of the sand dollar stamped in my mind like it happened yesterday. "My wife took this with one of those disposable underwater cameras forty years

ago, back in ninety-six. See what I'm holding in the picture?" I say, turning it around. "Take a good look, because you'll never look at it again quite the same way. We were snorkeling on our honeymoon in the warm, tranquil water..."

A forty-five-foot catamaran dropped its anchor in a secluded, horseshoe-shaped cove. Steep cliffs rising up from a private, white sand beach painted the backdrop to this tropical island paradise situated in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean.

Noah was a good-looking thirty-eight-year-old man with dark hair, blue eyes, and a chiseled body. He was wearing navy Nautica trunks as he floated effortlessly on his stomach, snorkeling in the crystal clear turquoise water. Robin was a beautiful twenty-eight-year-old woman. Her red bikini showed off a silver bellybutton ring on a trim waist. Her long, red hair flowed freely on top of the water's surface as she took pictures of the sea life with an underwater camera. The clarity of the water was so pure that everything in sight seemed to be within reach, no matter how near or how far. Tropical colored fish in vivid colors glided freely all around them in the boundless sea. In awe of his surroundings, there was no other place on earth where Noah could experience such unsheltered freedom.

He tapped Robin on the shoulder and motioned with his hands, pointing out a lone object sitting undisturbed on the ocean floor below.

"It's a sand dollar. I'm sure you've seen one, probably even held one in your hand, huh, Josh?"

Noah kicked his fins and dove down about ten feet, picking up the sand dollar and resurfacing to get air through his snorkel. From beneath the water's

surface, he proudly displayed his newfound prize to Robin.

"No two are exactly the same. Its simplistic design and imperfect form may appear somewhat... well, ordinary. Most people probably wouldn't think twice about it. So why should this seemingly insignificant object capture so much of my attention?"

BOOM ! The precious sand dollar in Noah's hand exploded. In what seemed like slow motion, the sand dollar disintegrated through his fingers into a thousand tiny grains of sand that evanesced into obscurity.

"Because for me, the sand dollar represents life, and how fragile life really is. What was once so very precious to me, suddenly and without warning, disintegrated and vanished before my eyes. Just like the sand dollar, life holds no promises. Seemingly solid and secure in our grasp, the blessings we have in our lives today are easily shattered tomorrow. The lesson learned: never take your loved ones for granted. And if you're ever lucky enough to find that one person in life who makes you love more than any other person could possibly make you love, you treat every day together as if it were your last. You cherish every moment."

"However, for me, this lesson came too late, for she was already gone, seemingly lost forever. And there was nothing I could do to put the pieces back together. I would spend my life wishing I could somehow travel back, back in time, to the day I first laid eyes on that precious beauty."

The precious beauty of Robin's young face was shadowed by sadness as she nervously searched Noah's worried eyes for reassurance.

"If only I'd known how fragile she really was. If only I'd known her hidden secret. I would have held onto her so differently... never letting go..."

Snapping out of it, my eyes drift back to the picture as I set it down on the table.

"Wow, she left quite an impression on you, didn't she?" Josh says, picking up the picture to look at it. "You must have really loved her."

"Yeah, I loved her, all right... never stopped, even after she was gone." But why bother Josh with all this? I'm sure he has better things to do than listen to an old man ramble on about the one who got away. "Hey, pass me the salt, will you?"

"So, what was it about her that made you love her so much?" Josh asks, handing me the shaker.

A compelling question for sure. I mull it over while I take another bite. I guess there's no avoiding the subject after all. Besides, I really do need to tell the story to someone. I guess Josh is as good as any. "You mean besides the way she used to look at me... gazing deep into my eyes, my soul, as if I were the only other person on earth?"

"Yeah, besides that," Josh says, laughing, his kind eyes encouraging me to tell him all about her.

"I didn't know it at the time, but I guess you could say I was dead on arrival, so to speak. Then she came into my life and fixed what was broken, opened my eyes to what really matters, you know what I mean? She was full of life, a real free spirit. I gave up everything for her, and in return, she taught me how to live my own life and be free. Made me feel alive."

"Then what happened?"

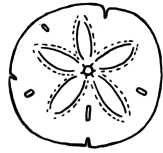
"She disappeared... vanished into thin air."

"Sounds to me like a story of heartbreak and misfortune."

"Yeah, some people might call it that," I say, looking away. "But that's not what I'd call it. No... I prefer to call it something else," I say, looking back at him.

"What's that, Noah?"

"A story of undying love."



Priorities

"It was four years before that incident in Saint Barts with the sand dollar," I tell Josh. "I had everything a man could possibly need — or so I thought. The year was 1992 and the place was Jamestown, Rhode Island..."

High on top of a hill rising up from a private, sandy beach sat a gray, shingled Nantucket-style house with six bedrooms, three balconies, and a large deck overlooking the mouth of Narragansett Bay. Scaffolding flanked the house on two sides. Thirty-five-year-old Noah stepped out onto the back deck wearing jogging shorts, a tank top, and running shoes, the sun just moments away from rising over the tranquil sea. He jogged down the numerous wooden steps leading to the beach below and along the vacant shoreline. Seagulls flew out of his way as small waves broke gently against an orange background.

The sun was shining as he made his way back to the house, running by a sand dollar sticking up in the sand, undetected.

Standing on the back deck of his home, Noah was drinking a cup of coffee and peering through an old brass telescope. On clear days like this, he'd scan the bay through his grandfather's telescope, his eyes eventually settling on the old lighthouse that sat on a small half-acre island in the middle of the bay. Built in 1871 and now in disrepair, the lighthouse had long since been abandoned by its keepers. It was a square, white house with a red Mansard roof. Ascending from the roof was a white hexagonal lighthouse tower with a rusted iron catwalk that wrapped around the light. Next to the lighthouse sat a small, white shed that once housed the oil needed to run the light.

Noah went back inside the house, turned off the computer, and put a large stack of papers into his briefcase. He grabbed his suit jacket,

briefcase, a set of blueprints, and a bouquet of 24 red roses as he left the house. He opened the trunk to the red 1966 Ferrari 330 GTS Spider parked in the circular cobblestone driveway and put his things inside. With the top down and the engine purring, he donned a pair of large Porsche sunglasses with gold frames and drove away, waving to the painters as they arrived in a white van marked *Hartman Enterprises*.

As he merged onto the highway, he found himself driving next to an attractive woman in a yellow Volkswagen convertible. She had long, dark, flowing hair and an exotic face. The woman looked over at him and gave him a big smile. Noah noticed her, but didn't acknowledge her, smiling to himself as he accelerated, pulling up alongside a school bus. The kids flocked to the windows to gawk in awe at the man driving the fancy, antique sports car. He glanced at the kids briefly and smiled to himself once again. It felt good to be Noah.

Inside the security office of Hartman Enterprises, a black and white monitor showed the Ferrari convertible pulling into a reserved parking space at the front of a crowded parking lot. The sign in front of the car read *Reserved for Noah Hartman*. Parked next to him were a Rolls Royce Corniche, a Porsche Carrera, and a Mercedes sedan, all with reserved parking signs that bore the name *Hartman*. Stan, one of the security guards in the office, watched Noah on the video monitor grabbing his things from the trunk as another security guard talked with a disgruntled employee about the parking ticket she had received.

Noah walked past a large sign that read *HARTMAN ENTERPRISES, National Headquarters*, and headed toward two buildings sitting side by side. One looked new and expensive, with mirrored glass and a sign over the door that read *Executive Offices*. The other was a rundown brick building with a sign that read *Real Estate Leasing and Development*. Built by Noah's great-grandfather at the turn of the century, the old building had never been torn down due to its nostalgic value to the family.

As Noah approached, three executives in dark suits stopped talking to greet him. "Good morning," Noah said with a pleasant smile, shaking their hand and glancing up at the sky, where a whooshing sound was getting louder and louder. Noah waved and headed directly into the old brick building, while the executives, looking at their watches, headed

into the nicer, mirrored one — the one with the sleek, black helicopter landing on top of it.

Noah walked into his small, cramped office that had two desks in it: one for him and one for his secretary, Diane. The office was furnished modestly, with wood paneling on the walls and linoleum on the floor. Diane, heavy-set with short hair and glasses, was on the phone trying to track down a shipment of L.V.L. beams that was delaying a construction project. With a smile, he handed her the roses and hung his suit jacket on the back of his chair.

Smelling the roses, she said into the phone, “Hold on a sec,” and looked over at Noah pinning blueprints to the wall. “Now what’s this for?”

“Come on now... you don’t remember what today is?” he teased.

She shook her head.

“It’s our five-year anniversary... working together,” he announced proudly.

She nodded. “You know what, Noah? You haven’t figured this out yet, but you really are just a kind, regular, down-to-earth type of guy — just like the rest of us — trapped inside an outrageously privileged, white-collared body.”

“Yeah, that’s what you keep telling me,” he said with a mischievous smile, setting his briefcase down on his desk and snapping it open. He removed a stack of papers and set them in three piles on Diane’s already overloaded desk. With an annoyed look, she struggled to find the Tenant Occupancy Report buried underneath the new stacks.

A dry-erase board was sitting on the floor facing the wall, concealing what was written on it. Noah picked it up, turned it around, and hung it on the wall, writing on it where he had left off, erasing some things and adding others.

“Thanks for the beautiful roses,” Diane said, hanging up the phone and grabbing a large vase off the shelf that was holding a small bouquet of wilted pink carnations. “Don’t forget, Russ will be here any minute. Can I get you anything for your meeting?” she asked, dumping the wilted flowers into the trash and replacing them with the fresh roses.

“No thanks, Diane. I’m all set,” he replied absently as he continued to write on the board.

Diane frowned at the piles of paper covering her desk. On top of each one was a spreadsheet titled *Prospective Mates*. The header read *SCORE, Name, Handle, Email, Age, Town, Height, Body Type, Number of Kids, Phone Number*. She picked up one of the spreadsheets and studied it, shaking her head in confusion as she glanced up at him.

Catching her look, he explained as he continued to write, "The pile on the left is all of the profiles of the women I want to contact on Mymatch.com. As you can see, I've given each woman a calculated score based on my special rating system. The middle pile is all the profiles of the women who have already contacted me first."

"Already? How long have you been doing this; six months?"

"This site is amazing. I just joined three days ago."

Diane picked up the first pile and riffled through the profiles. Large numbers were circled on each profile, denoting the score that each woman had received — 55, 27, 42, 48...

"What's with this puny little pile?" she asked, picking up the small third pile.

"Oh... those are the women my parents would like."

Diane looked even more confused.

"The Jewish ones."

Noah's eyes saddened as he stopped writing for a moment, reflecting back on his childhood.

Six years old and wearing a white tennis sweater and Mickey Mouse backpack, little Noah tramped behind his babysitter into the Mahjong room at Spring Valley Country Club. The room was all green, with green-flocked wallpaper, green upholstered chairs, and green satin drapes. Noah's mother, Miriam, was seated with three other women at one of the twenty square wooden tables, playing Mahjong with small tiles spread out in front of them. With long, black hair and delicate facial features, Miriam always dressed to impress. In a Long Island accent, she thanked the young babysitter and smiled lovingly at her son.

"Hey, sweetie, say hello to my Mahjong partners: Helen, Maxine, and Doris."

Noah looked at the ladies. "Hello," he said politely with a shy, adorable smile.

"Look at this cute, little *bubeleh*," Doris said, grabbing Noah's cheek and pinching it. Noah grimaced. "Don't you just want to eat him up?"

"You know, Miriam, he's turning into quite the *boytshik*," said Maxine.

"Noah, tell my friends what you told me you'd do someday if you ever bring home a *shicksa* who is mean to your mommy."

"What's a *shicksa* again, Mommy?"

"You remember, dear — a girl who isn't Jewish," Miriam reminded him.

"Oh yeah... I'll throw her right out of the house!" he said, swinging his fist through the air.

The women laughed while Noah smiled with pride. Miriam patted her son on the head and smiled quietly to herself, pleased that she had instilled her lofty priorities in little Noah.

Noah stared into space in front of the dry-erase board, a marker in his hand and a sad look on his face. Diane stood up and tucked the Tenant Occupancy Report away in the file cabinet beside him. Looking over his shoulder at the checklist on the board, she observed dryly, "Okay, Noah, now you've *officially* lost your mind."

DATING CHECKLIST

PHYSICAL:

voluptuous — A

pretty — A

young — B

not too tall — B

thin — B

good teeth — C

$5+5+3+3+3+1= 20$ possible points

PERSONALITY:

easy-going/soft-spoken — A

loving — A

affectionate — A

likes children — B

not Jappy — C

$5+5+5+3+1= 19$ possible points

BASICS:

no kids — A

doesn't smoke — B

lives nearby — C

$5+3+1= 9$ possible points

BACKGROUND:

Jewish — A

good education — B

good occupation — C

$5+3+1= 9$ possible points

OTHER:

likes sailing — A

sexy — B

good kisser — C

$5+3+1= 9$ possible points

A= 5 points

B= 3 points

C= 1 point

$20+19+9+9+9= 66$ TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS

"Voluptuous?" Diane questioned, one eyebrow raised.

Noah shrugged. "Okay, I know it must seem a little shallow, but dating in today's world can be very confusing. It's information overload.

By prioritizing the qualities that are most important to me, and generating a total score, I figured it would help me sort through it all. You know... find my best match in those stacks of papers."

"You can't be serious? Love can't be defined by a number. I'm telling you, Noah, when the time is right, it'll just happen."

"And this rating system will guarantee it happens," he said confidently, picking up Stacey's profile and looking at it. "Now take Stacey here, for example. She scored a fifty-five out of sixty-six possible points," he said proudly. "Now you can't tell me that she doesn't have a better chance of wooing my achy-breaky heart over..." he said, shuffling through the pile of profiles, grabbing one, "over Shelly here, scoring a measly twenty-seven points — come on now."

"You just don't get it, do you? People aren't some kind of two-dimensional statistic. They've got souls."

"Yeah I know, but how do I put on a number on that?"

"EXACTLY. You can't."

"I'm telling you, this is a foolproof system I've got here," he insisted, pulling a calendar off a nail in the wall. "Just give me 'til..." turning a couple of pages, "'til Labor Day," he said, drawing a heart around the date. "That's six weeks from now. I just have to do a little weeding out, that's all, and I'll find love — guaranteed."

"Six weeks, huh? Care to wager on that?"

"Okay... okay, I can do that. What do you say the loser buys the winner flowers every week for two months?"

"Nah, I always win that," she said, looking at the wilted carnations in the wastebasket. "Can't you think of something else?"

"Yeah, but this time *I'm* going to win, and you'll be buying *me* flowers for a change."

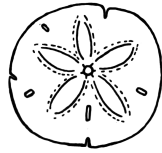
"Uh huh..." she said, rolling her eyes.

Noah's phone rang.

"Mr. Hartman's office," Diane answered.

"Russ is here," she announced.

"Okay, send him in," he said, lifting the dry-erase board off the wall and turning it around just as the construction manager walked in holding a briefcase and several rolls of blueprints under his arm.



Life Before Robin

"Rachel was a complainer," I explain to Josh, continuing with the story, "always complaining about one thing or another. She complained that I was shallow and self-centered. She complained I never listened to her, especially when it came to having enough chutzpah to stand up to my parents. Let's see, what else... Oh yeah, she complained I was materialistic and loved my boat more than I loved her. Maybe she was right — I don't know. In any case, it didn't matter anymore because my lawyer had called to tell me that my divorce from Rachel was now final, and I could start dating again. But finding the right woman was going to be quite the challenge. I needed to find someone that would love me for me and not for my money. And with Internet dating, finding the right match soon became a full time job."

"So I started with the Jewish pile first, not because it was important to me, but because it was important to THEM — my parents."

"What was important to me?" I say, repeating Josh's question. "That's easy... LOVE."

The clock read 9:01 PM. Noah was lying on his antique four-poster bed, talking on the phone to a prospective mate while holding her profile in his hand. They were hitting it off so well on the phone that before he knew it, the clock read 3:03 AM.

"Wow, I can't believe we've been talking for six hours already. We really do have a lot in common, don't we? Better get some sleep or we'll be falling asleep at dinner later on," he said with a yawn. "Sweet dreams, Stacey," he said, hanging up the phone and writing her name on the calendar below two other women's names that had been crossed off with large "Xs".

That evening, with growing excitement and a long-stemmed red rose on the passenger seat beside him, Noah drove an hour north to Boston to meet his potential mate. "I'm too sexy for my car, too sexy for my car, too sexy by far. And I'm too sexy for my hat, too sexy for my hat..." Noah sang along with the radio as he traveled up Interstate 95 with the top down and the wind blowing through his hair.

In his brown leather jacket and natty brown tie, Noah looked rather dapper as he pulled up in front of the cozy Italian restaurant in the North End and stepped out of his car. Holding the rose behind his back, he headed toward the woman standing in front of the restaurant.

It took only one glance to crush the excitement and anticipation that days of long emails and phone calls had built up. Noah tried not to let his disappointment show through as he politely greeted the woman who looked nothing like the photograph in her profile, surreptitiously taking in her dowdy floral dress and long, drab brown hair.

The young, attractive hostess smiled at Noah as she seated them at a cozy candle-lit table for two in the corner of the room. Noah returned the smile, more attracted to the hostess than his blind date. Noah and Stacey talked, ate, and drank wine together, capping it off with cappuccino and an order of tiramisu with two spoons. The look in Stacey's eyes and the permanent smile on her face told Noah that she was really into him. Noah did his best to show interest in Stacey despite the absence of physical attraction.

Relieved that dinner was finally over, he walked her back to her car, thanked her for an enjoyable evening, and leaned in with his lips shut tight for a quick peck good-bye. Stacey, on the other hand, had other ideas as she grabbed at him with her mouth wide open. Noah wrestled free from her grasp and walked briskly back to his car, ignoring Stacey's frustrated exhale behind him.

Every night for a month, Noah put on a sport jacket and tie, and drove an hour to meet the next prospect for dinner. Every night, a long-stemmed red rose sat patiently on the passenger seat beside him awaiting its beneficiary. Every night after dinner, he'd cross off one more name on the calendar and call the next woman on the list, talking for hours and setting up his next rendezvous. If one woman wasn't available to fill a particular dinner slot, another woman was. When he was done

making his phone calls, he was back online perusing the website again, crossing some names off the list and adding even more to the bottom. It was a tiring exercise in mathematics — addition and subtraction. And in the end, after processing all of those women, not one received so much as a second date. Discouraged, Noah thought that perhaps he was just trying too hard.

“Pretty soon I had gone through the entire Jewish list, all the A’s on the master list, and half the B’s. Eventually, I stopped writing long letters and having long phone conversations. It was way too much effort to spend on someone I’d most likely never see again. Forget the long dinners, the long emails, the long phone calls; meeting for a quick cup of coffee was much more efficient...”

With no rose in sight, Noah walked into a Dunkin Donuts and shook the hand of a woman. Discretely pressing a button on the stopwatch in his pocket, the fifteen-minute countdown began. When his pocket started beeping, Noah was back on his feet shaking the hand of the woman he’d most likely never see again. This scenario repeated itself dozens of times with an assortment of women. Anything over fifteen minutes would have automatically qualified for a second date — if only there’d been a second date.

Finally, Noah walked into his office one morning with a resigned air. After handing Diane a large bouquet of exotic flowers, he slumped down at his desk and took out his calendar, putting a big “X” through the heart drawn around Labor Day, next to all the other “Xs” going back six weeks. Looking over his long spreadsheet, marked up with so many additions and scratch-offs that it was hard to follow, he stood up and dumped the entire stack of profiles into the recycling bin, shaking his head and wiping the dry-erase board clean.

“It wasn’t long before I became overwhelmed with the whole Internet dating thing. The list wasn’t getting any shorter. In fact, it was only getting longer. There just wasn’t enough time in the day. There had to be a better way. Besides, meeting women the old-fashioned way was much more my style...”

Hip-hop music was blasting as Noah walked into The Art Bar in downtown Providence. After paying the \$10 cover, he began scanning the crowd. *What a meat market*, he thought, *and there's lots of meat*. The guys all sported greased-back hair and heavy gold chains, while the women displayed big hair, short skirts, and open blouses. In his brown tweed Brooks Brothers jacket, beige Tommy Bahama pants, and yellow Hermes tie, Noah quickly realized how out of place his conservative attire was in this libidinous crowd.

Handed a Heineken by the bartender, Noah navigated through the swarm of people, weaving in and out in a clockwise motion around the dance floor, eventually arriving back where he started, next to the bar. Noah was on the hunt, circling like a shark in the water. But he was not alone — there were plenty of other sharks in the water too.

After his first pass, Noah turned his attention to the dance floor, where two young men confidently entered the arena and danced fearlessly up to two young women who were dancing together. Turning their backs to them, the women moved to another spot on the dance floor. Unfazed, the two young men danced over to the next closest targets. This new pair seemed unimpressed too, giving them the cold shoulder. But this didn't deter the young men, who were up for the challenge. Their strategy seemed quite simple, really: gyrate their bodies continuously until the women acquiesced; then divide and conquer. Their perseverance appeared to be paying off as the women eventually succumbed, joining the two male specimens in dance. Implementing the final stage to their mating ritual, the females were separated and their dancing grew ever more suggestive.

Noah turned away from the dance floor and scanned the crowd. He knew he couldn't just dance up to women like that; he was shy, and it wasn't his style. And so an hour later, he finally got up the courage to ask an attractive younger woman with long, blonde hair to dance. "I don't think so," she replied rudely, walking away from him to dance with her girlfriend, who was already dancing. He asked another pretty, young woman to dance. "No." He went up to a third young woman and received yet another "No".

Stepping up to the bar, Noah ordered something a little stronger, a Captain Morgan and Coke. Also at the bar, sitting to his right, was a woman with average looks, about the same age as him. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Things were starting to look up. Asking her politely if she'd care to dance, she replied "No thank you," with a stiff smile, looking away.

Frustrated, Noah looked at his watch. It was already 12:30 a.m., and he hadn't danced all night. Feeling his chances diminishing by the minute, he spotted a woman standing nearby. She was chewing gum and was dressed haphazardly. He walked hopefully over to her, only to receive another "No." Noah couldn't believe his luck. He was now on a mission and wouldn't stop until somebody agreed to dance with him — anyone at all.

"AH-HA !" he said to himself, spotting a not-so-attractive, overweight, middle-aged woman separated from the crowd. *If this woman says "No", I'm leaving*, he thought to himself, approaching her with eyes of the tiger. "No," said the woman, shaking her head as a very large man came out of the bathroom behind her, walking up to her and giving Noah a dirty look.

"I never really liked nightclubs that much either. There was always so much noise, you could barely have a conversation. All you could do was ask a woman to dance and hope for the best. Most of the time, the women just wanted to be left alone so they can dance with their friends and have a good time. To them, I was just some stranger, no better than the rest of the creeps who were hitting on them. If only they knew the real me, they wouldn't have been so quick to dismiss me. Oh, I'm not talking about anything superficial, or anything like that. I'm talking about who I really was inside, what I stood for, my honesty, my integrity, but most of all, my tremendous capacity to love. But who was I to tell them?"

It was now one o'clock, and the club was closing. Masses of people were filtering out of the building into the parking lot as the Providence Police came in to disperse the crowd and send everybody home. It had not been Noah's night, asking ten women to dance and receiving ten rejections. And now he had to stand in the middle of a long valet line

waiting for his car, his arms wrapped tightly around his body, shivering without a coat.

As a red antique Ferrari roared around to the front of the building, everyone in line wanted to know just who belonged to the fancy sports car. A couple of women who had refused to dance with him earlier that night saw Noah getting into the car and ran over to him.

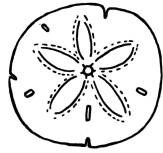
"Can you give me a ride?" asked the young woman with long, blonde hair.

"I don't think so," Noah replied, shutting the door on her.

"Hey, wait, where ya goin'?" said the other, chomping on her gum as Noah pulled away. "Why didn't you say you was rich?" she yelled as he turned onto the street, the tires screeching.

The year was flying by, with Noah dating one woman after another. After a couple of months of dating a woman named Debbie, he realized that he didn't want to waste his or her time if it wasn't going anywhere. As nice as she was, she just wasn't *the one*. Breaking up with her would not be easy, but it was for the best, not wanting to lead her on if his heart wasn't in it. After Debbie there was Cheryl, and after Cheryl there was Susan, and after Susan there was Monique. Each woman lasted no more than a couple of months. But there was always something missing, and Noah refused to settle. What that was... he didn't know.

"It wasn't long before I did have a girlfriend. Or should I say girlfriends? For me, I guess it was kind of like trying on different pairs of shoes. You know... until you try them on and wear them for a while, you really don't know if they're going to be a good fit. Oh, don't get me wrong; they were all really nice women. But I wasn't looking for just any woman; I was searching for one in particular — my soul mate. I had no idea where to find her, but I knew one thing for sure: I'd know her when I see her."



Life At First Sight

While **Y-M-C-A** by The Village People was playing at the main dance floor inside the Mardi Gras complex in Cranston, people were lined up outside, waiting to pile into the club. Noah and Scott were handed bottles of Heineken by the pretty, young ponytailed bartender as they stood watching the DJ spin records inside the mirrored booth. Scott resembled his brother, only with glasses, a slightly receding hairline, and an extra fifteen pounds from all the years of his wife's good home cooking. Scott looked tailored, lawyer-like as a matter of fact, with a navy pinstriped suit, white shirt with gold cufflinks, and blue tie. Noah, on the other hand, was dressed more casually, wearing a blue sport shirt and tan pants.

"Thanks for coming," Noah said as they stepped away from the bar. "The last time I came to a place like this, it didn't go so well. At least this time I have good moral support and a shoulder to cry on," he said, laughing.

"Anything to help, Little Brother, but I can't stay too long, or I'll turn into a pumpkin. I promised Sharon I'd be back by midnight. I figure if she can have Girls' Night Out once a week, I can have Brothers' Night Out once in a blue moon, right?"

"Sounds good to me," Noah agreed, clanking his Heineken to his brother's.

They opened a door marked *Diamond Rodeo Club*, and country music flowed out. Just about everybody in the room was out on the dance floor, line dancing. By the looks on their faces, they must have been really enjoying themselves. Since neither Noah nor Scott knew how to line dance, they exited the room, crossing over to the other side of the building. Heavy metal blasted out as they opened a door marked *Rock*

House Club. A live band was playing up on stage while people stood in front watching like zombies. They covered their ears and left the room, walking upstairs to the hip-hop room. Rap music poured out the door as they opened it and stepped inside. Squeezing in between the sweaty people, struggling to make headway across the dark room, they came to another door and headed out. Back downstairs they went, settling at the main bar, where disco music was much more their style.

"I don't think you're going to find your soul mate in a place like this," Scott admitted. "But besides that, I don't get why no one would dance with you last time."

"Who knows? Maybe they saw the real me — the man deprived of a life, living a lie."

"What in the world are you talking about? You've got a life — a great life. You have everything you could possibly need. Believe me, there's not a guy out there who wouldn't trade places with you in a heartbeat," Scott said, looking around the room at the men.

"It's funny you say that, because I'd do just about anything to trade places with *them*. Look at them, Scott," Noah said, gesturing with his head. "Don't you see they're different from us? They get to live *their* lives. Wouldn't it be great to be like them, with no strings attached, free to make choices and free to make mistakes, free to love and free to lose? I want to be like everybody else out there in the real world; I want to be *alive*."

"WOW... check out that vivacious redhead on the dance floor. Talk about *alive*..."

Noah turned his head toward the dance floor and was captivated by a beautiful woman, her hands up in the air and a silver cross bouncing around her neck as she danced with another girl. She had long red hair, freckles, and a natural, girl-next-door kind of beauty. Totally carefree and immersed in the moment, she appeared to be full of life as she mouthed the words to the song, clearly enjoying every beat.

"I suddenly found myself alone in the room with the red-haired beauty. Call it what you want; but I call it... love at first sight."

Scott looked at his gold Rolex and downed the last sip of beer. "And if I want to *stay* alive, I better get going," he said, standing up and placing the bottle on the bar. "Come on, let's get out of here. We can finish this conversation at lunch on Monday."

"What did you say?" Noah asked, mesmerized by the vision on the dance floor.

"I said," Scott yelled over the music, "we should get going."

"Yeah okay... I'll see you on Monday," Noah replied, standing up and walking toward the dance floor in a trance, leaving his bewildered brother behind. Noah was forced to stop and wait for the traffic jam of people to clear before he could continue on. By the time he reached the dance floor, the song had changed, and the women were no longer there. Looking around for them, he didn't see them anywhere, so he immediately started searching, eventually spotting them off to the side, near the line of women waiting for the bathroom.

Two men — one tall, one short — were standing nearby, checking them out. They seemed to be arguing over something or someone. Seeing Noah zeroing in, the tall one stepped in front of the redheaded woman just as Noah arrived. He was young, with blonde hair and the face of a Calvin Klein model, and the body to match. The young stud smiled confidently at her, taking her hand and gesturing to the dance floor with his eyes. The woman looked at him, then glanced at Noah standing back with a disappointed look on his face. She pulled her hand away from Model Man and shook her head.

"You're kidding me, right?" he said incredulously, backing up into Noah before grabbing his friend and stalking off.

The woman looked at Noah standing in front of her like a little boy. "I was just wondering, uh..." Noah began nervously. "What it is I'd like to ask you, is uh... what do you think, would you like to —"

She smiled and took his hand, leading him out to the middle of the dance floor.

"So, I take it you *would* like to dance..." Noah confirmed.

As they introduced themselves and started dancing, Robin's friend, Julie, squeezed through the crowd to join them. She was pretty too, about Robin's age, short, Italian, with shoulder-length black hair. Noah soon found himself to be a human sandwich, dancing with Robin close in

front and Julie close behind. *Now what could be better than this?* he thought while the three of them danced the rest of the night without leaving the floor.

It was one o'clock, and the crowd had thinned out considerably. The last song, **I Will Be Here** by Steven Curtis Chapman, started playing, and Julie walked off. As Noah and Robin looked deep into each other's eyes, Robin gasped, and time seemed to be standing still. The connection went far beyond simple attraction; it was a meeting of souls. As if awakened from a stupor and feeling truly alive, Noah was living in the moment, a moment of truth and clarity.

His arms glided around her neck as they started to slow dance. He put his head up against hers and could feel her ear brushing up against his. He turned his head slightly and discreetly inhaled the luscious scent of her hair, which smelled sweet, like strawberries. He pressed his lips against her neck and could taste her skin.

The song was coming to an end, and Noah put his face directly in front of Robin's, their lips so close they were practically touching. He gently placed his hand on her face and moistened his lips. With their hearts beating fast and their eyes fixated on each other, there was no one else on earth.



"Can you picture the way she was looking at me?" I say excitedly, sitting up in my hospital bed. "No one else ever looked at me that way before — or after for that matter. The connection in our eyes, the window to our souls, couldn't possibly be any stronger. Yeah, I had found my soul mate all right, and my life would never be the same."

"Well, at least you found her," Josh says, happy for me. "Some people go their whole lives without ever finding that one true love. Consider yourself lucky."

I take a sip from my cup. "Yeah... I guess you're right. I was pretty lucky, wasn't I?" I say, staring off, my mind filled with visions of the sand dollar exploding in my hand. "But there were times when I didn't always feel that way."

"You finished with that?" Josh asks, pointing at my empty plate.

"Here you go," I say, handing him the tray. As he lowers it beneath his cart, I see a little bit of wine left in the cup and motion for him to bring it back. He holds the tray as I take the last sip. It's good — really good.

"If I had only known then what I know now, I would have done things so differently. If ever there was a moment to go back to, this was it... our first kiss..."



Noah's hand was caressing her soft face as his lips were suspended tenderly against her lips. They were leaning up against the side of Robin's silver Honda Civic, the side-view mirror held on with duct tape. Julie was sitting in the passenger seat waiting for them to come up for air so they could go home to sleep.

As his lips pulled slowly away hers, Noah's eyes opened. But something was wrong. Tears were flowing down her white, freckled cheeks as she turned her head away.

"What's the matter?"

Robin looked back into his eyes, hesitating. "I don't know how to tell you this..."

"What is it?"

"I have a boyfriend," she confessed reluctantly. "Been seeing him a couple of months now." Noah's smile vanished. "But he's leaving next month, in the military. Besides, I don't want to be with him; I want to be with you," she said, her eyes looking deep into his, searching for comfort.

"Don't worry," he said, gently kissing one tearful eye and then the other. "Everything's going to be alright."

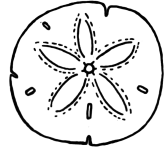
Robin smiled at the tenderness of his gesture. "Here's my number," she said, handing him a cocktail napkin with writing on it. "Tomorrow's my day off from the homeless shelter. Call me if you'd like to get together."

She gave him a quick kiss good-bye and jumped into the car. The loud noise emanating from the broken muffler tore the peaceful silence of the slumbering street as she waved out the window and turned the corner, her taillights disappearing into the night.

The next morning, Rosa, wearing a white housekeeper's uniform, pulled opened the drapes, allowing bright light to burst into the bedroom, where it fell upon Noah's face. He opened one eye. "Good morning Rosa," he muttered, half asleep. She picked up the clothes scattered around the floor and left the room, whereupon Noah covered his face with his soft down pillow and fell back to sleep, even as she vacuumed nearby.

An hour later, Noah ambled into the shower, his eyes half shut. Steam filled the room as hot water massaged his achy muscles. "Bye, Noah. See you next week," Rosa shouted as she passed by the bathroom. "I washed your pants," she yelled, walking down the large, curved staircase and out the door.

Noah's eyes suddenly opened wide. "SHIT !" he exclaimed, quickly shutting off the water and grabbing a towel as he ran out of the bathroom, soaking wet. He went straight to the laundry room and grabbed a pair of tan pants hanging on a clothes rack with freshly ironed clothes. He put his hand in the pockets — nothing. "Shit !" he repeated, rifling through the other pairs of pants hanging on the rack. He opened the dryer door and found another pair of tan pants. Quickly searching the pockets, relief washed over his face as he pulled out a shredded yet intact paper cocktail napkin. Anxiously placing the pieces on the ironing board, he arranged them back together with cautious precision. The face of victory, however, soon turned to defeat: the telephone number was illegible.



Butterflies

With a Kmart shopping bag in each of her hands, a woman wearing a black leather coat and gray wool hat crossed the busy Weybosset Street intersection in downtown Providence. The sign on top of the concrete building she entered read *Emergency Family Services of Rhode Island*. Standing behind the front desk wearing a white uniform and talking on the phone, Robin smiled at her and motioned with her hand to wait just one second. A young woman with greasy blonde hair and a torn coat waited anxiously beside the desk. Her two young children stared with blank faces at the TV across the lobby. The four-year-old, a cute little girl with curly, brown hair, spotted a penny on the floor, and without calling attention to it, she picked it up, examined it, and placed it in a large glass collection box containing only a handful of spare change.

"So you don't have any beds open either, huh?" Robin said disappointedly into the phone. "Well, call me as soon as one opens up, okay? We're filled to capacity over here too, and I'm running out of options for these people. Okay, thanks, Cheryl. Bye," she said, hanging up with a frustrated sigh.

"Here you go," said the woman in the black leather coat, handing Robin her white plastic bags.

"Wow, thanks," Robin said, looking at packages of men and women's underwear inside one of the bags. "I know a lot of people who could use these."

"I'm just glad I could help," the woman said, depositing a dollar into the collection box as she left, crossing the street in front of a red convertible Ferrari that was just pulling up.

Out of the car jumped Noah, who walked rapidly over to a homeless man leaning up against the side of a building, questioning him. The man

pointed toward the shelter. Noah walked over to the window, cupped his hands around his eyes, and peered in. There she was, behind the counter — Robin. He had been searching for her for a month, unsuccessfully, but today was different — he'd found her. Looking to his left, he noticed a woman walking out of the building next door with a bouquet of flowers. It was Clarke Flower Shoppe.

Robin's coworker, Theresa, walked up to the young family and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, ma'am, but there are still no beds available. I even double-checked just to make sure. Why don't you try back again tomorrow? I'm sorry."

"Wait a second," Robin called out to the disheartened family walking away. "What are you talking about?" she whispered to Theresa. "We can't just throw this family out into the street; it's cold outside."

"Well, what can we do about it? Have them sleep in the utility closet? We just don't have enough beds."

Robin looked over at the utility closet, trying to think of a solution. "Come on, let's go," the dejected woman instructed her kids, walking to the door with her children lagging behind.

"Where we gonna go now, Mommy? I'm hungry," the little girl said sadly. Robin stared at her as her mother bent down and zipped up her coat. The door opened in back of them, and Noah, holding a bouquet of red roses, politely held it open for them to leave.

"STOP RIGHT THERE," Robin commanded the family. "Come back; I've got a room for you."

The family stopped in the doorway and looked back at Robin as she unlocked the door behind her, walking into the closet-sized room.

"What are you doing?" Theresa complained, watching as Robin pushed a two-drawer filing cabinet on wheels out of the small room. "They can't sleep in there... that's your office."

"No?" Robin shot back. "Then just watch me," she said stubbornly, marching right back in.

Noah watched as Robin tried to push a heavy, wooden desk stuck to the floor. "Here, let me help you with that," he said, grabbing one end of the desk.

"Why didn't you ever call me?" she said, angry, violently shaking the desk, loosening it from the grips of the heavily waxed floor.

"You're not exactly easy to find, you know," he responded as the two of them raised the desk together and walked it out of the room.

"Well, don't think those roses are going to get you anywhere. I waited all month for you to call," she added, dropping her end of the desk onto the hallway floor.

"It's not that I didn't want to call," he said, setting down his end of the desk gently. "Turns out they don't make paper napkins like they used to."

Robin looked at him curiously as she reached for one of the shopping bags and emptied the contents onto the desk, all except for one. "Hold that thought," she said, walking across the lobby to a man sitting on the worn-out sofa, watching TV. He was African American, with gray hair and a scraggly beard.

"Happy birthday, Harry," she said, handing him the plastic bag.

"Wow, thanks," he exclaimed, removing a package of Hanes briefs. "But today's not my birthday," he said, jumping up from the sofa and scampering off with his gift. Removing the cushions from the sofa where Harry had been sitting, she carried them into her office and arranged them on the floor, along with some blankets.

"This should hold you over until something opens up in a day or so," Robin said to the homeless woman, grabbing a few pillows for her.

"Thanks, you're a life saver," she said, giving Robin a hug.

"I'm Robin."

"Hi, Robin, I'm Gail, and this is Peter and Ashley," she said, pointing at her children.

"Hey guys," Robin said to the kids, kneeling down. "You know what?" The kids shook their heads. "I'm really glad you're here," she said with a sweet smile, handing them brightly colored lollipops — the kind you see at the bank. "You know, Ashley, I've got a little girl just your age. Her name's Brittany. Would you like to meet her sometime?"

Ashley nodded, her face beaming.

"That was really admirable," Noah said to Robin as she stepped outside the room to talk to him.

"It was nothing... really. I'm sure you'd do the same thing," she said, glancing at the flowers in his hand. "Saving those for somebody?"

"Oh..." he said, holding them out to her. "Forgiven?" he asked.

"Forgiven," she confirmed, accepting the flowers and smelling them. "But only because they're so beautiful," she said, smiling and placing them in a vase in her former office. Robin grabbed her pocketbook and a small bag. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

Noah was staring curiously at the sign on top of the glass collection box when Robin came back wearing jeans and a sweater, carrying packages of peanut butter crackers. She handed them out to the young family, patting Ashley on the head as she ate one. Noah took Robin's hand and headed for the door, glancing at the collection box as they walked past it. The faded, torn sign on top read *Help us raise \$250,000 to expand our facility and open 50 more beds*. A drawing of a shaded thermometer illustrated that only \$153 had been raised so far.

"Such a gentleman," she remarked as he opened the passenger door of his car for her. "I'm not used to being treated so good. Careful you don't spoil me," she warned as she got in.

As they drove away, Noah glanced over at Robin sitting beside him. She was staring at him intensely with a look of vulnerability in her eyes. "Why do you keep looking at me like that?" he asked.

"Because you give me butterflies."

"I know what you mean. When I look at you looking back at me like that... I get them too."

A little while later, Noah and Robin were holding hands across a table in the outdoor courtyard at Venda Ravioli on Federal Hill. The butterflies in their stomachs made it impossible to eat — so they didn't. When the waiter came over to see how they were doing, he seemed disappointed that their plates were still full. Clearing the table, the waiter asked nervously, "So... care for dessert?" They shook their heads and smiled.

After dinner, Noah and Robin watched **When A Man Loves A Woman**, with Andy Garcia and Meg Ryan, playing at the Cable Car Cinema. Cuddled up in each other's arms, each time Andy kissed Meg on the big screen, so too did Noah kiss Robin.

It was late when Noah pulled up in front of the shelter. "Thanks, I had a wonderful time," Robin said, looking deep into Noah's eyes.

"Me too," Noah replied, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"I really like you," she admitted, their eye connection broken only by the passionate kiss they now shared.

Noah got out of the car and opened her door. As she walked to her car, Noah called out, "Hey... when am I going to get to see you again?"

Robin smiled at him. "Anytime you want, Noah."

"How about tomorrow?"

"I can't wait," she said, walking backwards slowly, unwilling to take her eyes off of him. "Sweet dreams, Noah."

The next day, Noah was standing outside a three-story tenement house in Central Falls. An old, rusty Chevy with different colored doors was up on blocks in the driveway. Laundry was hanging on a clothesline out of a window on the third floor, and the building next door was boarded up. The front door opened and a cute little girl with strawberry blonde hair stood in the doorway looking up at him.

"Hey, Noah, come on in," Julie said, appearing in the doorway behind the girl. "Robin will be right out."

He walked into the apartment and looked around. The furniture didn't match, the wall-to-wall shag rug was worn and musty, and the windows were bare — no curtains. A top-loading VHS player sat on a bookshelf constructed of cinderblocks and plywood next to a twenty-year-old television with a bent wire hanger for an antenna. Cinderella was playing on the TV.

The little girl stood staring at Noah. He knelt down to her level and asked sweetly, "What's your name?"

"Brittany. Who are you?" the little girl shot back.

Noah laughed. "I'm Noah," he said, extending his hand to greet her. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Brittany."

Brittany smiled. Instead of shaking his hand, she grabbed it and pulled him over to sit him down at a small plastic table and chair set in front of the television. She put a plastic cup and saucer in front of him and plopped a wooden Pinocchio puppet on the chair next to him. "Would you like some tea, Mr. Noah?" she asked politely, pretending to pour him some. Noah nodded.

On television, the clock struck twelve, and Brittany's attention shifted to it. Noah looked down at Pinocchio slumped over in the chair

beside him. He picked up the puppet bar and maneuvered Pinocchio's arms toward the saucer. Her eyes glued to the television set, Brittany was mesmerized as Cinderella hurried down the red-carpeted granite steps of the castle, losing her glass slipper as the clock sounded off deeply.

"Cinderella, right?" Noah announced proudly, setting Pinocchio back down on the chair, releasing its strings.

"Yeah, it's my favorite movie," she said, not taking her eyes off of it as the last stroke of midnight was about to sound, and the beautiful Cinderella jumped into the white stagecoach, making her escape into the night.

A minute later, Robin came out of her bedroom looking absolutely beautiful, her silky, red hair rustling, her eyes smiling, her lips red and moist, and her skin soft and white. She stopped abruptly and started laughing. Noah was sitting in a tiny plastic chair wearing a bonnet and boa while Brittany took pink lipstick from her plastic pocketbook and placed it up against his lips.

The day played out like a montage in a romantic comedy as Noah, Robin, and Brittany explored Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence. They rode the carousel and took a ride on a miniature train that toured around the park. Standing in front of the giraffe pavilion, Robin and Noah shared a cup of Dels frozen lemonade while Brittany sat on Noah's shoulders eating an ice cream cone. As Robin readied to take their picture, a woman offered to take it of all three of them. Robin handed the woman the camera as they posed in front of the giraffe walking towards them. The volunteer photographer stepped back to get them all in the frame. As she took the picture, the giraffe stretched his head down and snatched Brittany's ice cream right out of her hand, and Brittany screamed. Robin and Noah tried not to laugh as they walked away in search of another ice cream vendor.

A baby monkey clung to its mother as it swung through a tree behind a mesh enclosure. Brittany gestured for her mother to crouch down so that she could whisper something in her ear. Robin couldn't quite make it out, so she crouched even lower. Brittany wrapped her

arms around her mother's neck and hung on like a monkey, looking up and giggling as her mother smiled down at her and gave her a kiss.

A bit later, Brittany was petting an old, funny-looking goat in the petting area of the zoo. "Say cheese," Robin said, taking out her camera. Brittany looked at her hands, making sure she had no food before smiling for the camera. Screaming as the picture was taken, Brittany tried to pull away as the goat started chewing on her jacket. Noah quickly snatched her up and comforted her. "Thanks for saving my life," she said tearfully, nestling her head into his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around him.

Next, they headed for the butterfly building, which seemed like a safer bet for kids. The humid interior featured a running stream, exotic flowers, and hundreds of colorful butterflies flittering about.

"Don't you just love them?" Robin said, spinning around with her arms extended.

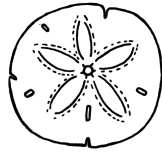
Noah ducked as a couple of butterflies circled his head. "Uh... do they bite?" he asked as a spotted yellow butterfly landed on his nose. Noah jostled his head from side to side, hoping to jar it off.

"Aw, it's just a harmless little butterfly," Robin soothed, touching her index finger to the tip of his nose. The butterfly flitted onto her finger, and she held it in front of her eyes. "You ever wonder what it would be like to be a butterfly? So beautiful... so carefree." Very carefully, she touched the tip of her finger to Brittany's, and the butterfly journeyed across.

Standing next to a sign that read *WARNING: FEEDING THE GEESE IS AT YOUR OWN RISK*, Robin ripped bread into small pieces and tossed it to a few of the one hundred Canadian Geese congregated in a clearing next to the lake. They paddled on the lake in a large swan-boat, and afterwards, they rolled out a blanket under an old willow tree to have a picnic. Jumping to their feet, they grabbed their things and ran as the crowd of uninvited Canadian geese arrived for dinner.

As they passed through the large, black iron gates on their way out, Brittany held both of their hands and swung off the ground between them. On the way home, Noah adjusted the rear-view mirror to see Brittany sleeping soundly in the back seat of the car, clutching her new stuffed giraffe.

"I think she likes me," he announced proudly.
"No... I think she *loves* you."



Great Expectations

With a fresh coat of polish, Noah's immaculate 1966 Ferrari pulled into Hartman Enterprises behind a beat-up, blue Mustang convertible, also a 1966 model. Noah followed the Mustang to the back corner of the lot and parked next to it. The driver, wearing a navy maintenance uniform, got out of the car and opened the trunk.

"Hey, Mike, I didn't know you drove a classic," Noah said, shutting his door.

"Hey, Noah," the man replied, closing his trunk and putting a tool belt around his waist. "Yeah, that's because I almost never drive it. I only take it out a couple times a year, just to air it out."

"Sweet ride," Noah said, peeking inside the Mustang. "I like the Pony seats."

"The chassis is kind of beat up — not refurbished like yours."

"What are you talking about? She's a beaut," Noah exclaimed, walking around the car, checking it out. "Besides, I don't look at the outside so much as I do the inside. That's where the real beauty is," he said, stopping at the front of the car. "Do you mind?" he said, pointing at the hood.

"Of course not," Mike said, popping it open.

"Impressive engine. Two-eighty-nine V8 with original four-barrel carb. Sweet. It's a sixty-six, right?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"First year they introduced an automatic tranny. You got power steering and disc brakes too?"

"Yup, first year for that too."

"I know. It's a great car you've got here. You should drive it more often. Talk to you later, Mike," he said, grabbing his briefcase and walking toward the mirrored building.

"Hey, Noah..."

Noah stopped and turned around.

"I'll see ya around," Mike said with a proud smile. Noah returned the smile as Mike closed the hood to his beat-up treasure.

"Hey, Stan," Noah called as he walked past Security and stepped into an elevator. When he stepped off on the top floor, he walked up to a glass door and put his hand on the brass handle, waiting for it to unlock. "Good afternoon, Leslie," he said to the white-haired secretary buzzing him in.

Walking down the hallway, Noah stopped in front of a large, vacant office and glanced in. He admired the oak desk and plush office chair, and then headed down the hallway, stopping at a door that read *Jerry Hartman, President*. Noah pushed open the door, revealing an expansive office with panoramic views of the meandering Pawtuxet River. It was decorated with antique furniture, French Impressionist paintings, and a silk Persian rug. Noah sat down in the brown leather sofa and waited his turn. Spotlit on the wall in back of him was an original Claude Monet oil painting. An executive in a gray pinstriped suit was standing in front of a large mahogany desk where Jerry sat, signing a document. Jerry was a good-looking sixty-two-year-old man, with manicured silver hair and a presence that commanded respect. The executive took the signed document and put it into his briefcase, thanking Jerry and nodding at Noah on his way out.

"Hey, Dad, want to go for lunch with Scott and me?" Noah asked.

"I wish I could, but I have an important meeting at one with Terry."

"Terry?"

"You know — the president of the bank."

Noah nodded.

"So what's up?" Jerry asked, his hand set impatiently on the phone.

"You probably don't know this, but today's my fifteen-year anniversary working for the company."

"Congratulations."

"I was just wondering..." Noah said, taking a deep breath, "you know the vacant office down the aisle? Well — "

As soon as the phone in Jerry's hand started to ring, he answered it and started talking. Noah looked at his watch and bit his nails. It was 12:22 p.m. He looked around the room, his eyes settling on a framed photograph on the wall of his father shaking hands with Ronald Reagan. His eyes shifted to a table with an intricate model under glass of Jerry's new pride and joy — Hartman Place — a fifty-acre upscale mixed-use development complex with shopping, dining, condos, office space, and more. Noah took a deep breath and waited patiently.

Looking at his watch, it was now 12:34 p.m., and Jerry was still on the phone talking business. Noah stood up and headed for the door.

"Hold on, Noah. Hey, Tom, let me call you back after the meeting... okay, great... bye," he said, hanging up. "Sorry about that. What were you saying again?"

"Well, I was just wondering if it would be okay if I could have an office in this building... in your aisle?" he asked nervously, sitting back down.

"Absolutely not," Jerry said bluntly.

"Why not?"

"I can't have someone visiting you at your level accidentally overhearing what's going on at my level."

"Well then, how about promoting me out of my level? My projects are the most profitable in the company, my occupancy rates are off the charts, and I'm ready to take on more responsibility. I work harder than anyone else here, working nights, weekends, whatever it takes."

"That's just it. Your organizational skills are terrible, and you're always scrambling to meet your deadlines. If you could get your work done in the same timely fashion as the other project managers, you wouldn't have to stay late. How would it look if I promoted the person who, our contractors complain, constantly gives them insufficient lead times? Look, if you're ever going to run this company someday, you've got to become more organized. Besides, since you're not the most qualified person for the job, our stockholders would think it's nepotism."

"Then forget the promotion. Just let me work as your apprentice," Noah pleaded, trying to turn the tide. "You could teach me what you

know about finances, bring me to important meetings, and introduce me to important people. Why not take me under your wing and groom me?"

"And what are you going to do all day, just sit around and watch me? Look, you've always known it's your company too, right? And being that it's your company too, you should want to do what's in the company's best interest. Noah, the company needs you as a project manager. *I* need you as a project manager."

Noah sat there, his hopes dead in the water, the air taken out of his sails. He had pleaded his case before the judge and was overruled. It was time to retreat to safer ground. "Okay," he said, standing up, defeated.

Jerry got up from behind the desk and walked over to Noah, putting a hand on his back. "Look, your occupancy rates are terrific; keep up the good work," he said, trying to be encouraging. "And congratulations on the fifteen years."

Jerry watched as Noah walked toward the door, head down, shoulders slumped. "Wait a minute," Jerry called out in an upbeat voice.

Noah turned around with the beginning of a smile.

"Don't feel bad... I wouldn't let your brother have an office in the executive building either," Jerry said reassuringly.

Noah's eyes shifted to the large painting hanging in back of his father's desk. It was a family portrait, with Noah and Scott wearing white tennis sweaters standing in front of Jerry and Miriam, painted when Noah was just six years old. His smile faded as he thought back to the expectations placed on him and his brother ever since they were little.

Six-year-old Noah, eight-year-old Scott, and Miriam sat around the long, antique dining table in their formal dining room. Noah and Scott looked like twins, dressed in matching Harvard t-shirts as Jerry entered the room wearing a raincoat and hat.

"Hi, honey. Sorry I'm late," he said, kissing Miriam. "Worst flooding in twenty years. Had to take the back roads to get home," he explained, taking off his hat and coat, and joining them at the table.

"Maria, you can bring dinner in now," Miriam called out.

The kitchen door swung open and Maria walked in wearing a white uniform and carrying a tray of food. She placed a bowl of matzah ball soup in front of each person at the table, along with a shiny sterling silver spoon.

"How was work today, honey?" Miriam asked, taking a sip of soup. Jerry nodded his head while sipping his soup. "Someday, all three of you will be coming home from work together," she announced, looking over at her two young boys. "Won't that be great? You and Scott helping Daddy run Hartman Enterprises? That's what you want, right, Noah?" she asked in a wheedling tone.

"Okay, Mommy," Noah replied, sipping his soup.

"Right, Scott?"

"Yes, of course, Mom," Scott answered immediately.

"Great. Then it's all settled. When you boys are old enough, you'll help Daddy run the company," she said, relieved, smiling victoriously at Jerry, who continued to sip his soup silently.

"Noah... Noah..."

Noah snapped out of his daydream, turning his head toward the woman in the gray pinstriped Armani skirt suit with salt and pepper hair who was standing next to him, calling his name.

"Oh, hi, Aunt Harriet. How are you?" Noah said politely.

"I'm fine, thanks. Noah, do you mind leaving so I can talk with your father? It's very important."

"Oh? What's it about?"

"Sorry, it's official company business, on a need-to-know basis. You understand."

While Aunt Harriet held the door open for him, Noah glanced over at his father, who did not object.

"Of course... I understand," Noah said sadly.



The door to my hospital room opens and in comes Scott, looking pretty good for eighty-two. “Hey, it’s Scott,” I announce to Josh, happy to see him.

“I came as soon as I heard,” Scott says apologetically, approaching me.

“I’m the baby in the family, can’t you tell?” I say, looking at Josh. “Scott’s two years older. Hey, Scott, I want you to meet my new friend, Josh,” I announce proudly.

“New friend? Heck, I’m an *old* friend,” Josh jokes.

“Hey, you’re not *that* old, you’re younger than I am, you know, ha.”

Josh and I share a good laugh while Scott remains focused on me, ignoring our antics with a somber look.

“Seriously, thanks for coming, Big Brother,” I say, curtailing my smile.

“How you doing, Little Brother?” he asks softly, tears in his eyes.

“Not too bad under the circumstances,” I say, winking at Josh.

“I don’t think I ever told you this before...” Scott says, taking my hand.

“Go on...” I say nervously, shooting an awkward glance at Josh.

“But I love you, Noah,” Scott says, wiping a tear.

“Thanks, that’s really sweet of you. And I love you too, Scott. But no worries; I never told you either.”

“Now don’t that figure?” Josh says, shaking his head, bewildered. “Why do we always hold back what’s really in our hearts on a day-to-day basis, only to go and blurt it all out someday when it maybe too late? I never understood that.”

“Well, at least we’re saying it now, huh, Scott? Anyway, like I was saying, Scott and I used to eat lunch together every day in the cafeteria at work. On this one particular day, Cindy and the other secretaries were sitting just two tables away, checking out my big brother.” I smile at Scott because we both know that’s not exactly how it happened.



Noah was standing in line next to Scott at the buffet counter in the company cafeteria. "So how's your class coming along?" Noah asked.

"It's going really well. I'm learning a lot about screenwriting, and I'm almost finished writing my first screenplay."

"Wow, that's great. I'm really proud of you," he said, paying for both lunches and sitting down at a table with Scott.

Scott turned his head and noticed a table full of pretty, young secretaries talking to each other while smiling at Noah. "I think Cindy over there has the hots for you."

Noah stopped eating and glanced over at Cindy, who was ogling him with wide eyes and a seductive smile. "Me? Nah, it's *you* she wants," Noah insisted, taking a bite of food.

Scott turned to look at Cindy again. "You might be right..." he said, dubiously, "but I don't think so. You're the hot bachelor, not me. I've got a wife and two kids at home. Too bad Dad won't let you fraternize with the help."

"Yeah, God forbid I actually befriend any of the ten thousand employees who work for him," Noah said sarcastically, taking a bite of food, shaking his head. "It might be nice to have a friend or two, don't you think?"

"You've got me as your friend," Scott said reassuringly. "So tell me, Noah, what was all that nonsense the other night about not feeling alive? Should I be concerned?"

Noah glanced at him, not sure if he should go there or not. "Are you happy here? I mean, if Mom and Dad hadn't chosen this career for us, would you still want to do this?"

"HELL, NO !" Scott said emphatically, looking directly into his brother's eyes. "I don't know why I even bother to speak sometimes, with Dad and Aunt Harriet never listening to any of my great ideas on how to modernize and grow the business. Why do you think I'm taking that night class? If I could write screenplays for a living, I'd be out of here in a second. But I can't just quit without having a job already lined up. Sharon would kill me if we ever had to give up the nanny or sell the house. How about you? Are you happy here?"

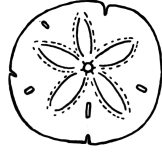
"Well, it's not exactly what I expected. But what else can I do for a living? Ever since we were little kids, this is all I've ever known," Noah

said, glancing over at Cindy, who was still smiling at him. “Who are we trying to fool, anyway? Mom and Dad would never let us leave. Not to mention our golden handcuffs. Say good-bye to the company car, the boat, the house, and God knows what else. With our salaries being as high as they are, there’s no way we could afford that kind of lifestyle working anywhere else. If either one of us leaves, we both know what happens next... the money runs dry. Yeah, I know they’re only material things, and I’m sure I could live without them, but every time I get up the courage to leave, Mom and Dad persuade me that I could never make it out there on my own — you know, in the *real world*, where ordinary people live. I guess I’m just scared.”

“You need to have a plan — like me. Take a class or do something else on the side until you find something that works. Do it the smart way. Then you can leave.”

Noah thought about what his brother just said. It made perfect sense. “Don’t you ever wonder what it would be like to feel alive, like the life you’re living is actually your own, not someone else’s? To live by your own decisions, and just imagine... when the wind and rain hits your face, you actually feel it. Don’t you ever wonder what that’s like, Scott?”

Scott stopped in mid-motion as he brought the fork up to his mouth, looking at Noah with crinkled eyebrows just as Jerry and Aunt Harriet approached the table. Noah looked up at them and put on a smile as they sat down to join them.



Total Surrender

Noah's hair was riffled by the wind as he tacked his sixty-foot sailboat, her boom swinging across mid-ship as her sails filled with air. Majestic orange and red cliffs reflecting the setting sun welcomed her as she entered the mouth of Narragansett Bay into Newport Harbor. Gliding through the glistening water, seagulls squawked as they flew across her bow. The name on her transom read *Freedom; Jamestown, RI*.

As she lay on the teak bow, Robin looked back at Noah and smiled as they sailed by the abandoned lighthouse on the small private island, her red hair trailing in the breeze. Noah took a deep breath of the fresh air surrounding Freedom and smiled with contentment. He was living in the moment.

"Some people find it up on a roof, gazing at a billion stars on a crystal clear night. Some people find it on top of a mountain, with beautiful vistas of peaceful valleys below. Some people find it on a secluded pond, or a secret hiding spot, or maybe even in a special chair, one with special memories."

"But for me, I find it out on the water, sailing on a boat. It's where I find peace and tranquility. Where everything makes perfect sense, and all my troubles disappear. My soul surrenders to it. To put it simply, it's where I find my God. Oh, I'm not talking about religion; I'm talking about spirit... something deep inside."

"Out on the water, the gentle breeze caressing my face, the warmth of the sun kisses my skin, and my eyes are enchanted by thousands of sparkling diamonds, dancing on top of the water's surface. Out on the water, the air is fresh and the sounds of the sea sing out loud. When I want

to feel alive... when I want to feel free... I know exactly where to go to find it."



An antique red Ferrari drove over the train tracks, past the abandoned station, and into a vacant lot. With blueprints under his arm, Noah stepped out of his car and walked past the sign — *Coming soon, HARTMAN RIVER-LOFTS, featuring 200 luxury condominiums & deluxe fitness studio*. Behind it was a large brick building with a tower at each end, one with a bell, one with a clock. Situated on the Pawtuxet River, the textile mill was once used to spin cotton. But like all other New England mills of its day, it was abandoned a half-century earlier when all the textile jobs moved south.

Noah fumbled with a bunch of keys as he opened the padlock on the temporary plywood door and entered the building. He looked around the dusty, gutted edifice, and then looked up at the sky through the open ceiling. He put down his blueprints on a table saw and grabbed a tool belt, buckling it around his jeans. He removed the hammer from his belt and smacked a nail into the jack stud alongside the door, hanging up his Ralph Lauren sport shirt. Tossing a yellow helmet onto his head, he wiped the sawdust off of his white tank-top undershirt as he ascended a ladder.

Taking several ladders to reach the roof, Noah gawked at the open ceiling joists stretching between him and the tower, fifty feet away. He took a deep breath and moved his right foot slowly along the edge of a joist. With his arms out, wobbling slightly, he moved his left foot along the edge of a parallel joist, sixteen inches apart. "It's just a walk in the park," he reassured himself as he walked gingerly along the edges of the two boards. "Our guys do this all the time, no problem." Stopping halfway across, he looked down in between his feet at the ground floor, sixty feet below, and nearly lost his balance. "On second thought, all the parks I know seem to be located on the ground..." Moving a little faster as he reached the end, he let out a sigh of relief and opened the door to the tower, stepping inside.

A silver Honda Civic pulled up to the building, and Robin got out holding a picnic basket and bottle of wine. "Noah?" she called as she entered the building, looking at the shirt hanging by the door. "Surprise... it's me," she said, looking around, drawn toward the two large wooden barn doors dead ahead. She put down her basket and lifted up the wooden latch in the center of the two doors. "Wow," she exclaimed as the doors swung open, staring at an old water wheel spinning alongside a waterfall.

Noah climbed up the wooden ladder built into the wall of the tower, startled by the abrupt departure of a bunch of pigeons as he reached the top. He looked at the large bell sitting on the floor, unattached, and began measuring it. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he glanced out the arched opening and suddenly noticed Robin standing at the edge of the river in her underwear.

"Hey," he yelled as she jumped into the water, carefree, the noise from the waterfall drowning him out.

A few minutes later, Noah was standing at the water's edge. He looked around, but the only sign of her were her clothes sprawled out on a boulder. He looked down into the dark water.

"Hey, good-lookin'," she said, emerging from the other side of the waterfall. "Care to join me?" she said with a seductive smile, her body wet, her white underwear see-through.

"What, are you crazy? I'm not going in there."

"See, that's your problem, Noah. You're afraid to live. You'd be surprised at how much fun it is. Come join me; I dare you."

Noah just stood there.

"Don't you want me?" she asked, lowering the straps to her bra.

"Of course I do, but that's not the point."

"The point?" she echoed, removing her bra.

Noah gulped.

"If you really want me..." she said with a mischievous smile, "then come and get me."

Noah looked around and didn't see anyone. Hesitating, he took off his L.L. Bean work boots and dropped his jeans to the ground, folding them neatly and placing them on the rock along with his folded undershirt.

Taking in his thin waist, washboard abs, muscular chest, and undulating arms, Robin's eyes bulged.

"But it's cold," he complained, standing in his boxers and dipping his foot in.

Robin frowned.

"Alright, I can do this," he said, sliding into the cold water, smiling when he reached her.

Robin turned around and disappeared through the waterfall. Noah followed cautiously, stopping just short of it. He could barely make out her image through the gushing water. The power of the water smashed down on his hand as he reached in, and he was suddenly pulled through to the other side.

As Robin backed away from him, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. Droplets of water rolled down her curvy body as she gazed at him with intense desire. Noah walked up to her, his lips inching closer to hers, his chest quivering from the slightest touch of her supple breasts. He put his hand on her face as he kissed her tenderly, then passionately.

She jumped up and wrapped herself around him. "Do you surrender?" she breathed in his ear.

"Surrender?" he questioned, breathing heavily. "What do you mean?"

As he continued to kiss her, he backed into the waterfall. With water crashing down upon them, she put her feet down on the ground and moved her hands down his back to the dimples of his firm buttocks. Knocked to the ground by the pressure of the raging water, his boxers were no longer there. She felt around and realized that her thong had suffered the same fate. Clutching each other, they plunged back into the river.

As they stared at each other, the tension between them was intense, their bodies aching for one another. "Do you surrender?" she asked suggestively, moving closer.

"What was that?" Noah interrupted, glancing toward the building. "I think I heard something."

"No you didn't. You didn't hear anything," she insisted.

"Uh, yeah... I did," he said, looking around, listening.

On the other side of the building, a white truck beeped its horn a second time. "Shit, I totally forgot," Noah said, rushing out of the water and grabbing his pants. "I'm supposed to meet up with Russ at one."

Robin let out an exasperated breath as she fell back into the water.



The rain slapped the windshield as Noah waited in his car outside of her apartment. Robin made a mad dash against the wind and rain. He opened the door and in she jumped, looking more beautiful than ever, her hair soaking wet and wind-blown. She couldn't stop staring at him as he drove off, swerving around fallen tree branches in the street. He looked over at her, smiled, and took her hand.

A little while later, they were sitting on the same side of a booth in a silver, retro-style diner. "What's the matter? You don't like your breakfast?" Noah inquired, looking down at Robin's plate full of food.

Robin smiled and shrugged. "Sorry, it's those darn butterflies again. I guess I just don't have an appetite," she said, glancing down at Noah's plate full of food. "So, what's your excuse?"

Noah smiled and shrugged. "Butterflies... It does make it hard to eat, doesn't it?"

She nodded in agreement. "By the way, I told my parents all about you, and they can't wait to meet you," Robin said.

"Oh...? Good or bad?"

"What do *you* think?" she said with a smirk. "I told them you're amazing. Not only do you have the most amazing blue eyes — the color of the sea — but you've got these amazing full lips — great for kissing, by the way."

"No, really... what did you tell them?"

"What...? You don't believe I told them that? But it's *true*," she said coyly. "Alright, I told them you're the nicest guy I've ever met; how's that?"

"Not bad... go on..."

"I said, 'Noah puts me so high up on a pedestal that my feet don't even touch the ground.'"

"You said that? Why?"

"Because it's true. I don't want to be woken up from this dream, Noah. I keep thinking you're too good for me. And when you figure that out, I'm afraid you won't be sticking around anymore."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? For the life of me, I don't know what I did to deserve you. You could have any woman you want — someone from *your* world, with your background, your education, your religion, your status... your dollars. I'm not any of that. So why me?"

"First of all, money has nothing to do with anything — certainly not love. Second of all, I can't have any woman I want. I —"

"Yes you can!"

"I don't know — maybe — but that's not the point. The point is... I don't want just *any* woman; I want *you*. I don't care about any of that other stuff. None of that's important to me. What's important is how I feel when I'm with you. And when I'm with you, I feel something I've never felt before, like I'm becoming alive inside. It's both scary and exciting at the same time. All you have to do is look into my eyes, and I melt. Do you realize the effect you have over me? 'Cause it's like some unseen force is drawing me toward you."

"I feel drawn in too. There's no denying it."

"Maybe it's destiny, who knows?"

"Or maybe I'm just really lucky."

"I'm the lucky one," Noah retorted.

"So, what did you tell your parents about me?" she asked, smiling.

Noah exhaled and looked away.

"What...? They don't like me?"

"How could they not like you? They haven't met you."

"Then what's the problem?"

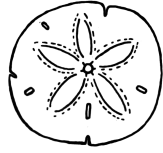
"It's just that... I haven't told them yet." Robin frowned. "You don't understand what they're like; they're very powerful people. And they think they know what's best for me, but they really don't have a clue. Only *I* know what's best for me... and that's you. I'm planning on telling everybody tomorrow night at dinner. So don't worry, once they see how happy I am, they'll be thrilled. I promise," he said, kissing her forehead.

Noah tossed some money on top of the bill and stood up. "Come on, let's get out of here," he said, grabbing her hand and leading her out.

The ocean was turbulent from the brewing tempest, the water white and sudsy as large waves pounded the beach. It was a rare sight, seen only in hurricanes and extremely powerful storms. Up on the hill at a safe distance from the tumultuous ocean sat Noah's majestic house. Through a large arched window, Noah and Robin were watching the ocean's dramatic spectacle.

Reaching gently toward her, Noah slowly started unbuttoning Robin's shirt while Robin unbuckled his belt. Their clothes fell to the floor, and they lay down on the bed. The tempestuous ocean outside was matched only by the heated passion that was building inside. As they made love for the very first time, their eyes told each other how much they wanted one another, not only in this moment, but for all eternity.

"Like a drug that we just couldn't get enough of, once we got a taste of each other, we couldn't stop wanting more and more. As our two bodies merged to one, so did our souls. The connection couldn't be more intense. No matter how close we got to each other, we just had to get even closer. We were completely and utterly in love. It was total surrender: Mind. Body. Soul."



Meet The Parents

A valet driver opened the door to Noah's Ferrari convertible as it pulled up in front of Capriccio restaurant in downtown Providence. Inside the elegant Italian restaurant, the ambiance was warm and charming, with a cobblestoned floor, columns with decorative moldings, and tables glowing under candlelight. The pianist at the baby grand was playing **The Way You Look Tonight** by Frank Sinatra as Noah, holding a small gift bag, walked over to the alcove where Scott, Sharon, Miriam, and Jerry were sitting.

"Happy birthday, Mom," Noah said, kissing his mother's cheek.

"Come here for a second," she said, motioning for him to duck down.

Noah grimaced, lowering his head as Miriam proceeded to lick her hand and pat his hair down. As a tuxedoed waiter approached, Noah pulled away and sat down at the empty seat beside his brother. As the waiter made his way around the table with a bottle of Dom Pérignon, he poured Champagne into everyone's glasses.

"I can't wait for all of you to meet her," Noah announced. "She's amazing. I'm so in love. I'm telling you, she's *the one*. I'm going to marry her someday."

"Congratulations, Little Brother. I'm really happy for you," Scott said, patting Noah on the back.

"This is exciting news," Sharon, Noah's sister-in-law, said. "I can't wait to meet her."

"You guys will get along great. And she's got the cutest little girl, Brittany."

"Is she Jewish?" Miriam asked, getting right to the crux of the matter.

Noah shook his head.

"Where did she go to college?" Miriam asked, frowning.

"She didn't go to college; she was in the Army."

Miriam and Jerry locked eyes, eyebrows raised.

"Where does she work?" Jerry inquired.

"Downtown, at Emergency Family Services."

"What's that?" Miriam asked.

"A homeless shelter."

"Oy," said Miriam, looking over at Jerry with deep concern.

Noah could see that his answers were not scoring any points with his parents. Translation — uneducated, no money, and definitely not Jewish. Based on the facts, she obviously was not good enough for their son.

"Hey, Noah, why don't you bring her down to Mom and Dad's summer house this weekend so we can all meet her," Sharon suggested enthusiastically, ignoring her in-laws' interrogation tactics. "We're going to be there for the Fourth of July fireworks. The kids can swim in the pool together, and I can get to know my future sister-in-law."

"Sure, we'd love to come," Noah replied, relieved.

While everyone else laughed and chatted, Miriam and Jerry continued to exchange glances as the waiter began to clear the plates.

"Would anyone care to take home the leftovers?" the waiter inquired politely.

Everyone shook their heads. "We only eat fresh food in this family," the matriarch explained to the waiter as he removed her plate. Several more waiters appeared holding a lit birthday cake and singing **Happy Birthday** in Italian. As they set the cake before Miriam, she frowned at Noah and shook her head, making her wish and blowing out the candles.

"Happy birthday, Mom," Noah said, getting up to give her a kiss, and handing her a floral gift bag. "It's from all of us, including Dad."

"Oy. You shouldn't have spent your money on me," she said, accepting it reluctantly.

"I picked it out myself. Thought you might like it," Noah said with a warm smile. "It took me quite some time to find it," he added.

As she opened the gift, Noah, Scott, and Sharon exchanged looks. "Wow, it's gorgeous," Miriam announced delightedly. "Thank you so much," she said, blowing a kiss to everyone around the table, holding up

an exquisite butterfly broach. She passed it around the table so everyone could get a closer look. When it made its way to Noah, he smiled as he took it out of the box and held it close to the candle, mesmerized by how it sparkled under the light. The butterfly broach was set in eighteen-karat gold with emerald wings and two one-karat diamonds for eyes. Noah's smile turned to sadness as his thoughts returned to his childhood.

Six-year-old Noah ran into his bedroom, grabbed his piggy bank, stuffed it in his backpack, and ran back out. Pedaling his bike down the street, he turned into the fairground beneath a large arched iron gate with a banner that read *Butler On The Green*.

It was warm and sunny, with a hundred people strolling about on the green, enjoying the day. Noah walked his bike past Frenchy's ice cream truck, past a cluster of vendors selling flowers, pocket books, scarves, and women's accessories, stopping at a table filled with costume jewelry. A rhinestone butterfly broach caught his eye. He picked it up, admiring how it sparkled in the sunlight.

"I think you just found the best one," said the salesman on the other side of the table.

Noah nodded in agreement.

"Something as special as that must be for someone pretty special, huh?"

"Yeah, it's for my mommy. Today's her birthday."

"Well, in that case, your mommy is going to be one lucky lady to receive such a thoughtful gift from such a wonderful son."

Noah nodded again. "How much is it?"

"For you? Fifty cents."

Noah put down his backpack and pulled out his piggy bank, emptying the contents, about forty pennies, onto the table. "Is that enough?" he asked nervously.

The man smiled, scooping up most of the coins. While Noah deposited the remaining pennies back into his piggy bank, the man wrapped the gift in manila paper. Waving good-bye, Noah pedaled off, gripping the precious package securely in his hand.

Noah couldn't wait to give the present to his mom. "Happy birthday, Mommy," he called, running upstairs to her bedroom, his face beaming as he handed her the gift.

"Oh, Noah, you shouldn't have spent your money on me," Miriam said, reluctantly opening the package. "Now isn't that pretty?" she said absently as she glanced at the cheap butterfly broach. "Thank you, sweetie," she said, giving Noah a kiss on the head, and setting the broach down on the dresser without removing it from its wrapper. She picked up a black gown off the bed and left the room, calling out for Maria, the maid.

Later that evening, Noah caught his parents dressed up and about to go out. As they were putting on their coats, he ran over to his mother to see if she was wearing her new broach. "Mommy, why aren't you wearing the butterfly pin I got you for your birthday?"

"That was very sweet of you, Noah," she said, glancing down at him. "But you might as well learn this lesson at an early age. I believe in always telling the truth, don't you?" Noah nodded. "Well, the truth is I don't wear costume jewelry. So I am not going to *pretend* to wear this thing every time I go out, not tonight, not ever."

Noah looked like he was about to cry. "You know Mommy loves you, right?" Miriam said. Noah nodded, trying to hold back the tears. Miriam looked at him and smiled. "Here," she said, taking the rhinestone broach out of her pocketbook and handing it to him.

“Someday, sweetie, when you’re old enough to afford to buy me real jewelry, with real gold and real diamonds, then you can buy me jewelry for my birthday, okay?” she said, patting him on the head as she turned and left the house with Jerry.

With tears rolling down his face, Noah stood in the doorway watching as his parents drove away in his dad’s beige Bentley convertible.



It was another hectic day at the office — no different than any other day. Noah was sitting at his desk holding a construction-cost datasheet while Russ, the construction manager for the Hartman Towers development project in Boston, sat on the other side, waiting for an answer. Blueprints littered his desk and walls, cluttering the office. Diane was on the phone trying to track down a shipment of Better Header beams that was holding up the framers at the Hartman Promenade construction site in downtown Providence, already two months behind schedule.

Larry popped his head in, and Russ turned his head to see who it was. “You almost ready for me yet?”

“Give me a few more minutes,” Noah replied.

“Okay then, I’ll be outside in the lobby,” Larry said looking at his watch as Noah’s phone started ringing.

“I’ll call you right back,” Diane said, quickly hanging up her phone and answering Noah’s. “Noah Hartman’s office... No, he’s not. He’s in a meeting. May I take a message?”

“Excuse me, Noah? Got your profit projections done yet?” asked Bob, the accounting manager, sticking his head in the doorway and giving Russ a friendly nod. “You’re the last one, and your father needs his budgets by tomorrow.”

“I’ll make sure I’ll leave it on your desk before I leave tonight — whatever time that is.”

“Appreciate it,” Bob said, changing places with Aunt Harriet in the doorway.

“Noah, I want you to go to Hartman Resort and Spa in Newport and meet with the building inspector tomorrow,” Aunt Harriet said, waving to Russ. “I had his parents over the house the other night for dinner, and they told me that he recently became a new father. So I want you to give him this for me,” she said, stepping over to Noah’s desk and handing him a package.

“Boy or girl?”

“Boy. Also, I’m still waiting for your C.A.M. analysis that was due last week, and your dad’s still waiting for his budgets.”

“I know. I’ll have them both done before I leave tonight.”

"Good. Have you been to the Wasserstein's new waterfront condo and recreation club in Portsmouth yet? Got to know your competition."

Noah shook his head.

"Well... what are you waiting for? Get over there already," she said with a wink and a smile as she left the office.

Noah's phone rang again, and Diane answered it. "Noah, Max wants to know if you're going to the New York convention on Friday or Saturday?"

"Saturday."

Linda, the Human Resources director, walked in quietly and handed Noah some forms. As she turned to leave, Noah looked at the medical forms and called out, "Hey, Linda, what's this all about?"

"Sorry to interrupt your meeting, Noah," she said, pausing to smile at Russ. "We're switching over to Blue Cross next week, and all the paperwork needs to be filled out again. Oh... I almost forgot... here's an organ donor card," she added, holding it out to him.

"Sorry, that's where I draw the line," Noah said sharply, holding up his hand.

"Noah Hartman... big humanitarian," Diane called in sarcastically, overhearing the conversation. "What do you care what happens to your body after you're dead, anyway?"

"It's just not my style, that's all."

"Not your style?" Diane mocked. "Imagine there's some helpless guy out there at the mercy of a long waiting list for a new liver, wondering if he'll ever live long enough to get to the top of that list. Then one day, he gets a phone call telling him to hurry up and get over to the hospital before it's too late. Over all the other people on the list, he's just been selected to be the lucky recipient of a new liver, courtesy of Noah Hartman, who has just saved his life. A day later, and he would have died. Wouldn't that make you feel great about yourself, Noah?"

"No, not really. I think I'd be feeling pretty dead by that point," he said sarcastically.

Undaunted, Diane continued. "Okay, Noah, how about this? Now imagine that there is no liver available. And that desperate, scared guy out there doesn't know if today's going to be the last day of his life, or the first day of the rest of his life. Are you picturing this yet, Noah?"

"Yeah... got it."

"Okay, good. Now imagine that guy is Noah Hartman. Well? Kind of changes everything, doesn't it?"

Noah didn't reply.

"Noah, you know I love you," Diane continued, "but stop being so self-centered and start thinking about others for a change. You'd be surprised at how good it makes you feel."

"Well, tell you what. I'll just leave it here on the desk just in case you change your mind," Linda said, setting the card down on the desk and leaving.

Max, a senior shopping center development manager, entered the doorway. "Just in case you haven't seen the operating statements that just came out, you were number one again this month. Not too shabby, kid," Max said jovially, looking over at Russ, acknowledging him.

"That's because I learned from the best," Noah said, winking at his mentor as he left the room.

Noah's phone rang again. "Noah Hartman's office," Diane said. "No, I'm sorry, he's in a meeting. May I take a message? Oh... I'm sorry, Mr. Hartman, I didn't recognize your voice," she said nervously. "Here he is, hold on," she said, transferring the call to Noah's phone.

"Hi, Dad," Noah said cheerfully. He paused. "But I've got Russ sitting right here, and a commercial realtor out in the lobby who's been waiting for over an hour," he added. "All right, I'll be right there," he said, hanging up the phone.

Noah shrugged at Russ apologetically and stood up.

Jerry was sitting behind his large, mahogany desk when there was a soft knock at the door. "Come on in," he called out.

"You wanted to see me, Dad?" Noah said, peeking his head in the doorway.

"Come on in and have a seat."

Noah walked into the office and sat down on the brown leather sofa.

"Shut the door."

Noah stood back up, shut the door, and returned to his seat, biting his nails.

"Your mother and I are very concerned about this Robin person. You said you want to marry her? How long have you been dating her for?"

"Three months."

"Don't you think it's very irresponsible of you to be making those kind of statements?"

Noah shrugged.

"Look, I'm going to be straight with you," Jerry said in a firm voice. "We don't want you to be with a person like that. She's uneducated, has no money, a lousy job, a child you'll end up having to support, and who knows what other problems. She's not the type of person we'd expect you to be with. You have nothing in common with her, and frankly, it doesn't make any sense."

"I can't believe you ordered me in here just to tell me whom I can and cannot date. Don't you think you're being a little prejudiced considering the fact that you haven't even met her yet? And besides, it's not your decision anyway. *God*... I hate it when you and mom try to control my life !"

"There's no reason to get all defensive; I'm only trying to help. Look, I know you're not stupid; you went to my alma mater. I know if you think this through carefully, you'll realize that you can do a lot better, which brings me to my next point. Have you had sex with her yet?"

"That's none of your business," Noah shot back, surprised by his frankness.

"I'm your father; so *your* business is *my* business. Whatever you do, make sure to wear protection. I don't trust her type. There are a lot of unscrupulous women out there who'd intentionally try to trick a guy like you into getting them pregnant, just so they can collect Child Support. I'm sure Robin sees you as her meal ticket out, so try to avoid sleeping with her, if you can."

Noah took a deep breath, trying to maintain composure. "Robin is not like that. And besides, I'm planning on spending the rest of my life with her, remember?"

"And what if she gets pregnant?" his father added. "Have you thought about that?"

"What about it?"

"Will she convert? What about the children? Do you think she'll object to bringing them up Jewish?"

"I don't know. We haven't talked about that yet."

"I thought so. Well I sure hope we raised you well enough to appreciate how important it is to marry someone within our own faith. You've heard the same sermons I've heard: the Jewish population is shrinking, year after year, and it's up to you and every generation to come to keep it going strong. Otherwise, someday it could become extinct. All I'm asking is for you to think about it. I'm sure you could just as easily fall in love with a nice Jewish girl."

"Look, Dad, you can't tell me who to love. It's my life — not yours."

"Noah, you don't understand, your mother and I love you very much, and we only want what's best for you. I think it would be prudent of you to end this right now before it goes any further, for your sake, not mine."

With Jerry staring at him waiting for a response, Noah paused, summoning his wits. "Dad, if you could only see the way she gazes into my eyes, you'd understand why I love her so much. All she has to do is just look at me that way, and my heart starts melting. That's what it is, Dad. I feel the way I do about her simply because of the way she looks at me."

"Well, I'm sure there are lots of women out there that could make you feel that way, by whatever you just said... looking at you."

"That's where you're wrong, Dad. She's the only one. She's genuine — not fake like all the others. It's my soul she cares about — not my money."

"You mean *my* money."

"And she's so filled with life," Noah continued, ignoring his father's remark. "When she laughs and smiles, I just want to latch onto it and go for the ride, because when I'm with her, for the first time in my life I feel alive."

"You look alive to me, Noah," Jerry answered dryly.

"Oh, really?" Noah said sarcastically. "Look, all I can do right now is follow my heart, and whether you like it or not, there's only one person in this world right now holding the key. I have no choice, I'm helpless... helplessly in love."

"That's absolute nonsense," Jerry said, throwing up his hands. "You can have any girl you want, and you know it. How about that Schwartz girl whom Mom likes? She's seems nice... cute, too."

"Sarah Schwartz?" Noah asked incredulously. "Isn't she, like, in fifth grade?"

"You haven't seen her lately. She's all grown up, going to Brown Med School in the fall. I'm playing golf with her father on Sunday at Spring Valley. Want me to fix you up?"

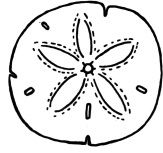
"No... no, I don't," Noah said, annoyed, standing up. "Is there any thing else, Dad? Russ is waiting patiently for me in my office."

"Yeah, one more thing... You know you're always welcome to visit us anytime you want at the summer house, right? But just not with this Robin character, okay? I don't mind so much, but you know your mother. She's very upset about this, and that would only add fuel to the fire. She can't help the way she feels, so she'd appreciate it if you'd respect her wishes. I'm sure you understand."

Noah nodded curtly. As he reached the door, his father called, "Hey, don't worry about it. Eventually your mother will come around; she always does. Just give her time. She may have a funny way of showing it, but she really does have a huge heart, and she loves you very much. She'd do anything for you."

"As angry as I was at their misguided attempts at controlling my life, I clung to the conviction that my parents loved me as best they could — albeit with conditions attached. And whether I liked what they had to say or not, they'd always be my parents, and I loved them... no matter what."

Brushing by Noah as if he were invisible, Aunt Harriet entered the office and began talking to Jerry, something about a major anchor tenant going bankrupt at several of the Hartman properties. Noah listened to them for a moment, then quietly headed back to his office with a heavy heart.



The Real World

High on a cliff overlooking a sandy beach, Zeke was giving Noah a huge bear hug in front of an old trailer at the trailer park. Zeke was big and burly, nearly double Noah's size, with a thick beard.

"Sorry, we're big huggers in our family," Zeke admitted, releasing him. "Me and Mary are so glad to finally meet you. Robin has told us so much about you. And anyone who treats our little girl with love and respect is always welcome here."

"Thanks, that's really nice of you to say," Noah said, recovering from the hug.

Mary was short, with long, salt and pepper hair. "Hi, Noah, I'm Mary," she said, kissing his cheek and making him blush. "You sure are easy on the eyes."

"Thanks, Mrs. Jaworski."

"Mrs. Jaworski? Who's that? Call me Mary. Who knows, maybe someday you'll even call me Mom."

"Sure thing... *MOM*."

Brittany set her plastic tea set all around the wooden picnic table for everyone to enjoy, and started drinking tea with her pal, Pinocchio. While Zeke threw hot dogs and burgers on the fire, Noah talked with him about the Red Sox's declining chances that summer. Robin and Mary sat in plastic lounge chairs drinking beer, chatting and laughing while faint music from a distant festival resonated in the background.

"Do you love him?" Mary asked, taking a sip of beer from a red plastic cup.

"*MOM!*" she objected loudly, looking over at Noah talking to Zeke by the fire pit. Noah turned his head to look at her, smiled, and continued talking.

"Well... do you love him?"

Robin took a sip of beer and lowered her cup, revealing a big grin.

"Hot damn !" Mary exclaimed, clapping her hands. "Mother's intuition. I just knew it. I could tell by the way you look at him. And he looks at you the same way."

"Yeah, I love him," she admitted, smiling, looking over at him fondly. "He's the sweetest guy, Mom. Never met anyone like him before. All the guys I've dated have all treated me like trash... but not Noah. He treats me like I'm some goddamn princess in a fairy tale. And he can't be convinced otherwise — I already tried. You know, despite his silver spoon upbringing, he somehow managed to stay down-to-earth. And I love that about him."

"Well, you want to know what your mother thinks?" she said with a stern face.

Robin looked concerned, afraid of what she might say.

"I love him, too !" she cried out, standing up to give her daughter a hug.

"Hey, keep your hands off him. He's all mine," Robin said jokingly. "Besides, you've got Zeke," she added, taking a sip.

"Yeah, Zeke's a keeper, alright," Mary said, looking at him. "So tell me... this prince of yours... is he real, like the rest of us... or is he just part of a fairy tale?"

"I don't know," Robin answered, looking over at him, locking eyes with him. "I just don't know."

Brittany watched as a flame engulfed a marshmallow at the end of her tree branch. Walking over to blow out the black inferno at the end of the stick, her mother kissed her on the head and said, "Britt, you be good for Grammy and Grandpa, okay?"

Brittany nodded, smiling when Zeke handed her a lit sparkler.

"Thanks for watching Britt for us," Robin said, kissing and hugging both of her parents. "We'll pick her up in the morning."

"It was a pleasure meeting you," Noah said, kissing Mary's cheek and shaking Zeke's hand.

"Likewise," Zeke said, reeling him in for another bear hug.

"So, where are you guys off to?" Mary asked.

"Meeting Julie and her new boyfriend, Jake, down at the beach. The whole gang's having a bonfire."

"Hey, that sounds like a lot fun. Mind if a couple of old geezers tag along?" Zeke kidded.

"Yeah, sure," Robin replied, laughing. "Britt will just put herself to bed."

"You guys have fun now," Mary said, waving to them as they walked off, holding hands.

"Don't do anything we'd do," Zeke yelled, pinching Mary on the butt.

Noah felt like a fish out of water walking through the trailer park in his Ralph Lauren seersucker dress shirt, Tommy Bahama silk pleated pants, Sperry Top-Sider loafers, and yellow cashmere cable-knit sweater draped around his neck. The residents, in their ribbed undershirts, oversized t-shirts, and bathing suits, stopped setting off their firecrackers to stare at him.

As Noah and Robin crossed through a carnival that had vendors selling doughboys, pretzels, cotton candy, and kettle corn, they stopped at an outdoor stage to slow dance to a local band playing **Look Heart, No Hands**. When the song was over, Robin took Noah's hand and led him over a dune to the beach, where they watched the first of many fireworks exploding just offshore.

"Happy Independence Day," Noah said with a smile, launching a passionate kiss.

"As the fireworks started going off above my head, so too were they going off inside my heart. And so I felt compelled to let her know."

Noah whispered in her ear, but she couldn't hear him over the explosions.

"WHAT?" she yelled.

He repeated it in her ear, a little louder this time.

"I can't hear you," she yelled back at him, shaking her head and pointing up to the sky.

"I LOVE YOU !" he yelled.

Hearing him loud and clear this time, she looked deep into his blue eyes and smiled as she leaned forward to kiss him. "I love you too," she whispered in his ear.

Crossing over the dunes, they headed down the beach toward the far end, where about twenty people had gathered around a blazing bonfire. As they approached, they heard music and laughter. Everybody was wearing tank tops, t-shirts, hooded sweatshirts, and bathing suits. "Am I too conservative?" Noah asked, looking down at his preppy wardrobe.

"If you're talking about your outfit, don't worry, you look fine."

"Hey guys !" said Julie, Robin's roommate, handing them Budweisers. "I want you to meet Jake."

"Hi, Jake. I'm Noah," he said, shaking his hand.

"And I'm Robin," she said with a smile.

"Nice to meet you," Jake responded, returning the smile.

"Me and Robin have been best friends since like second grade, huh, Robin?" Julie said, giving Robin a friendly squeeze. "Jake, why don't you go introduce Noah to the guys while I talk to Robin," she said, clutching Robin's arm as she stepped aside with her.

"Sure thing," Jake said, patting Noah on the back as he led him away. "So what do you do?"

"Me? I uh... I... work for my dad," Noah said humbly, eager to change the subject. "How about you?"

"Fireman," Jake replied as they walked toward the people standing around the bonfire.

"But what about...?"

"Oh, right... the fire. What do you think? Should I put it out?"

Noah shook his head.

"Good idea. I'll just leave it then," he said, laughing with him.

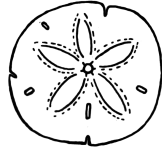
Jake put his hand to his mouth and whistled loudly, getting everyone's attention as the music was turned down. "Everybody, this is Noah. Noah, this is everybody," he announced as the friendly, down-to-earth group of people started introducing themselves to Noah, making him feel welcome.

"Can I get you another beer?" Jake asked, walking off toward the cooler.

“No, I’m all set; but thanks,” Noah replied, sitting down on a log and looking around at the friendly crowd. They were drinking, laughing, singing, and dancing around the fire. Yearning to be a part of their world, Noah suddenly envied what they had. *This is what’s missing*, he thought to himself. They were not only enjoying a simple moment of friendship, they were celebrating life. And no one seemed to celebrate life better than Robin, smiling and laughing as she talked.

“As I watched Robin standing there interacting with her friends, I realized why I was so drawn to her. She was filled with the one thing that I could never have... LIFE.”

Robin noticed Noah looking lovingly at her, and she smiled at him. With fireworks exploding in the distant background, she took his hand and began to dance.



The North Star

"It was great sailing weather that summer, and I got to spend time with my two loves — Robin and Freedom. Now what could better than that?"

As long as you had a boat, there was always plenty to do on Narragansett Bay during the summer months in the Ocean State. Noah's sailboat was one of a thousand boats anchored off the Quonset Point Air Force Base for the annual air show. Brittany was wearing a purple life preserver, trying to follow the dazzling display of aeronautics through a pair of oversized binoculars. Noah took a picture of Robin blowing a kiss to him just as The Blue Angels flew by with a thunderous roar.

A month later, Jimmy Buffet was singing **Cheeseburger In Paradise** at the Newport Folk Festival to a packed audience on the lawn at Fort Adams. Among a hundred other boats anchored just offshore, Noah's boat was rafted up to Scott's fifty-foot Sea Ray Sedan Bridge. Scott and Sharon never condoned their parents' prejudice against Robin. On the contrary, they welcomed her into the family with open arms. Robin, Sharon, and Julie were cuddled in the arms of their men, enjoying the music, dinking wine coolers, and snacking on cheese, crackers, and grapes as the sun dipped down behind the Newport Bridge.

Labor Day — the official end to summer — had arrived all too soon. With thousands of boats sailing out on the bay, Robin stood behind the helm steering Freedom with Noah standing directly behind her, kissing her neck. Their destination — the small island with the old, abandoned lighthouse. A jet ski whisked by them as they dropped anchor, the boat

slowly drifting back as one hundred feet of chain clanked through the windlass.

"I love it out here. It's so much fun," Robin declared, her feet dangling in the water as she sat on the teak swim platform with a margarita glass in her hand.

"Too bad it's not for sale," Noah said, taking a sip from his glass, gazing at the lighthouse. "Wouldn't it be cool to convert that old thing into a beautiful bed-and-breakfast? It would even be a great location for our wedding, don't you think? We could run the inn together, you and I. I could shuttle the guests over by boat, and you could make the beds and vacuum the floors," he declared, sparking a playful splashing war.

"I think it's a great idea," she replied, slurping the last sip, "provided *you* do all the dirty work. Yeah, I can picture it now... Robin Hartman, the hostess with the mostest. It's got a catchy ring to it, don't you think? Too bad your dream's not for sale, Noah."

A million stars sparkled in the sky that night as the full moon illuminated a path on the flat water to Noah's sailboat, still anchored by the lighthouse. All alone, with no other boats in sight, they jumped off the stern holding hands. As they hit the water, hundreds of tiny effervescent bubbles glowed fluorescent green all around their naked bodies, skinny-dipping. They kissed as they treaded water and then climbed back up the ladder onto the swim platform, Robin first. Noah took the transom hose and slowly rinsed her off, bathing her body with warm, flowing water as they shared a sultry kiss. Without removing her lips from his, she took the hose away from his hand. Warm water cascaded down his chiseled chest onto her supple breasts as she lowered the showerhead.

"Do you surrender?" she asked tantalizingly.

"Yes... I surrender," he breathed.

As Noah and Robin headed home on what would be their last ride of the season, the GPS monitor at the helm flickered for a moment and then went off. Noah tapped it, hoping to get it started again.

“Without navigation, how are we going to get home?” Robin asked, sounding worried. “Everything looks so black, and I can’t make out where the water ends and the land starts.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of; trust me. Must be a loose wire. It’s no big deal; I’ll fix it tomorrow. Besides, there’s always navigation. You just don’t see it,” Noah said as he gently took her hand. “See the Big Dipper up there?” he said, raising her hand up to the heavens, pointing her index finger at the constellation. She looked up her arm and nodded. “See the two stars on the bowl furthest from the handle? Now draw a line connecting them and extend it out...” he said, moving her finger across the sky, “to over there,” pointing her finger at the North Star. “You see that bright star, the first one in the handle of the Little Dipper? That’s Polaris, the North Star. Its direction always points true north. It sits in the sky directly above the Earth’s axis of rotation above the North Pole. As the Earth rotates, it’s the only star in the sky that doesn’t move. As the night goes on, all the other stars seem to rotate around it. So when I need a beacon to guide me home, all I have to do is look up at the sky, at Polaris, and it points me back to you.”

“And what do you do if it’s cloudy out, big shot?”

“Oh, good question. Well then, I simply follow my heart, which I know will always lead me back to you,” he said, leaning in for a kiss, gently stroking the nape of her neck.

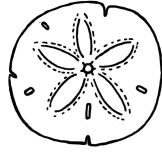
“That’s why I love you so much — you’re so romantic,” she said, hugging him.

Noah looked back up at Polaris. “You know, a thousand years from now, as the Earth slowly wobbles, some other star in the sky will become the North Star, instead of Polaris. And you know what we’ll do then... when Polaris no longer brings me home to you?”

“A thousand years from now? But we’ll be in heaven,” she said, confused, looking at him, waiting for an explanation.

“I’ll build ourselves a boat. And on that day, you and I will simply sail away...”

Robin gazed at him with a sweet smile. “Alright then, it’s a promise,” she said, leaning in to him, while high above, the North Star guided them home.



The Marriage Proposal

*M*y seventy-seven-year-old sister-in-law enters my hospital room and walks over to my brother standing beside my bed. “Hi, honey,” she says, kissing him. “Hi, Noah,” she says softly, looking down at me.

“Hi, Sharon. Thanks for coming,” I say, happy to see her. “I’d like you to meet my new friend Josh over here. I was just telling him the story about Robin and me.”

She looks into my eyes, smiles, and kisses my head, making me blush.

“You know, Noah, you’re a man after my own heart,” Josh admits. “I had no idea you were such a romantic. ‘And on that day you and I will simply sail away into heaven together’ — now that’s good stuff. Did you think of that all by yourself? Anyway, go on, go on; I love a good love story.”

They were all looking at me with pleasant eyes that encouraged me to continue. “So, like I was saying... it was a wonderful summer that I’ll never forget. But all good things must eventually come to an end. The air was getting colder and the leaves were starting to fall. And like the song says, ‘Seasons were made for change’, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. Nothing could have prepared me for what would happen next...”



Orange and brown leaves were falling as Noah and Brittany sat at a picnic table beside a heap of leaves, painting funny faces on pumpkins with acrylic paint while Jake cooked burgers on the gas grill. It was fairly cold — cold enough for sweaters and jackets. Inside the apartment, Julie

and Robin were drinking Gallo Chablis, discussing the upcoming big event.

"Does Noah know yet?" Julie asked.

"I'm a little worried about Joe being there," Robin admitted. "Even though we broke up ages ago, I'm afraid of how I might feel seeing him again. No, I haven't told Noah, and I'm not going to, either."

"Robin, you have to tell him. He deserves to know."

"I don't think I can," she said, shaking her head subtly. "I'm too afraid of losing him. I love him too much. Noah's not like any guy I've ever dated before — he's nice. And he couldn't care less that we come from two different worlds, because when I'm with him, no one else in the world matters... You ever get butterflies?"

"Butterflies?"

"Yeah, I get them every time I look into his beautiful blue eyes."

"Then don't go to Cathy's wedding in North Carolina. Stay home with Noah. You don't know what's going to happen when you see Joe again. You know how your brain works."

"Come on... just because I was dating Joe for a couple of months before I met Noah, doesn't mean I'm going to go running back to him the second I see him again. I do have *some* self control, you know."

"I hope you know what you're doing. Just don't blow it with Noah, okay? I really like that guy. He's charming."

Robin took a sip of wine as she looked out the window at Noah chasing after Brittany, tackling her in a pile of leaves and lifting her up in the air above him as she laughed hysterically. "Yeah, even my shrink calls him that. Except he calls him *Prince Charming*."



Noah pulled up to Green Airport with Robin and Brittany. He took their luggage out of the trunk and carried it over to the Southwest curbside counter. He gave Robin a hug and patted Brittany on the head.

"Well, I better get going," Noah said, watching closely as a police officer stood in back of a car, writing a ticket. "I love you," he said, giving Robin a quick kiss good-bye, watching the cop put the ticket under the wiper blade and head toward their car.

"I love you too," she responded. "Noah, wait !" she said urgently, grabbing his jacket as he pulled away.

"I can't; I have to go," he called out, running to the car, reaching it at the same time as the officer. "Sorry about that, officer. I'm leaving right now," he said, opening the door.

"But there's something I need to tell you," Robin yelled.

Noah looked over at her, waiting for her to speak. Instead, she just stood there, frozen.

"Well? You gonna move this thing, or what?" questioned the police officer.

"Hold on a sec," Noah said, holding out his hand. "What do you need to tell me?" he yelled back to her.

Shaking his head, the officer raised his pad and walked to the back of the car to take down the license plate number.

"I'll see you in three days," she yelled.

Noah nodded and quickly drove away, avoiding the ticket.

Robin was writing on butterfly-themed stationery as she sat on the plane next to Brittany, who was coloring in a Cinderella coloring book with Pinocchio by her side. Even though Robin's letter was addressed to Noah, it was really her way of reassuring herself that nothing was going to happen with Joe — at least that's what she kept telling herself, anyway.

Meanwhile, Noah walked into Ross Simons jewelry store in Warwick for his appointment with Steve. He followed him back to his office and sat down in a comfortable leather chair. Steve closed the door behind them and opened his private safe, removing a 3.75-carat round solitaire diamond engagement ring with platinum setting. He handed it to Noah, who admired its brilliance as it sparkled under the bright lamp.

The next day, Robin and Brittany sat down at a round banquet table in a modest restaurant for the rehearsal dinner. Robin glanced across the table at the handsome man with the baby face, military-cut hair, and full dress Air Force uniform. Joe looked back at Robin and smiled.

Meanwhile, Noah had a welder's mask covering his face as tiny sparks flew out in front of him, engraving a brick.

The following day, a bride and groom kissed each other at the altar, a twelve-foot high statue of Jesus nailed to the cross in the background. Robin was sitting in the tenth row, with Brittany on one side of her and Joe on the other. Joe reached over to hold Robin's hand, but she quickly pulled away, glaring at him. She looked over at Brittany to see if she'd seen anything. She had not. The audience inside the church stood, applauding loudly as the bride and groom walked back down the aisle. As everyone emptied out of their seats, Joe tried reaching for Robin's hand once again, this time capturing it.

Meanwhile, Noah opened his mailbox and shuffled through the mail until he came to an envelope with butterfly illustrations, postmarked from North Carolina. He opened it immediately.

Dear Noah,

I wish you could have come with me to my friend's wedding. I'm sorry you weren't invited. I can't stop thinking about you. I think I miss your full lips and warm blue eyes the most. Before we know it, I'll be back home and we'll be together once again, this time forever. I promise I'll never leave you again, not for one minute. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. You truly are my soul mate, and I'm so lucky to have you in my life. The plane is about to land, so I better get going. I'm counting the days until we're back in each other's arms for good.

Loving you forever,
Robin

Later that evening, Robin was slow dancing with Joe at the reception while Brittany's head rested on the dinner table, sleeping. Joe moved his lips close to Robin's. She quickly turned her head. Joe slowly turned her face back toward him and noticed a tear rolling down her cheek.

Meanwhile, Noah was aggressively pushing and pulling on a crowbar in the dark, trying to pluck a brick from the sidewalk in front of Robin's apartment. The outside light turned on in front of the apartment, and the front door opened just as the brick popped out. Noah dropped the engraved brick in its place, grabbed the crowbar and the old brick, and took off running down the street, just as Julie stepped out the front door. As she walked past the new brick that was sticking up slightly above the other bricks, she looked around suspiciously, not certain if she had seen anything or not.

Back at the wedding reception, Joe was kissing Robin on the lips. As she moved her arms around his neck, she suddenly remembered how much she cared for Joe.



Robin was staring out the passenger window as Noah drove them home from the airport.

"So, how was the wedding?" Noah asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"Good," she replied without elaborating.

"Good," he said tersely, glancing over at her, then back at the road.

"So, was she a beautiful bride?"

Robin didn't answer.

Noah waited a few seconds, then asked gently, "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No..." she said, turning her head to look at Brittany in the back seat.

"Not right now."

"I knew something was wrong right away. No one was talking, and the tension was so thick you could practically cut it with a knife."

Noah pulled up in front of her apartment and carried the luggage inside. As he came back out, Robin said to Brittany, "Go on inside, honey. I need to talk to Noah." Brittany obediently walked in the door.

"Come on over here, I want to show you something," Noah said, taking Robin by the hand and leading her over to the section of sidewalk

where he had placed the engraved brick. He took the engagement ring out of his pocket and concealed it in his hand, glancing down nervously at the brick. He looked at her and smiled. Her breathing was labored as she looked away, not noticing the brick.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, his smile fading.

“Remember that guy I was dating for a couple of months up until we met?”

“Yeah... so what? I don’t care about him,” Noah said, his face frozen.

“Well, he was there... at the wedding.”

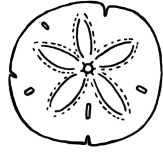
“Oh? And...?”

“Apparently, he never had any closure,” she said, her words striking Noah hard. “I promise you, nothing happened; Britt was right there beside me the whole time. But you should have seen how happy she was to see him. Brittany loves him, and he loves her.”

“Yeah, and what about me? I love Brittany too, you know.”

“Anyway, we decided to get back together and give *us* another chance. I’m sorry, Noah... it’s over,” she said, walking back to the apartment and slamming the door behind her without a backwards glance.

Noah glared down at the engagement ring in his hand and just stood there in disbelief. Even after night had fallen, Noah was still standing there, cold and shivering in the dark.



The Company He Keeps

The phone was ringing off the hook as Noah lay motionless on the bed. Rosa walked into the bedroom and answered the phone on the nightstand. "Hello. Oh, hi, Mr. Hartman. Yes, Noah's here, but he no want to talk right now. He knows it's been two weeks since he's been to work. He knows the budgets are past due. Okay, I tell him. Bye, Mr. Hartman." No sooner had she hung up the phone than it rang again. "Hello. Oh, hi, Mrs. Hartman. No, Noah no want to come for dinner tonight. He still no feel good. Okay, I tell him. Bye, Mrs. Hartman," she said, hanging up and leaving the room. The phone rang again, and Rosa could be heard speaking down the hall. "Hello. Oh, hi, Scott. No, Noah no want to talk right now. Okay, I tell him..."

"My life was not the same without Robin in it. I was depressed, and nothing could make me happy — nothing except for Robin, that is."



His fake gold Rolex and thick gold chain around his neck contrasted against a dark tan. Although he wore no wedding ring, the tan line on Tony's left ring finger suggested otherwise. "Go on..." he nudged, sitting back in his chair and staring at her.

"I don't understand what happened," Robin told her psychiatrist. "I swear it didn't matter that Joe was there, because I kept telling myself how much I loved Noah, over and over again. I tried to hang onto that for as long as I could, I really did — "

"Robin, stop torturing yourself. We go through this every time this happens. I keep explaining to you that it's not your fault; you can't help

it. Your brain is just wired that way, that's all." She nodded. "If you want, I can put you on different medication."

"I don't know," she said, clenching her teeth. "None of the meds so far have made any difference. If anything, they only seem to make things worse."

"It's your call. So, what else is happening in your life?"

"I got a letter today in the mail," she said, handing over an envelope. He removed the letter and started reading it. "Apparently, my biological father died a couple of months back from a heart attack. It says there he died alone, with no immediate family to speak of. As it turns out, I'm his sole heir. The lawyers had a tough time finding me. Since he didn't have a will, I guess *his* money is now *my* money."

"Wow, Robin, that's a substantial amount," he exclaimed, handing her back the letter. "What are you going to do with all that money? Buy a small house somewhere?"

"Not exactly... I'm going to burn it."

"Robin, you're not going to burn it. Think about Brittany's future."

"Well... maybe not," Robin acquiesced, looking away. "But, that son of a bitch abandoned my mom and I when I was just a baby. And for the last twenty-five years, I didn't even know he was still alive. That bastard's not my dad — Zeke is. He can keep his goddamn money and burn in hell as far as I'm concerned."

"Come on, Robin, let it go. It's not healthy for you. The only person this negative energy is hurting is yourself."

Robin nodded. "Alright... I'll give it a try."

"I'm sure you'll figure out what to do with that money," he said reassuringly.



Sporting a scraggly beard and a gray hooded coat, Noah sat staring off into space in the waiting area in the executive building outside a door that read *Harriet Hartman, Executive Vice President*. He had lost the love of his life, and he was struggling to come to grips with how unhappy he was working for the company. Not only was it a job that he didn't choose

for himself, but it was a job that he knew he could never leave. He felt trapped.

"You okay, Noah? You don't look so good," said the project manager sitting next to him, waiting his turn to go in.

The door opened and Max walked out, visibly agitated.

"Hey, Max, how'd your review go?" asked the nervous project manager.

"Great... Just terrific," Max replied sarcastically, shaking his head in disbelief. "Thirty-two years of dedication and loyalty. Thirty-two years of starting Jerry's shopping center division from scratch and turning it into a multi-billion-dollar division. And how do they thank me? They fire me because we lose a couple of major anchors all in the same year. I got to go pack up my stuff and get the hell out of here... Oh, hi, Noah. I didn't recognize you with that beard. I feel bad for you, kid, I really do."

Aunt Harriet opened the door and popped her head out. "Noah, you're up next."

Noah glanced at Max and trudged into the office, lowering himself into a big leather armchair across from his father.

"Hi, Noah," Jerry said with a pleasant smile.

"So, let's get started," Aunt Harriet announced, shutting the door. "Looking at your final numbers for the year, Noah, you had another outstanding year. In fact, you're one of our brightest stars. Out of the twenty-two project managers we have working for us at the company, you and Carol are the only ones to actually show a profit increase over last year. Not only did you have an astounding twenty percent increase in occupancy rates, but you also had a twenty-seven percent increase in profit."

Noah sat numbly, unresponsive.

"Great job, Noah. Based on your exceptional numbers, your dad and I feel you've earned another \$25,000 bonus this year, same as last year. Congratulations." Aunt Harriet and Jerry stood up to shake his hand.

"Thanks," Noah said without emotion, standing and extended his hand reluctantly. "Is that it? Can I go now?"

Aunt Harriet nodded, and Noah dragged himself toward the door. "Oh, Noah, wait a second," she exclaimed. Noah stopped. "Your father and I have been talking. He mentioned to me that you're looking to take

on more responsibility. So how'd you like to add our shopping center portfolio to your current responsibilities?"

Noah stood there for a moment. "How could you fire Max after all these years?" he said, not turning to face them.

"Noah, your father and I agonized over this one. You know very well that ever since the last recession, our occupancy rates and rental income have consistently dropped, year after year. The only way to survive is to cut back on expenses wherever we can and do more with less. We're not in business to lose money, and we just couldn't afford Max's lofty salary anymore. If we didn't let him go, then two other project managers would have to be let go in his place. We had no choice. I admit, Max is a great guy, but business is business. He'll be all right; we gave him a great severance package. So what do you say, star? You wanted more responsibility, now you've got it."

"Not like this," he said, walking through the door.

Noah was eating lunch all by himself in the cafeteria when Cindy invited herself to join him. Although she was young and pretty, Noah didn't pay much attention to her and the fact that she may have had one too many buttons opened on her shirt that day.

"Hey, Noah. I like the new look — the beard," she said, taking her lunch out of a brown paper bag.

Noah continued to eat his lunch without acknowledging her.

"I heard you broke up with your girlfriend. I'm sorry to hear that. If you ever need a friend to talk to — or a shoulder to lean on — I'm your gal."

"Hi, Noah," Diane said, walking briskly over to them. "Cindy, I don't think you know what you're doin' over here. Come sit down with the rest of us at our table."

"Yeah, okay... be there in a few," Cindy replied placatingly while smiling at Noah and opening her yogurt.

"Noah, tell Cindy she needs to get up now," Diane insisted, glancing over at Stan, the security guard who was sitting across the cafeteria, eating his lunch and glaring at them. "They're watching you, Noah," she warned in a low voice. Noah didn't respond. He just kept on eating. "It's

your funeral,” she said to Cindy, walking back to sit with the other secretaries.

Noah had managed to make it through a long, cold winter. The tulips were in bloom in front of Hartman Enterprises as Noah’s convertible pulled into the company parking lot with the top down. Cindy rode in the passenger seat wearing sunglasses, her hair windblown. Noah didn’t pull into his usual reserved parking space, like he always does. Instead, he drove to the back corner of the lot. Glancing around and not seeing anyone, he kissed Cindy before getting out of the car.

As they walked into the building separately, not acknowledging each other, a surveillance camera zoomed in on Cindy. Inside the company’s security office, Stan rewound the tape, viewing the segment again as he picked up the phone.

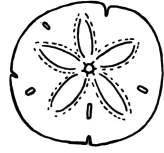
“Hello, Jerry? It’s Stan here in security...”

Later that day, Noah was sitting in his office talking to Russ when Diane came storming in. She grabbed Russ’ leasing brochure out of his hand and threw it at Noah, just missing his head.

“What the hell?” Noah exclaimed.

“Noah, you asshole. They just canned Cindy.”

“Shit,” he said, burying his head in his hands. “I’m so sorry.”



Destiny

Light gusts of wind blew brown leaves in swirling patterns as Noah, rid of his beard, sat at his desk staring out the window, surprised to see a red robin sitting on the sill, waiting patiently for her mate to arrive with another twig. Like clockwork, the other red robin flew in, placed the twig in the nest, and flew away to go find another twig.

Diane sat at her desk watching him. "Noah, you okay? You gotta snap out of it and finish the profit projections that were due yesterday. Noah... Noah?"

"I can't stop thinking about her. It just doesn't make any sense."

"Who? Cindy?"

"No... Robin. She was *the one*. I don't understand what happened," he said morosely. "Robin, I don't understand," he said softly to himself.

"Destiny's funny that way. If it was meant to be, Robin will come back to you. If she doesn't, then it was never meant to be. It's like that saying, *If you love something, set it free...*"

Noah leaped up, grabbed his briefcase, and strode toward the door.

"Hey, where you going? What about the projections?"

Noah stopped and looked at her. "To pay a visit to destiny," he said, dropping the completed budgets on her desk and disappearing down the hallway.

Noah stood in front of Robin's apartment door, holding the diamond ring in one hand and a folded letter in the other. The door opened.

"Hi, Noah," she greeted him with a pleasant smile.

"Hey," he said, surprised that Robin actually seemed happy to see him. "How've you been?"

"Good... You?"

"Not bad... How's Brittany doing?"

"She's doing great, thanks for asking."

"Tell her I said hello, okay?"

"I will."

There was an uncomfortable silence as Noah stood there, clenching the diamond ring. "Well, this is for you," he said, handing her the letter, his eyes taking her in one last time. "Call me if you want to talk," he conceded as he turned and walked back to his car. *The timing just isn't right*, he thought to himself as he stared at the diamond in his hand, tossing it into the glove box and speeding away.

As Robin stepped back into her apartment, she unfolded the letter and began to read it.

The Beautiful Red Bird

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful red bird. One day, the beautiful red bird decided to fly right through my window and into my life. Never had I seen a more beautiful creature. My life would never be the same, because never did I love anything more.

I remember the moment I first laid eyes on the beautiful red bird. She was so full of life as she smiled and danced with her hands up in the air. There was no one else in the room.

I remember our first kiss. I kissed away the tears from her sad but beautiful eyes. My heart skipped a beat.

I remember the butterflies. We couldn't even eat.

I remember the tumultuous ocean on the day our bodies and souls first truly connected.

I remember Polaris, the star that always leads me back to her.

But most of all, I remember the way she used to gaze deep into my eyes, and through her eyes, I fell deeply and madly in love with her beautiful soul.

These things I will always remember until the day I die.

And so I wonder, What does the beautiful red bird remember? Because on one sad day, for some inexplicable reason, the beautiful red bird decided to just get up and fly right back out that window.

Oh, how I miss the beautiful red bird. I just want to tell her that the window is still open, just in case she ever wants to fly back in again. As long as I'm alive, that window will always be left open.

Robin, I love you, and I always will, until the end of time.

Noah



The wind was howling that cold Friday night in October when Noah returned to Mardi Gras. He was wearing a long, puffy down coat, the fur hood pulled up over his head.

"This was it... the place I first met Robin. Maybe if I were lucky she'd be there again, I thought. Who knows, maybe I'd get to see her smile... talk to her for awhile... dance with her even..."

Noah checked his coat and started searching the crowd for Robin's face. He thought back to that fateful night, the night he first laid eyes on her, dancing with her hands up in the air, so happy, so full of life. He bought a Captain and Coke, then another, and another, all the while hoping she'd somehow magically appear.

Suddenly, there she was — a woman with long, red hair just like Robin's. As she turned, his heart raced. The side of her face looked just like Robin's. He hurried over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. The woman turned and smiled at him, but he was heartbroken to see she wasn't Robin. Although she did look a lot like her, a copy would never be quite the same as the original. "Sorry," he said as his face fell, walking away.

Noah left the nightclub and got into his car, which rolled slowly into a telephone pole. A police officer on detail at the club ran over to the car

and opened the driver's door. Inside the slightly damaged vehicle, Noah was out like a light, unharmed and fast asleep.

Noah ended up spending the night in jail, sleeping it off. Appearing before a judge the next morning, he released him on his own recognizance. Ben, a litigant on the payroll of Hartman Enterprises, told Noah not to worry about the D.U.I. charge, the judge being his brother-in-law.

The next night, Julie and Robin got dressed up for a night out on the town. As they left their apartment, they headed down the dimly lit sidewalk, and Robin tripped, breaking the glass heel off of one of her transparent Benjamin Walk shoes.

"Damn it, these were my favorite shoes," she exclaimed, taking off the broken shoe and examining it.

Julie looked down and noticed an engraved brick sticking up through the leaves. She bent down and brushed it off, using her lighter to read it.

"Holy shit, Robin, did you see this?"

"Oh my God..." Robin breathed as she bent down and read the words on the brick — *Robin, Will you marry me? LOVE always, Noah*. "He never said anything to me."

"You're shitting me, right? He carves a frickin' marriage proposal in stone in front of our apartment, and he never mentions this to you?"

"Yeah, I know, right? I mean, who does that?"

"When do you think he did it?"

"I don't know... last year, maybe."

"What are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do? We live in two different worlds, remember? And you can't mix 'em together."

"I guess you're right... Come on, let's go get drunk."

A half-hour later, Robin and Julie arrived at Mardi Gras, while Noah arrived at the Art Bar across town, driving a rental car. He searched the crowd aimlessly for Robin, then sat at the bar by himself for the rest of the night, drinking only water.

The Art Bar was closing, so Noah left a tip, fetched his puffy down coat from the coat-check, and headed home, disappointed. As he parked

the car in his driveway and headed toward his house with his fur hood pulled up over his head, he heard a car driving down the street.

"All I could think about that night was Robin. What was the chance that while I was looking for her, she'd be looking for me? No way could that car coming down the street so late at night be her..."

"This is a really dumb idea. Just turn the car around, and let's go home," Julie said to Robin as Robin's silver car zipped down Noah's street.

"He's never going to know I was ever here. It's one-thirty in the morning, and if I know him, he was out like a light by ten."

"And what if you're wrong, and he sees you?"

"Trust me, he's not going to see me."

"Just let the poor guy move on with his life, and let's get the hell out of here. Besides, with your history, you can't even promise that you won't do it to him again, can you?"

As the car sped by, Noah looked over his shoulder, but he couldn't make out the car over the bright headlights.

"SHIT ! Who the hell was that?" Robin exclaimed.

"Some fat old lady. I didn't recognize the car."

Noah walked back to his rental car and pretended to put the key into the passenger door, waiting for the car to return, hoping it would somehow be Robin. The Honda came to a screeching halt at the end of the dead end street. Backing up and quickly turning around, the car raced back up the street. Noah ran out into the middle of the road just as it passed him, his hood falling down from his face. It was Robin's license plate.

"That ain't no fat old lady..." Robin screeched, looking in her rear-view mirror. "That's Noah !"

Noah jumped in the rental car and gave chase, catching up to her at a red light and pulling up beside her on the wrong side of the road. He beeped his horn to get her attention, but she wouldn't look. The light changed, and she was off to the races again. But Noah was in close pursuit. He pulled in front of her and started slowing down. She lost him by making an abrupt turn to the right, fleeing down a small dirt road.

Noah looked in his rear-view mirror, slammed on the brakes, and quickly started backing up. Slamming on her brakes, Robin stopped on a boat ramp just short of the water as Noah pulled up behind her, blocking her in.

They jumped out of their cars and walked quickly toward each other. While Noah was ecstatic to see her, it quickly became apparent that Robin did not share the same sentiment. She stormed toward him with the broken transparent shoe in her hand, throwing it at him and missing his head as he ducked. Noah grabbed hold of her as she pounded on his chest.

"Stop, I surrender," he pleaded, struggling unsuccessfully to contain her blows.

Suddenly memories of loving Noah started coming back, precipitated by the fact that his lips were now pressing against hers. As if a switch inside her brain was magically triggered, she stopped hitting him, and stared.

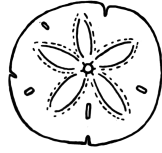
"It's me... Noah," he said, releasing her.

"I know," she said with a loving smile, gazing at him. "I remember now."

Robin's lips rushed to meet his again, kissing him as if he'd been away at sea for years on end. Just then, a police car pulled up and shined a high beam light onto them. Not paying any attention, they kept right on kissing. The officer shined the light onto Julie sitting in the passenger seat. She turned around and waved at the officer, calling out, "Don't worry, everything's fine!"

As the police radio crackled, "0500 burglary in progress..." the police car sped off into the night with its lights flashing and siren sounding. And while Robin and Noah continued kissing without interruption, the constellations above them shined bright and clear.

"And so that night... destiny paid a visit to me."



A Kiss To Remember

As Noah loaded a cardboard box into the back of a small U-haul truck, Robin, wearing her new diamond engagement ring, hugged Julie in front of her apartment.

"I'm going to miss you," Julie said to Robin. "One piece of advice... keep him this time, okay?"

"Oh, believe me, I will. I love him, and nothing could ever change my mind about that."

"Well, maybe you should write yourself a letter... just in case."

Robin laughed as she kissed Julie good-bye and headed for the truck.

Forty-five minutes later, the U-haul truck pulled into Noah's cobblestone driveway in Jamestown. While Noah grabbed a carton from the back of the truck, Robin stood on the threshold fumbling with an orange foam keychain with her daughter standing beside her, clutching onto Pinocchio and anxious to go in. As soon as the door opened, Brittany ran up the stairs to find her new room, her smile fading as she entered. The walls were brown, the curtains brown, the comforter brown, and the dresser was black.

"Mommy," she called out. "MOMMY !" she screamed nervously, not getting an immediate response.

"What is it, honey?" Robin asked, appearing next to her in the doorway.

"I'm scared !" she said, pointing at her masculine bedroom.

"Don't be scared, sweetheart. The room just needs mommy's touch, that's all, and some good old-fashioned lovin'. Before you know it, it'll feel just like home. I promise," she said, kissing Brittany on the head. "Come over here; I want to show you something. Look, you've got your

own balcony," she said, opening the French doors. "You can even have tea out here with Pinocchio if you want. And I have a pretty good idea he's going to really like the view."

Brittany's mouth dropped as she stepped out onto the deck overlooking the mouth of the bay. "Okay, Mommy... I'll take it," she said, nodding sweetly.

Noah was sleeping like a baby when the alarm went off at six a.m. As usual, he slept through the buzzing sound that was getting louder by the second. Robin rolled over him, reached up, and yanked the clock out of the wall, dropping it to the floor.

"Honey, aren't you getting up for work?"

"I don't feel so good," Noah groaned. "Must have been the food you made last night."

Robin frowned, felt his forehead, and went downstairs to make coffee. An hour later, she was dressed in her white uniform, kissing him on the head as he continued to sleep. The moment the front door slammed shut, Noah's eyes popped open. He pushed the curtain aside and watched Robin wave good-bye to Brittany as she hopped onto the school bus. He continued watching until she had driven down the street on her way to work. Noah opened the front door and put his hand to his mouth, whistling loudly, and two white vans marked *Hartman Enterprises* pulled right up. Two men wearing white overalls jumped out of one van, while Mike, the maintenance guy, jumped out of the other.

Mike and Noah made a good team, building a bunk bed in the shape of an opulent castle, while the other two men primed the walls and then painted them pink. Noah and Mike hung Princess curtains on the windows and rolled out a Princess rug on the floor, while the painters painted a large mural of Cinderella on a wall. A delivery truck from Cardi's Furniture pulled up in front of the house, and two men brought up a white dresser, vanity, mattress, and an oversized purple shaggy beanbag chair. They took the old furniture with them as they left. As the *pièce de résistance*, Noah hung a framed limited edition Disney animation cel of Pinocchio on the wall. Looking at his watch, it was now 2:05 p.m. They had finished just in time.



"Hey, Denise. How are you?" Robin said, walking up to the teller at Old Stone Bank.

"ROBIN !" she exclaimed. "Thank you so much for getting little Joey for me last week."

"No problem, he's a doll. How's your mom doing?"

"She's doing much better now that they have her on antibiotics. I don't know how I would have gotten her to the hospital if it wasn't for you picking up Joey from daycare and watching him all night for me."

"It was no big deal, really. I'm sure you'd do the same for me."

"So, how are things with you? What's goin' on?"

"You're never going to believe this, but I got this check in the mail," Robin said, embarrassed as she handed it to her.

"Oh my God, Robin, that's amazing. What, did you win the lottery or something?"

"Not exactly, my biological father died."

"Zeke died?" she said, raising her voice, concerned.

"No... no, Zeke's fine. Anyway, I'd like you to make out a bank check for me."

"Sure, how much?"

"All of it. Here's who I want it to go to," Robin said, handing her a note.

Denise read the name on the note and looked up. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked cautiously, looking at her.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Okay," Denise said, smiling. "Let me just go get the bank manager's signature, and I'll be right back."

She left and came back to her station a few minutes later, handing Robin a red envelope. Robin opened the envelope and looked at the bank check inside made out for \$257,000. She inserted a note written on butterfly-themed stationery into the red envelope and sealed it.

"Anything else?" Denise asked.

"Yeah, how about some more sweets for the kids?"

"Of course," she laughed, handing her a bag full of brightly colored lollipops.



Brittany stepped off the school bus and ran into her mother's outstretched arms, skipping into the house arm-in-arm. Robin headed into the kitchen to put away the groceries while Brittany scampered upstairs. A moment later Robin heard a scream, and she ran upstairs to find Brittany jumping up and down in her room, laughing with joy. In disbelief, Robin took in the transformation of the room, which now resembled Cinderella's enchanted castle.

The moment Noah walked through the door into the foyer, Robin surprised him by grabbing hold of him and giving him a passionate kiss that seemed to last a lifetime. She looked deep into his eyes, thanking him without words for his thoughtfulness.

"Can you picture the way she kissed me? No one ever kissed me like that before — or after, for that matter. You can't imagine how wonderful that made me feel. This is why I loved her so much. Of all the kisses I ever received my entire life, I would never forget this particular one. No words were ever spoken. No words were needed. I knew from that kiss that Robin missed me all day long and couldn't wait to see me. I knew from that kiss that I was loved."

Robin handed Noah a red envelope.

"What's this?" he asked, examining the sealed envelope.

"I need you to hold onto this for me for safekeeping. It's important, so don't lose it. Promise me you'll never open it."

"Okay, I promise," he said, curious about the contents of the envelope. He read the words on the front of the envelope — *Deliver to Robin when the time is right.*

"But how will I know when the time is right?"

"That's something I hope you never have to find out," she said, exiting the foyer with a mischievous smile.

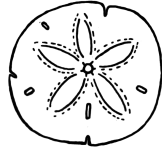
Noah continued to have a puzzled look on his face as he stared at the mysterious envelope in his hand.



The holidays were a time of joy. Brittany was running around the house with Scott and Sharon's two kids. Sam was five, the same age as Brittany, and David was seven. Julie was there, pregnant, with her fiancé Jake. Scott and Sharon talked to Zeke and Mary while Robin opened the front door, embracing Jerry and Miriam, who stiffly returned the gesture. Robin walked over to join Noah sitting on the side of the sofa. More than words, she expressed her love by wrapping her arms around him and kissing his head. Noah rested his hands on top of hers and smiled.

A little while later, everyone sat down at the dinner table for the feast. Noah rose to say the blessing. "We're thankful for all the people in our lives whom we love. May they always share a special place in our hearts, our homes, and our lives. And thanks for the simple things in life," he said, looking at Robin. "It's always the simple things that we cherish the most and never forget." He looked around the room at everybody and raised his glass. "Happy Thanksgiving, everyone."

Noah was fast asleep at five o'clock in the morning, spooning Robin, when Brittany ran into their bedroom and started jumping on the bed. Brittany pulled them out of bed and down the stairs, excited to open the presents beneath the Christmas tree. The glass of milk left for Santa sitting on the granite island in the kitchen was mostly empty, the cookies on the tray mostly eaten. Brittany spotted a trail of what looked like hoof marks going across the kitchen floor, leading back to the fireplace in the living room. Noah looked up the fireplace flue and was surprised to pull out a large, black boot covered in soot. "It must have fallen off of Santa's foot as he was leaving," Noah told Brittany, her mouth open in amazement. Robin laughed, shoving Noah. Noah put the boot aside and lit the fireplace, and while Brittany excitedly unwrapped her presents, they kissed in front of it.



A Shack In The Woods

Forty-nine-year-old Brittany walks into my hospital room and joins Scott, Sharon, and Josh around my bed.

"Thanks for coming, Britt," I say appreciatively.

"*This* is little Brittany?" Josh exclaims, surprised. "Wow, she sure turned into a beautiful woman, didn't she?"

Brittany places her hand gently on my face and looks deep into my eyes with her warm, loving eyes. I return the sentiment.

"How's your mom doing?" Scott asks her.

"I just left her room," she says, looking over at Scott. "Olivia's still there with her now. When she and Noah arrived in the ambulance, she was hysterical. The doctor had to sedate her twice just to calm her down."

"Is Robin okay? What happened?" I ask, concerned.

"She's okay now," Brittany says, moving my hair away from my eyes and mouthing the words *I love you* to me. "She's resting comfortably. Besides, she's much better off not knowing what's about to happen to Noah," she says, looking back at Scott.

"Britt, what are you talking about? What's about to happen to me? Can't I just go home?"



"Honey... I think I smell something burning," Noah said nervously, watching a thin plume of white smoke float in between Brittany and him as they sat at the kitchen table waiting for dinner. Brittany looked up and screamed, running upstairs to her bedroom and slamming the door behind her.

Robin was standing in the kitchen reading some papers while food on the stove burned in front of her. "What the hell is this?" she demanded, marching over to Noah and holding up the papers.

"Oh, I see you found the prenup..." he said matter-of-factly.

"And when were you planning on telling me about this? Or were you hoping I'd just discover it sitting here on the kitchen counter?"

"Well, I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I, uh... can't get married without one."

"*Oh, great !*" she remarked sarcastically. "So what choice do I have? If I don't sign it, we don't get married?" Noah shrugged. "What ever happened to the old-fashioned, romantic idea of planning to grow old together? You know... because we love each other?"

"Look, you don't understand. I've already been through one nasty divorce, and I need to be better prepared this time."

"So your first marriage to Rachel ends in disaster, and I get to pay the price. I guess all you care about is keeping your stuff, huh? What about the people in your life? Don't they mean anything to you? Or does money mean more to you than me?" Noah sat there silently. "This should be the happiest time of our lives. We haven't even gotten married yet, and all you can think of is an exit strategy... just in case. That's a hell of a way to enter into a union that's supposed to last a lifetime, don't you think? Or are you planning on screwing up?"

"I don't have a choice in the matter. If I don't have a prenup, I can't get married."

"That's ridiculous. You always have a choice."

"You don't understand, if I don't have a prenup, my parents will disown me."

"Well, guess what? If your parents actually disowned you, that would be the best thing that could ever happen to you."

"I didn't make the rules — I just play by them."

"I'm not marrying your goddamn parents, Noah, I'm marrying *you*. For God's sake, when are you going to stand up to your parents and start making your own decisions for a change?"

"But I have to protect the company stock."

"Bullshit ! The only thing you're interested in protecting is your stuff. What about me, Noah? Don't you care about me?"

"Of course I care about you."

"Then tell me I don't need to sign this thing."

He looked at her and exhaled, shaking his head.

"Screw your parents, and for that matter, screw you. I wish you didn't have any money," she said, throwing the papers at him and storming out of the room, going upstairs to check on her daughter.

Noah picked up the prenup, turned off the burners on the stove, and opened the windows to dissipate some of the smoke still permeating the room.

Later that night, Noah shut the TV off in the den and went upstairs. He turned the handle to the bedroom door, but it was locked.

"Robin..." he called out, knocking. "Robin?"

There was no answer. He opened the guestroom door and turned the light on, staring at the empty bed in the corner that he'd soon call *home*.

The sign on the door read *The Law Offices of Brown & Sons*. Inside the large conference room, Noah and Robin sat on opposite sides of a long conference table, their lawyers beside them.

"Well, quite frankly," her lawyer said, "I've seen a lot of prenups in my day, and this one's about as lopsided as they get."

"Well, this is just the starting point, Steve," Ben, Noah's lawyer, explained. "That's why we're here: to work out the kinks. Our clients are in love, and we want to make this as painless as possible for them. Tell us what you want, and let's start the negotiation process."

"NEGOTIATION PROCESS?" Robin said angrily. "Is that what this is? Noah goes to his corner, and I go to mine? Is this a glimpse of what our marriage is going to be like?" she asked Noah. "You make all the decisions, and who cares what I want? What are we going to do when we disagree? Call our lawyers to start another negotiation process?"

"No, n-n-not at all," Noah stuttered. "This is all just a formality. Once we get through this minor sticking point, then it's smooth sailing."

"Oh, really? You mean as long as I'm a good little wife, keeping my mouth shut and going along with whatever you say, then everything will be just fine and dandy. Is that the way it's going to be? Because if it is, I

don't want to sign up for this. Whatever happened to us being a team? — You know, equal partners on an equal playing field."

"Look, Robin, none of us wants the two of you to end up in divorce," Ben said in a placating tone. "But if for some horrible, inexplicable reason it ever happens, then we feel it's only fair that what belongs to Noah before the marriage, including any and all Hartman Enterprises stock, should stay with Noah, and what belongs to you, should stay with you. Now what's wrong with that line of thinking? And just to show Noah's appreciation, if you do end up getting divorced, he'll give you thirty thousand dollars for every year the two of you were married — prorated, of course. That's three hundred thousand dollars if you stay married for ten years, which I may point out, is three hundred thousand dollars more than what you have now. It's nothing to sneeze at, and it would definitely be more than enough for a down payment on a new house."

"I understand what you're saying, Ben," Steve kicked in, "but what Robin is concerned about here, is that her house will not feel like her *home*."

"That's because it's not her home — it's *Noah's* home," Ben rebuked.

"That's exactly Robin's point. Someday down the road, Noah could get tired of her. Maybe he wants a newer, prettier model — who knows? He could abandon her and throw her and any children they might have together out on the street, and Noah's life goes on uninterrupted, as if nothing ever happened. He comes out smelling like a rose — no harm, no foul. Can you imagine what it would be like for Robin in that situation? Always wondering when or if her own husband is going to wake up someday and say, 'Oh, by the way, I'm getting kind of tired of you, Robin, it's time for you to pack your bags and leave *my* house'."

"Well, in that case, Noah will be happy to put Robin's name on the deed as long as she pays him for half the equity up front."

"Ha, that's a laugh," Robin called out. "You know I can't even afford my own gas. How do you expect me to come up with money to buy half a house?"

"There's no need to get upset," Ben said calmly. "We're all here to help. The wedding is only two months away, and we have to get this settled so the two of you can start enjoying a long, happy life together. So

what's it going to take to get you to sign this thing? A new BMW? A Lexus? How about a Range Rover?"

As Robin shot a scornful look across the table, Noah lowered his head in shame. He knew the prenuptial agreement was a necessary evil; he just wished there were an easier way. Ben opened his briefcase and removed catalogs from Mercedes, BMW, Lexus, Land Rover, and others. Robin looked at Noah, shook her head, and tossed the catalogs aside, storming from the room.



Karen, Larry's pretty, new assistant, was sitting in Noah's office next to her boss, taking notes. She was young and slim, with shoulder-length blonde hair and a dainty Southern accent.

"Impressive brochure," Noah commented, picking up the Hartman Towers leasing brochure and turning it over, revealing the words *Wentworth Leasing and Sales*. "And you did a great job for me on our Portsmouth waterfront project. However, I need Wentworth to take a ten percent cut in commission on this one. Ever since my parents had dinner at Al Forno with Sol Cohen from Commercial Properties, my dad's been stopping by my office every day to review their proposal. I've been negotiating with them and got them to sharpen their pencils considerably. They'd do anything to eat your lunch. But don't worry, I told my dad that all things remaining equal, we've got to stick with the vendor of record — you guys."

"I appreciate that. Anything else?" Larry inquired.

"Yeah, I need a fifteen percent increase in co-op advertising."

"Gee, I'm so glad I asked," Larry said sarcastically. "Tell you what, I'll find out and get back to you by Friday. How's that?"

"Fair enough, Larry."

As Karen bent over his desk to pick up the stack of brochures, she looked up at Noah and smiled. Like a gentleman, Noah quickly looked away, trying to avoid the view down her beige silk blouse.

Noah stood up and shook Larry's hand and then Karen's. "It was a pleasure meeting you... Karen, is it?" he said to her as the two real estate agents left the office.

"Hey, Little Brother," Scott said, popping his head in the doorway. "Ready for lunch? You can fill me in on the wedding plans."

Just then Karen came dashing back into the office. "I forgot to give you this," she said, handing Noah her business card. "Just in case you need to get a hold of me," she said with a suggestive smile, running back out.

Noah turned the card over and read the message on the back.

The man in the cafeteria line in front of Scott and Noah kept looking back at them, accidentally knocking over his cup of soda. As the man attempted to clean up the spill with a couple of small paper napkins, Noah ran in back of the counter and grabbed a dishtowel, getting down on his hands and knees to wipe it up.

"Wow," the man said, amazed. "I can't believe the owner's son would actually do that for me. Thanks."

Noah stood up and handed the wet towel to the server behind the counter. "It's nothing, really," he said, pouring another soda from the fountain machine and handing it to him. "Careful with this one," he said jokingly.

Scott paid for both his and Noah's meal, sitting down at an empty table next to a group of white-haired women.

"The wedding is only a month away," Noah confided in his brother, "and I'm not even looking forward to it. All we do is argue, and we haven't even had sex in three months, ever since I handed her that frickin' prenup, which, by the way, still isn't signed yet."

"Shhh... keep it down," Scott warned, looking over his shoulder at the elderly secretaries, who by their sudden silence were likely eavesdropping.

"And if she doesn't sign it, then what?" Noah asked.

"Then you don't get married," Scott insisted.

"*PERFECT*. Then we won't have anything to argue about then, will we?"

"What are you arguing about?"

"She argues about the prenup, and I argue about the sex."

"Sex?"

"Yeah, sex. I HAVE TO HAVE SEX, SCOTT; I HAVE TO HAVE IT !" Noah exclaimed loudly, grabbing hold of Scott's shirt. Glancing over at the old ladies, who were gawking at him with their mouths open, he smiled awkwardly and let go of Scott's shirt.

"To tell you the truth," Noah said quietly, "it seems like we're arguing about every little thing these days. Isn't the arguing supposed to start *after* you get married?"

"Look, Noah, if you're having second thoughts, if there's any doubt whatsoever in your mind, then you've got to postpone the wedding. You don't have to cancel it, just give yourself more time to work things out."

"I can't do that to her. She'd be devastated. And over what? The prenup?"

"In case you haven't noticed, we don't live in a utopian society. Stop being so idealistic and start being practical. You've got to postpone the wedding."

"How do I do that? The invitations have already gone out, and Dad has pretty much paid for everything already."

"Forget the money; it's water under the bridge. Stop worrying about other people and start thinking about yourself. Believe me, you don't want the foundation of your marriage to be based on this."

"You know, despite all the problems we've been having lately, deep down beneath all the arguing, I'm still just as madly in love with her as the day we first met. If I postpone the wedding now, she'll probably never marry me. And for the rest of my life I'll be looking back, wondering if I made a terrible mistake, regretting it. No... I have to go through with this. I have to find out for myself," Noah said, glancing at the white-haired ladies, who turned quickly back to their bag lunches.



"I don't give a damn about your house, your boat, your precious toys," Robin sobbed as Noah packed a suit into a suitcase on their bed. "You should know that about me by now. You think I'm with you because of your money? Is that it?" Noah kept on packing without looking at her. "Well it's not it. I love *you*, not your goddamn money. It's not about how many dollars you have or what you own; it's about who you love. And I

love *people*, Noah, not things. I guess you really don't know me that well after all. No..." she said, shaking her head, "I don't want your money... but I do know who does. Just think of all the desperate people you could feed or shelter simply by selling your boat or living in a smaller house. Wouldn't that make you feel great about yourself? Helping complete strangers in need?"

She looked at him packing his suitcase absently, and she let out a scream of frustration. "I wish you didn't have any money. I wish you were poor, just like me." Noah stopped packing and looked at her. "That's right. You heard me. I wish you poverty. POVERTY. So every morning when you open your eyes and see me lying next to you, you'd know... you'd know that the only reason why I love you so damn much is because of one thing and one thing only: your beautiful soul," she said, her voice softening. "It's your soul I'm in love with, Noah, not your money."

Noah continued to pack. "You can keep your precious things," she continued, shaking her head. "I don't want them. But please... please don't make me sign that horrible paper. It doesn't make me feel safe in this house. Don't you see how important that is to me? I need to feel safe here."

"I'll be back from Las Vegas on Monday," he said, zipping up his suitcase. "We can continue our talk then," he said, taking his suitcase and leaving without kissing her good-bye.

Posters of shopping centers on large, lit-up displays framed the spacious Hartman Enterprises booth at the Las Vegas Convention Center, featuring the large mixed-use development model from Jerry's office. With spotlights shining down on it, the replica of Hartman Place included one million square feet of upscale open-air shopping and dining, a water fountain with a synchronized light and music show, a movie theater, and two 30-story mirrored buildings, one for office space and one for luxury condos. Larry and his entourage spotted Noah standing under the *Hartman Enterprises* banner and headed toward him.

"This is my boss, Charlie Wentworth, VP of Sales and Leasing," Larry said, introducing him to Noah. "And you've met my assistant, Karen."

"Very impressive," Charlie praised, glancing at the model as he shook Noah's hand. "We look forward to representing you on this," he said, handing him a business card.

"It was Max's baby," Noah said, staring blankly at the model.

"A bunch of us are going to Top Of The World for dinner tonight — top floor of the Stratosphere Hotel. Care to join us?" Larry asked.

"Sure, why not?" he said as Karen put on a smile. "I've never eaten there before."

"The reservation's for seven," Larry added.

"Okay, thanks. See you tonight," Noah said, waving to them as they left the booth.

Noah took out his brown business card binder and put Charlie's card in the next available slot, one slot below Karen's business card. He took out her card and read the back: *My cell 563-2213. Call me day or NIGHT! Karen ♥*

The waiter brought over a couple of bottles of wine and started filling everyone's glasses as Larry, Charlie, Noah, Karen, and two other agents sat at the table, 800 feet above the Las Vegas Strip.

"Oh, look..." Karen exclaimed, pointing toward the window and leaning into Noah, placing her hand on his thigh. "Isn't it breathtaking?"

Noah took in the beautiful vista of the Las Vegas skyline, and took a sip of wine. She removed her hand and picked up the bottle of wine, refilling his glass.

"Where are you staying?" Larry asked Noah, opening the door to the taxi for him after dinner.

"The Four Seasons. How about you?" Noah said, getting in.

"We are too."

"Great; hop in. We'll share," Noah said, sliding over as Karen got in next, her leg rubbing up against his as the cab pulled away.

Noah opened the door to his hotel room and looked at the phone on the nightstand — no messages. He took off his suit jacket and tie, and sat down on the bed, removing his shoes and rubbing his feet. As he picked

up the phone and started dialing home, there was a knock at the door. He put the phone down and walked sluggishly to the door.

"Will you please open this for me?" Karen asked, handing him a bottle of Taittinger Champagne as she barged into the room. "A lady should never have to open Champagne all by herself."

Noah looked at the bottle and then looked at her, hesitating as he shut the door behind him. "I think I should inform you, Karen, I'm kind of wiped out..."

She put on a fake pout, and Noah laughed. "Oh, boy... what am I getting myself into?" he said, peeling the gold foil off of the bottle, shaking his head.

The cork popped loudly as it flew off the bottle, with bubbly pouring all over the carpet. They laughed as Noah ran with the overflowing bottle into the bathroom, coming back out with a white hand towel draped around the neck of the bottle. His mouth dropped open.

Karen was standing there in a black lace teddy, her little black dress nestled around her feet. He smiled nervously as she stepped out of her dress and sauntered toward him seductively. Her perfectly toned body and tantalizing smile mesmerized him as she put her arms around his neck. Noah physically longed for her — what man wouldn't? Especially not a man in his prime who hadn't had sex in three months.

As she moved in for the kiss, the phone started ringing, breaking him out of his trance. Noah stood there, frozen, staring at the phone as it continued ringing. A moment later there was silence, and the red message light came on.

"I couldn't go through with it. Despite the problems we were having, I was still deeply in love with Robin."

Noah removed her arms from around his neck and walked toward the door. "Perhaps this isn't such a good idea after all," he said, picking her dress up off the floor and holding it out to her.

"Maybe Noah's just a little tense," she suggested, a fake pout on her face as she did a catwalk over to him and knelt down in front of him. "Let me help with that," she insisted, unzipping his pants.

Noah grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet, zipping up his pants.

"I'm sorry, Karen, but I just can't go through with it. After all, I'm still engaged to be married. You understand, don't you?"

Karen let out an exasperated breath as she stepped back into her dress. Noah held the door open for her as she stormed out of the room. "Asshole," she called over her shoulder as he shut the door.

"Hello," Robin answered the phone, relieved to hear Noah's voice on the other end as she lay on the bed in her terrycloth robe, tissues in hand, eyes swollen from crying.

It was Monday evening when the plane landed back in Providence. Soon after, Noah walked through the front door of his house, his briefcase in one hand and his suitcase in the other. He set the briefcase down and walked over to Brittany sitting on the sofa in the living room, watching her favorite animated Disney classic on TV.

"Hi, sweetie," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Where's Mommy?"

"Upstairs lying down."

Noah walked upstairs with his suitcase and glanced into Brittany's room as he passed by it. He stopped and walked back into her room. Robin was staring at the mural on the wall, holding the photograph from the zoo in one hand, some folded papers in the other hand.

"Hey, I'm back," he said, standing in the doorway.

"Let's get out of here, Noah," she pleaded, setting the frame on the dresser, looking at him. "Sell the house, the boat, whatever you have to do, and let's get the hell out of here. I hate Rhode Island, and I don't want to live here anymore."

"You know I can't do that; I have responsibilities. Where else can I make six figures, large bonuses, a company car... We have everything we need right here to live a very comfortable life together."

"Who do you think you're fooling? You hate your job, and you know it. Your parents bribe you to keep you exactly where they want you, and you subscribe to it."

"My parents are very generous people. They only want what's best for me."

"Maybe so, but they treat you like a six-year-old child on strings. And who the hell wants to live like a puppet, anyway?"

Noah walked over to her, the Pinocchio poster hanging in the background. "Okay, you're right... I hate my job. And it really sucks that my parents treat me like a child, trying to make all my decisions for me. But all that goes away the moment I step through the door, coming home to you and Britt here in our little castle by the sea."

"You just don't see it, do you? For God's sake, Noah, you only go around once in this world, and you're blowing your only chance at it. Do you really want to be eighty years old, dying in some bed somewhere someday, and wondering where all the years went? Feeling bad for yourself, and blaming your parents, ironically, for robbing you of the one life that they gave you? Regretting that you never made a change when you could have? Now imagine that some angel hears all your senseless bickering about how you squandered your life away, and decides to send you back some forty years or so for a do-over, making you think that it was all just some kind of weird dream."

"WAKE UP, NOAH ! No one gets a do-over in this lifetime. Every day you waste is one less day to change your fate. It's time to cut the cord with your parents, and time to start living. It's *your* life, Noah — not theirs."

"Robin, I'd love to be able to do that... but I can't. The price is just too great."

"Oh, really? And what exactly is the price of freedom these days? The writing's on the wall, literally, written in large letters on the back of your boat. It's a cry for help, and you know it. Well, guess what? Here I am to help. Why? Because I love you. Think of me as that angel forty years from now coming to you in that strange dream of yours. And all of a sudden you wake up, right here, right now, in this time and space. Well, congratulations, Noah, you're not eighty years old anymore, and you still have your whole life ahead of you. So what are you going to do now that you have a second chance at life? You can't blame the same people twice, you know. The decision to either live your own life here in the present or allow someone else to live it for you is ultimately yours to make. So what's it going to be?"

Noah was about to speak, but stopped himself.

"Just what exactly are you afraid of? Living? Admit it: you're afraid to live."

Noah didn't know what to say. Agreeing with her was one thing; having the courage to live in the real world was quite another. He knew that if he ever quit his job with the company, his parents would no longer reward him financially, and he'd be forced to give up all the finer things in life that he'd grown so accustomed to.

"Can't you see how this place is smothering us? Let's get a fresh start someplace new, away from the influence of your parents, away from all this stuff that binds you. You don't have to allow your parents' money to enslave you anymore if you don't want it to. The secret to unlock your golden handcuffs is something your parents don't ever want you to know about. Aren't you at all curious to know what that is?"

Noah waited for the answer.

"The secret is... there's no key, Noah. The only place they're locked is in your head. And all you have to do to free yourself is just take them off."

Noah walked over to the bookcase built into the side of the castle-bed and picked up a book, staring at it blankly.

"It's time for the prince to finally break free, take his maiden by his side, and get the hell out of the kingdom that reigns over him," Robin said, looking at the Cinderella mural on the wall. "He can always start a new kingdom somewhere else in some distant land, where the prince can be king, and the maiden, queen."

"Robin, I love you, and what you're saying has a lot of merit... but what you're asking me to do: just pack up and rid myself of all my worldly possessions, everything that I've worked hard for in the last sixteen years... Well, I just can't do that. Where would we go? What would I do for a job? Where would the money come from?"

"I don't care about the money; I care about *you*. Just think, for once in your life you can set your life's compass on true north, true to who you really are. You can finally do whatever it is you've always dreamed of doing — whatever makes you happy. I'll even work two jobs if that's what it takes. Don't you get it, Noah? No matter where we live, we'd still be in our little castle. Heck, I'd live in a shack in the woods if I had to, and I'd be happy. You know why?"

Noah shook his head.

"Because I'd be with *you*."

Noah stood there staring at the *PINOCCHIO* book in his hand. Robin looked at him and shook her head.

"I guess what *you* say goes, huh?" she conceded, having no more energy left to fight. "What *I* want means nothing?"

He put the book back on the shelf and shrugged.

"Just forget I ever mentioned it, okay?" she said with tears in her eyes, shoving the papers into his gut as she left the room.

Noah unfolded the papers in his hands and stared at it. It was the prenuptial agreement, with smudges from water droplets... smudges from where her tears must have landed. He turned to the last page and looked at it. Robin had signed it.



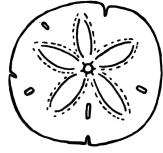
A loud rumbling noise announced her arrival as Robin's silver car pulled up to the curb in front of Emergency Family Services in downtown Providence, the muffler dragging along the ground.

Theresa ran up to Robin as soon as she entered the building. "You're never going to believe this ! Some anonymous donor just mailed us a check for \$257,000 !" she said excitedly, handing Robin the note that accompanied the check, written on butterfly-themed stationery.

"WOW, that's amazing," Robin said as she glanced at the note.

"We can finally build the addition and add all the beds we need. No more turning people away into the street. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah... that's really great," Robin replied with a subdued smile.



Smooth Sailing

June 10th, 1996 turned out to be a beautiful day for sailing, with hardly a cloud in the sky. A sleek, black helicopter was flying just above the Newport Bridge with its door wide open. Inside the helicopter, a videographer motioned for the pilot to fly lower so he could get a different angle on the sailboat he was filming, which was sailing briskly toward the expansive structure. The name on the transom read *Rockin' Robin*.

Noah was at the helm with Robin tucked underneath his arm. She was wearing a white wedding gown and a big smile. Her long red hair was flowing freely in the breeze. Noah, Scott, Jerry, Zeke, Jake, and two other men were wearing black tuxedos. Julie, Sharon, and two other young women were wearing long lavender bridesmaids dresses. Miriam and Mary were also onboard, wearing elegant floral dresses. Brittany wore a pretty pink dress covered by a purple life preserver. Scott and Sharon's two boys, David and Sam, were wearing orange life preservers as they sat on the port side hanging onto the railing, their feet dangling off the side. Unlike the others onboard who were smiling and enjoying the moment, Jerry and Miriam seemed to be just along for the ride.

"Isn't it bad luck to change the name of the boat?" Robin asked worriedly. "Doesn't that mean the boat's going to sink or something?"

"Nah, that's just a silly superstition," Noah replied. "The boat's never going to sink... not as long as I'm captain, anyway," he said, giving Robin a reassuring kiss.

They dropped anchor next to Rose Island in Newport Harbor, and everybody moved forward to the bow. With the bride and groom leaning against the pulpit rail, the ceremony commenced.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the Justice of the Peace concluded fifteen minutes later. "You may kiss the bride."

Bending backwards like that famous picture of a nurse being kissed in Times Square by a sailor, Robin succumbed to Noah's passionate kiss. Transmitted wirelessly from the helicopter above, the longwinded kiss was broadcast on a large video monitor on the middle deck of the 180-foot blue-hulled ship anchored beside them. With a burst of applause from the hundred wedding guests aboard the *Hartman E*, waiters popped Champagne corks over a pyramid of Champagne glasses while the band jumped right into playing Reggae music. The guests were dressed casually in Hawaiian shirts, shorts, and floral sundresses. Many had drinks in their hands as they watched the ceremony unfold on the large video monitor, while others watched directly through binoculars.

As the bride and groom came back to life from their kiss, the wedding party started ripping off their clothes, revealing bathing suits underneath. Screaming in jubilation as they jumped off the teak swim platform into the cool water, the guests onboard the ship broke out laughing.

"May I help you... Mr. Hartman?" Robin asked with a titillating look as Noah swam up to his bikini-clad bride.

"That's very nice of you to offer — Mrs. Hartman — but I think I'll just help myself, thank you," he said before diving down, removing her white garter from around her thigh with his teeth. Climbing swiftly back up onto the sailboat, he flung the garter out over the water, where three single groomsmen were waiting for it. Jake was the lucky one to catch it on the fly.

Brittany handed Robin the bouquet as she climbed back onto the sailboat, throwing it over her shoulder at the three single bridesmaids who were treading water. Julie swam vigorously to retrieve it before it sank. Swimming over to her with a sly smile, Jake dove down and slipped the garter onto Julie's leg as she screamed with laughter.

As the black helicopter landed on the helipad on the upper deck, a small transport boat delivered everyone from Noah's sailboat over to the ship. The band started playing **I Will Be Here**, and everyone was called into the main salon. Noah walked over to the middle of the dance floor,

turned around, and held his hand out toward his new bride, who was walking toward him.

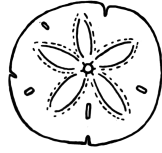
“Here I am... Mr. Hartman,” she said upon arrival.

“Here I am... Mrs. Hartman,” he responded as he took her in his arms to slow dance.

As the slow song came to an end, the band jumped right into playing the fast-paced **Hora**. Everyone rushed to the center of the dance floor, holding hands as they formed a circle around the newlyweds, dancing festively in a circular motion around them. The groomsmen pulled two chairs into the middle of the circle and seated the bride and groom, raising them up into the air while they remained connected by holding onto opposite ends of a beige cloth.

Later on, the wedding cake was brought out, and Robin cut the first piece. Smushing it all over his face, she managed to miss Noah’s mouth entirely. With cake dropping off of his face, and seeking sweet revenge, Noah took a large chunk of cake and held it up in the air for all to see. With the audience cheering him on, he lovingly shoved it *all* into her mouth, every last bit, except for the morsel that didn’t quite fit, which he graciously placed on the tip of her nose. They ate what was left off of their faces, followed by a long, messy kiss.

The warm glow from the setting sun silhouetted the ship as music and laughter echoed throughout the harbor.



The Curse Of Jean Pierre

A small island-hopper plane took off from the Saint Maarten airport. It offered one seat on each side of the aisle, a cabin not tall enough to stand up in, and no flight attendant. A white Igloo cooler filled with soft drinks was secured in the cabin for those thirsty enough to dare unbuckle in flight.

As the plane approached the neighboring island, it began its descent. Without a cockpit door, Noah and Robin held onto each other tightly as they watched the pilots fly the small aircraft downward at a steep 45-degree angle just above the treetops of the mountainous terrain. Noah wondered where the horizon had gone as the runway — growing ever so large by the second — filled the entire forward view through the front windshield. At the last possible moment, the plane leveled off and touched down. As the plane raced down the short runway, the brakes were applied, and the plane started slowing down, coming to a stop at the very end, where two topless women walked in front of the plane on a white sand beach.

“Bienvenue à Saint-Barth,” the pilot announced proudly as the plane veered right, heading toward the small terminal. “Welcome to Saint Barts !”

Perched on top of a huge rock at the end of Saint Jean Beach, Hotel Eden Rock jutted out into the bay. Surrounded entirely by ocean, every room was waterfront, each with its own theme. Noah and Robin entered the spacious Howard Hughes Suite, their eyes drawn to the turquoise ocean surrounding their room. Rose petals covered the bed, and Dom Pérignon sat on ice. As the cork flew off the bottle, their clothes fell to the floor around their ankles, and they lay down on the bed.

"I love you, Mrs. Hartman," Noah said as he carefully poured a drop of cold Champagne onto her body.

"I love you, too... Mr. Hartman," she responded with a flinch and a giggle as he slowly sipped it off.

The next day, Robin was sitting in the passenger seat of a red Jeep Wrangler as Noah hugged a cliff that traced the contours of the shoreline. With her hand clutching the safety handle tightly and her teeth clenched, they drove along the narrow road with no guardrails and down the steep incline to the secluded beach below.

Noah removed his shirt and started chasing after her down the vacant beach. Robin screamed as she took off running, removing her shirt and throwing it back at him in an attempt to evade her eager pursuer. She stopped, turned around, and motioned for timeout. She removed her shorts and threw them at him, bolting off again, attempting a daring escape into the open sea. She screamed, laughing as he caught up to her in the waist-deep turquoise water. As he kissed the side of her neck, she removed her bra and threw it back onto the sandy beach. After all, Saint Barts was a French island, and when in Rome...

Back at the beach that bordered the hotel, they ordered two frozen fruity drinks from the grass tiki hut, while kite surfers flew over waves and into the air in the background. Strolling by the pool in their bathing suits, Robin asked to taste Noah's drink.

"Mmmm," she said, savoring the sweet, tropical taste. "It's delectable," she continued, her hips moving fast and hard to the side, bumping Noah into the pool. She lay down on her lounge chair and took a sip from both drinks, smiling victoriously.

"Hey," Noah complained, swimming over to the side of the pool, "that's *my* drink."

Robin shrugged as Noah splashed water in her direction, sharing a laugh.

Later in the day, they held hands as they meandered in and out of the small shops that lined the sidewalks selling Caribbean apparel. "I want to buy you a souvenir every day that we're here, so you'll always remember this place," Noah announced, purchasing her a sexy, backless dress.

Further down the road, they ate ice cream as they strolled along the main road into town, admiring the numerous 200-foot+ mega-yachts docked there.

Soothing music was playing softly in a candlelit room as they lay next to each other on padded tables, lying on their stomachs with plush, white towels spread across their butts. Warm, smooth rocks were rubbed all over their oily bodies as they relaxed. “Mmmm,” Robin moaned with pleasure. “Does this feeling ever have to end?”

On the terrace outside their room, a private dinner was served to them as the setting sun colored the ocean-background red and purple. They drank wine and reminisced about their memorable day. After an indulgent dessert, Noah brought the bottle of wine inside the room and put a CD into the boombox. As **I Will Be Here** started playing, Noah took Robin in his arms and danced her over to the bed, unzipping her sexy, backless dress.

The next day, Noah, Robin, and three other couples were sailing on a large catamaran on a temperate afternoon. Lying on what looked like a large mesh trampoline making up the mid-section of the bow, they looked down through the porous fabric at the billowing water beneath the swift boat, laughing hysterically when an occasional spray of water splashed up at them.

The catamaran dropped its anchor in a secluded horseshoe-shaped cove. The water was flat in the lee, and a steep cliff rose up from the nearby white sand beach. The captain of the boat was French and gorgeous. Tan and in great shape, he had long blonde wavy hair and a chiseled face. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt — open, of course — along with beige shorts and Caribbean sandals.

“My name is Jean Pierre,” said the captain with a French accent. “Before you *départ*, I must tell you one thing, *s’il vous plaît*. Whatever you do, don’t touch nothing in ze sea, okay? It’s bad luck. I cannot say to you of ze last person who disturbed something, but I tell you this. It was, how you say... *catastrophe*. So don’t do it, *d’accord*? Now go... go and enjoy your big adventure.”

“Ooh la la,” Noah teased softly in Robin’s ear with an exaggerated French accent, “Beware of zee curse of zee capitaine Jean Pierre.” Robin laughed, hitting him on the head lightly with a fin.

As the passengers donned fins, snorkels, and masks, they stepped down the fiberglass steps that were molded into the stern and floated off into the balmy water. While the others snorkeled close to the boat, Robin and Noah swam to the nearby beach. Lying at the water's edge, they kissed as the water rolled gently over them. With the catamaran and snorkelers in the distance, they went for a short walk down the beach holding hands.

Back in the warm, crystal clear turquoise water, they floated effortlessly with their arms and legs outstretched. Robin took out a disposable underwater camera and started taking pictures of the vibrant, colorful fish swimming all around them. Suddenly Noah spotted a lone sand dollar sitting undisturbed on the ocean floor below. He tapped Robin on the shoulder and motioned toward it. Diving down, he picked up the sand dollar and resurfaced, proudly holding out his prize as Robin took an underwater picture of him. He handed it over to her, and after a brief underwater examination, she handed it back to him.

What happened next would prove to be a defining moment in Noah's life. Seemingly safe and secure in his hand, the sand dollar suddenly exploded into a thousand tiny grains of sand, disappearing through his fingers into the vast sea around him. They looked at each other, worried. *What now of the curse of Jean Pierre?* they wondered.

"Our amazing week together in Saint Barts suddenly shrouded in mystery, it was time to leave paradise behind and head for home. The honeymoon was over. We had been warned that it was bad luck to disturb anything in the sea, but that was just a silly superstition... right?"

