

J B M B

- Just Be My Baby –

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A true story about love and narcissism

by

Michelle J. de Wildt

No one knows a man the way the woman who loves him does.

Not his parents. Not his friends. Not his colleagues or siblings.

They see fragments, the social side, the charming side, the stories he tells.

But she? The woman beside him? She sees everything.

The rough edges. The cracks. The loving gaze — and the deadly silence.

She knows his vulnerability, his anger, his panic, his masks.

What he cannot bear to feel, she is forced to carry.

What he hides, she must hold.

This book is based on the author's personal memories, supported by more than four thousand pages of original WhatsApp messages, emails, personal documents, and independent research. Times are shown in 24-hour format.

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– happiness is seeing opportunities –

Bart's impossibly great love

It was a love so vast he couldn't contain it. A love that overwhelmed him, flooded him, and slipped through his hands. He loved me with everything he had — but that “everything” was often far from loving.

His desire was intense, spellbinding, almost addictive. He confused presence with devotion, sex with affirmation, control with closeness. What he called love was, at its core, fear — fear of losing me. And what he offered as passion often felt to me like pressure, claim, or punishment.

His “impossibly great love” wasn't impossible because it was pure, but because it was too big for the tools his heart had learned to use. He couldn't pace it, carry it, or deepen it — only possess it. And so he kept trying to capture me, instead of meeting me.

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This book is based on the author's personal experiences. Names, locations, and identifying details have been changed or anonymized where necessary to protect the privacy of those involved. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or to real events is coincidental or reflects the broader recognizability of certain relational dynamics.

For readability and narrative flow, the sequence of some events has been slightly adjusted without altering their factual essence.

This work represents the author's personal perspective and recollection. It is not an accusation, statement of fact, or legal claim, but a personal reconstruction of what was lived, felt, and understood. The intention is not to harm, but to create space for insight, awareness, and healing.

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This book was written with love, strength, and the belief that truth is healing.

Prologue

The story I'm about to tell you is true. Real conversations. Real messages. A painful truth — my truth — lived over more than seven years. The people around me witnessed everything that happened to me.

I write under a pseudonym. Not because I want to hide, but to protect myself. I want to show you how it truly was: without embellishment, without disguise — yet also without naming or harming anyone.

Never did I imagine I'd become entangled in a love that would slowly drain me. A relationship full of contradictions: warmth and distance, tenderness and pressure, involvement and control. A dynamic that gradually revealed itself as one of attachment anxiety, emotional immaturity, and narcissistic reflexes.

When you think you've found *Mr. Right*, you're not looking for red flags — especially not when you grew up with similar patterns. Then it even feels familiar. And when too much comes at you at once, you become vulnerable. That's how it slips in. That's how you allow it — without even noticing.

At the same time, there were many beautiful moments too. Good ones. Magical ones. Maybe that was the hardest part: the beginning was so light, so intense, so connected.

Honest conversations, tender words, warm arms, and shared dreams. That's what you keep longing for. That's what you hold on to — not the moments of doubt or confusion, but the softness of how it all began.

Maybe you're in such a situation right now. Maybe you sense that something isn't right, but you keep hoping it will get better. I tell you this from experience: let go of that hope.

It won't get better. You can't understand him, can't change him, can't heal him.

As hard as it is — choose yourself. The perfect picture you're clinging to doesn't exist. It's an alternate truth, shaped by his need for control and self-protection. He cannot give you what you need.

This book is my way of healing, processing and understanding. The moment I saw the pattern clearly was a turning point — a liberation, but also a costly lesson that demanded much of me.

I write this for you, so that you might recognize sooner what I only understood later. Spare yourself the pain, the effort, the risk.

Please — choose yourself.

Be your own baby.

The Voice of BART – The Master of the Game

The world is my stage. And I am the director. Everyone plays a part. But only I know the script.

I see her sitting there — Michelle. She's laughing with her friends. Her eyes sparkle the way they used to when she looked at *me*. That same fiery gaze of admiration. Now she looks at someone else like that.

That's not how it works for me. I know what to do. I let her believe she's free for a while — that she can exist without me. But I haven't forgotten how she melted at my words, how my voice made her tremble, how she always listened when I whispered, "With you, I don't have to pretend."

She thinks she's stronger now. That she's outgrown me.

Pathetic.

She doesn't understand that no one will ever love her the way I did. No one will ever see through her like I could.

She's not ready to realize that yet — but the moment will come. When she feels lonely, she'll remember how I protected her. How I guided her.

Of course, I made mistakes. Who doesn't?

Her expectations were too high. I only showed her who she really was — a woman craving affirmation, love, something she could never give herself.

If I send her a message now, she'll hesitate at first. Her rational mind will warn her, but her heart will start to race. She'll wonder if I've truly changed. If I've finally become the man she always hoped I'd be.

That's the beauty of this game: I decide when it begins. I decide when it ends. All I have to do is wait.

And if the waiting takes too long?

I'll make sure someone else takes her place. I'll rewrite the scene.

New actress, same script.

And her? She'll just play her part — whether she realizes it or not.

Because the world revolves around me.

Always.

Chapter 1:
2017 – The reunion

Summer 2017 – A Star Is Born

It was a relatively cool summer day in July. The sun appeared now and then, the sky was partly cloudy, and I had a few weeks off. A perfect day to relax with Lianne, one of my friends, at a wellness center nearby. Just to get away. Away from home.

Although I had a lovely house in a quiet neighborhood in the heart of the Netherlands, and two almost grown children, it no longer felt like home. My husband, Frank, and I — after nearly thirty years together — were more like brother and sister than partners. No fights, no drama, but no love either. We'd stopped sleeping together years ago — officially because of his sleep apnea, but I knew better. We had simply grown apart. I had my own life: my job, my friends, my hobbies. And he had... well, whatever it was he had.

I'd been disappointed in our relationship so many times that I'd grown used to it. Frank and I never did anything fun together. He wasn't there for me when it mattered. Distant, disinterested — always somewhere else in his head. There were stretches when he barely spoke to me for weeks. And when I brought it up, he'd say he was depressed — or something like that.

In recent years, the house had felt tense. An invisible pressure that only lifted when I closed the door behind me.

And then there was that one remark — almost every Saturday morning: "I'll come by tonight." That was how he announced sex. Not as a question, not as an invitation, but as a fact. As if I were an object, expected to be available on command.

I didn't want it anymore. Hadn't wanted it for a long time. So I was away more and more often.



That day at the wellness felt like a breath of fresh air. Nothing to do, nowhere to be. Just enjoying the warmth and the beautiful surroundings.

Lianne and I had just had a hot stone massage at the beauty center and were walking toward the terrace for a drink. We chatted, as always, about everything and nothing.

When we sat down at a table, I caught sight of a waiter walking outside. He looked around, scanning the terrace... and then his eyes found ours. No way, I thought. Bart?

“Shit,” I whispered to Lianne. “I think I know him. If that’s who I think it is, I’ve got stories to tell.”

Bart frowned for a moment, then walked over with a smile. He knelt beside my chair and looked at me with those piercing blue eyes. His gaze drifted across my face — as if searching for confirmation.

“Bart?” I asked. He grinned broadly.

“Michelle.” We’d recognized each other.

He’d changed. Of course he had — it had been over thirty years. His hair was gone, but those eyes... they were exactly the same.

He immediately started talking about the old days — tennis, the club discos, and how incredible it was that we ran into each other like this. Lianne and I ordered drinks from him, and we talked briefly, but soon Bart had to move on. The terrace was busy. I watched him walk away, thinking how strange it was to see him again after all those years.

Later, under the tanning bed, the memories came flooding back like an avalanche. Bart and me. Or rather, Bart — and my hopeless crush on him. I was nearly fourteen, and he was my first love. Did he know? Probably. Did he take it seriously? Probably not. Bart was always chasing something bigger, something better. And I — a small, skinny girl without an impressive chest — was not that.

Still, we had our moments. We danced together at lessons, played on the same tennis team. I filled my diary with stories about him.

My mother once advised me not to chase after him, but I didn't listen — not until the day I realized I could keep hoping until the end of time.

Then I met Leon. Leon was the cool guy in town — broad, confident, popular. The one all the girls had a crush on. And to my surprise, he chose me.

One sunny day, we were lying in the grass near the tennis courts, talking, when Bart suddenly cycled up. "Hey, how are you?" he asked casually, wanting to sit with us. Leon barely looked at him. He must have felt it — that invisible thread between Bart and me. But he cut it with one simple look.

Bart left. And me? I suddenly wasn't interested in him anymore. Until a few years later, when he sent me an invitation. He had a car and wanted to take me to the movies.

I don't know why I said yes. Maybe because I wanted to finally make the impression I never could before. Maybe to show him what he'd missed. I don't remember all the details of that evening — but I do remember how strange it felt. An anticlimax. It was... small.

And that was that. Bart disappeared from my life. And now, here he was again.

•

When Lianne and I were getting dressed that evening to go home, Bart passed by again — supposedly checking the clothing lockers. Enthusiastic, talkative, full of stories. He gave me his business card, said he'd love to meet up sometime. I slipped it into my wallet, with no intention of using it. I was married. And honestly? I wasn't that impressed.

I didn't think I'd ever see him again. But that changed a few days later, when I was in Noordwijk with my sister-in-law, Brenda.

And that was the beginning of it all...

August 2017

I'm spending the day with Brenda — shopping in Noordwijk and clearing our heads at the beach. We talk the whole drive there; as always, there's plenty to catch up on. Brenda isn't just my sister-in-law — Frank's youngest sister — she's also one of my closest friends.

Since her divorce we've really found each other. Our conversations are open, honest, familiar. No topic too strange, no secret too big. Brenda is single and navigating the world of dating apps — a world that's both fascinating and chaotic. And frustrating. Her ex never wanted children, yet after the divorce he quickly found a new girlfriend *with* kids — something that still bothers Brenda deeply.

We have lunch at a cozy little beach café, and as soon as I tease her a bit, she dives right in.

She tells me about a man from Amsterdam she's been seeing regularly. No relationship — just physical. And not *ordinary* physical. It goes further than the usual adventures. "I'm practicing how to come without using my hands," she says triumphantly.

I almost choke on my drink. "What?"

She laughs. "Yes! Under the tanning bed, with oil and a vibrator. Just moving back and forth. Don't you get it?"

Well... no. I try to picture it, but my mind refuses to cooperate.

Brenda bursts out laughing at my bewildered expression and explains the whole thing in far too much detail.

Then comes the next topic: anal sex. "I was a bit nervous at first," she says, "but if your partner isn't that well-endowed, it's fine. A smaller size is actually perfect."

I raise an eyebrow. "Good to know, I guess?"

Brenda giggles, amused by my reaction. "It's incredibly hot, Michelle. You should try it sometime!"

I shake my head, laughing. It's not exactly my territory, but I enjoy her openness. And then suddenly, a thought occurs to me. "I might actually have a candidate for you."

I tell her about my unexpected encounter with Bart at the wellness center — how he recognized me right away, how enthusiastic he was, how we reminisced about the old days.

"Do you have a picture?" Brenda asks, curious.

I have no idea if one is easy to find, but I type his name into Google. And yes — there he is.

Brenda studies the photo and immediately asks, "Are you going to meet up with him?"

I shake my head. "Of course not! I'm married to your brother."

We both laugh, and with that, the subject seems closed.

After lunch we go shopping.

It's blissfully aimless — wandering through the little streets, trying on things we don't need, commenting on everything as if we were fashion experts.

Later, as we sit on the beach with a drink, Brenda picks up her phone. "I'm expecting a message from one of my lovers — do you mind?"

I shake my head and close my eyes, enjoying the sea breeze.

Then suddenly she says, "Hey, you have to see this!"

I open my eyes and look at her screen. She's received an email from a dating site — with photos of available men. And who's right there among them? Bart.

We look at each other and burst out laughing. "You're kidding!" He's using the exact same photo as on LinkedIn. What are the odds? Brenda gives me a mischievous grin. "Shall we send him a message?" I chuckle. "That would be hilarious. If you send me a screenshot of that email, I'll add it."

Together we come up with a text: *“Hi! This is my number. Funny coincidence — I was out with a friend and just told her we’d run into each other. Guess what she just got...?”* I attach Brenda’s screenshot showing Bart’s picture and hit send.

Within moments, he replies. Bart is surprised — actually stunned. But after a few messages, he regains his footing and turns the situation around. Soon he’s asking when I can meet him.

I laugh and brush it off. My vacation is almost over and I don’t have time — or rather, I’m *not making* time. Still, the attention feels secretly flattering. I slip my phone back into my bag, and Brenda and I head out for dinner.

☺

That evening, Bart texts me again — he’s clearly excited.

The next morning, before I’ve even had my first cup of tea, there’s another message:

“So when can we meet?”

I’m spending the day with my family at the zoo, so no. *Tomorrow, maybe?* No — tomorrow I’ve got appointments at the garage, the hairdresser, and the beauty salon. I suggest a Friday two weeks from now. Lunch. He reluctantly agrees.

But a little later, another message arrives: he’s rearranged his schedule. We *can* see each other sooner if I want — right after my visit to the garage, around two o’clock, at the hair salon.

I can’t help but smile. There’s something amusing about how persistent he is, how quickly he seizes the moment. So I tell him it’s fine if he comes to the salon and give him the address.

And there we are: me with dye in my hair, sitting outside on the bench in front of the hairdresser’s. Having a coffee. Catching up. Laughing about the old days. It feels easy. Familiar.

Bart waits until I’m finished, and we walk to the parking lot together. He makes me guess which car is his. I’m wrong three times before he points

to his orange VW Polo. I grin. “Ah, the Prince Charming and his orange horse car!” Then it’s his turn to guess mine. He misses three times too. I point to my VW Scirocco. “At some point, you’ve got to let the accessories do the talking, right?” I shrug. He raises an eyebrow. “Oh wow!” I laugh.

The days that follow, we keep texting — morning, afternoon, evening. The conversations drift from memories to hobbies, from holidays to deeper things. I tell him I’m thinking about taking salsa lessons. He answers immediately: “*Let’s do it together!*”

I don’t tell him I’ve already asked Frank to join me. I don’t want to disappoint him.

Bart begins to hint more and more that he doesn’t want to lose me again. He wants to stay in touch, to see me more often. Words like *sweetheart*, *baby*, and *darling* start popping up in his messages. Then come the suggestive ones — playful, flirty. About blindfolded massages. About stepping outside your comfort zone. About enjoying the moment.

I laugh it off, seeing it as harmless attention.

And attention — if I’m honest — feels kind of nice.

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On the Friday I had suggested earlier, we meet for lunch. After we eat, Bart suggests going to his place for a cup of tea.

His place — the ground floor of a rented home in an older part of town — is small and simple. He gives me a quick tour: a narrow hallway, a small entryway with doors leading to his apartment and the upstairs neighbors, a living room with a kitchenette, and an adjoining bedroom with a compact bathroom and a bathtub. The walls are painted almost entirely dark blue, yet the place still feels cozy.

We have another drink together, and Bart says how much he enjoys being in touch with me. “I can’t believe we never had anything back then. I’ve always thought you were amazing.”

We agree to spend a day at a sauna together soon — more time to catch up without distractions. There's still so much to talk about. We both enjoy each other's company and are sauna fans. It all feels very natural.

When I get home, I remember that I still have some old diaries somewhere. There must be stories about Bart in them. I'm almost sure I used to write regularly back then. I search through some boxes in the attic and find them quickly. As I start reading, I can't help but laugh. What a silly little teenage girl I was. Maybe I should bring one of them to the sauna — I can't wait to see Bart's face when he reads it.

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A week later, the day of our *sauna date* arrives. I grab my bathrobe from the clothesline, pack my sauna bag, and drive to Bart's house. He greets me with a wide smile.

And if I'd known then what I know now, I almost certainly wouldn't have gone...

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We drive to the sauna in Bart's car. It's about a forty-five-minute ride from his place, and it's wonderful — a new experience for me, since I've never been there before. The atmosphere is calm, the treatments professional. Bart and I float through the afternoon, sweating in the saunas, chatting in the whirlpool, and later taking our time over a delicious dinner — a chicken stew, perfectly done.

I'm enjoying myself.

On the drive back to Bart's house, we laugh a lot. At the sauna, we'd read from my old diary, revisiting memories and sharing stories we hadn't told each other before. Some were embarrassing, some funny, some unexpectedly tender. It feels as if we've turned back time.

When we get to his place, Bart pours me a Safari with 7-Up. “Your favorite drink,” he says with a smile. Funny that he remembers. And then he asks the question I’d seen coming — the one he’d been hinting at all afternoon, the one I’d hesitantly agreed to.

“Ready for your massage?”

I nod. “Yes.”

Bart takes out a blindfold — something he’d mentioned earlier. A blindfolded massage heightens your senses, he’d said. He notices my hesitation and says softly, “Trust me. Nothing will happen that you don’t want. Just let go completely.”

I smile. Okay, then. It feels like a playful experiment, and his tone is reassuring. This is just a relaxing day. An old friend giving me a massage — what could possibly go wrong?

He leads me to his bedroom. It’s strange being blindfolded — a little awkward, as if my sense of direction has been switched off. Immediately I notice how my other senses sharpen.

Bart folds my clothes and puts them on a chair, then guides me to the bed. I don’t think anything of it — after all, he’s already seen me naked all day.

“I’ll cover you, of course,” he says.

A towel is placed over my lower body. His voice is calm, his movements polite — almost professional. My body feels heavy and relaxed from the heat of the saunas, and I’m slightly light-headed from the drink.

The massage begins. Gentle hands, steady movements. My back, my shoulders. Then my legs. Bart bends my knee and rests my lower leg against his chest. His hands glide firmly along my calves. It feels good — indeed more intense than usual. My mind empties. Time fades away.

I'm drifting off when he suddenly says, "Turn over." And I do — without thinking. He rearranges the towel, now covering the front of my body. Bart starts to massage my arms, slow and steady movements. Then his hands slide carelessly across my stomach. For a brief moment, they brush against my breasts — quick, fleeting.

Bart moves lower. My legs. His hands glide along my skin — exploring, feeling. My body is slick with massage oil, more sensitive from the drink. I sink deeper into relaxation.

But then — suddenly — a flash. A sensation. Just for a moment — faint, almost imperceptible — I feel a spark, on my clit.

I register it, but it's so faint that I immediately doubt whether it really happened. I must have imagined it...

Bart keeps massaging. His touch remains calm, methodical. I pull myself together. Did I imagine it? I convince myself that I did. But then it happens again. Three times. Featherlight. Exactly on the same spot. What is happening?

What the fuck!

I feel the touch down there, and my body reacts instantly — as if a switch has been flipped. My mind goes quiet; my body takes over. My breathing quickens. Before I can even think about resisting, a wave of unfamiliar sensations floods through me. My body surrenders completely — without thought, without restraint. A soft sound escapes me — unplanned, unconscious.

I sense Bart moving — closer. The air shifts. He spreads my legs apart. His mouth, his tongue. He tastes me. Licks me. First gently, then more eagerly. Warmth. Breath. Skin. The sensation is intense — overwhelming. He doesn't pause. Doesn't hesitate. Doesn't stop.

He touches parts of me I didn't even know existed. My body goes wild. I'm panting. Heat rises under his touch. My heart is racing. I've never felt anything like this before. What is happening to me? My legs tremble; I feel myself swelling. My whole body feels ready to burst. I want him closer — much closer. I'm dizzy with excitement. And then... fireworks.

Oh my god!

An orgasm rushes through me — a shockwave that ripples, tingles, as if my body momentarily lifts off the ground. I gasp for air. My body responds instinctively. It feels so good. It feels so...

I don't know what's happening to me. I don't want it to stop. I want more — much more. So I reach for him, pulling him closer. "Fuck me," leaves my mouth before I can think, hoarse with ecstasy. I want to feel him fill me. Bart doesn't hesitate for a second.

The caution and courtesy with which he treated me all day vanish in an instant. What remains is intense desire, raw urgency — almost primal. Bart moves hard and fast, as if he can finally let himself go. It's as if everything he's been holding back suddenly erupts at once. His breathing is heavy, his grip firm. His movements are quick, determined, his breath uneven. I feel his skin on mine, his strength, his excitement—as if he is afraid the moment will be lost. He comes with a soft, almost trembling moan. His whole body jerks and relaxes.

For a moment, he rests his full weight on me. Then he slowly rolls onto his side. He reaches for the nightstand, takes a cigarette, and lights it. One for me, too. He inhales, exhales slowly, then looks at me with a crooked smile.

"That was nice," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. Satisfied.

After the cigarette, Bart pulls me close. We lie spooning, his arms wrapped around me, his lips brushing my shoulder — a few soft kisses, tender, possessive, as if to say: *you're mine*.

I let myself sink into the moment — into the afterglow, the gentleness, the closeness. It feels intense. Desired. I turn onto my other side. Bart rolls onto his back, and I curl up beside him. He drapes an arm around me and traces gentle patterns on my skin.

Then it hits me — how effortless it was. That I actually had an orgasm. With Frank, that had never happened. He often called me frigid. Never made the slightest effort to please me. Said he didn't know how. But it was never me, I realize now. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm not broken. Not cold.

The realization hits me.

We lie there in silence for a while, still drifting in the afterglow. After a while, I say, "I should probably go home." Bart nods. I get up and start dressing. He walks me to my car and kisses me on the cheek, grinning. "See you soon, gorgeous," he says, his hand resting briefly on my lower back. I smile at him and get in.

On the drive home, I try to make sense of what just happened. I cheated... That's what it is — but it doesn't feel that way. It felt so overwhelming. Almost magical. I feel wanted. Alive. Completely, utterly female.

When I get home, I sneak quietly upstairs to my bedroom. In bed, I check my phone. Messages from Bart keep coming in.

"Jesus, I'm still living in a dream! I'm never letting you go again!"

His scent still lingers on my skin. It's too late to shower without waking Frank or the kids, so I fall asleep with Bart — with us — still on my skin. Luckily, Frank sleeps in the attic.

Today was special. So familiar. Bart was attentive, sweet, gallant.

That night, I sleep like a baby. And when I wake, I smell Bart. I think of him — and I already miss him. I want contact. I want to date, to do things together. I feel the tickle. I want more.

I don't feel guilty toward Frank. For years, he hasn't shown any real interest in me — no affection, no attention, no desire.

Through Bart, I feel alive. Wanted.

🐰

Day one as a *dishonorable woman* passes by. And meanwhile, Bart keeps texting.

"You know, I'm such a happy bunny right now! No idea what the future will bring, but we'll laugh, explore and enjoy 🐰. Can't really get you out of my head — not that I want to. But I don't want to rush things either."

I smile. His enthusiasm is contagious — but I can only share it halfway. For him, it's simple. He's divorced.

I'm not.

🐰

Later that week, Frank tells me he's changed his mind. He doesn't want to go to salsa after all. "Just cancel it," he says. A letdown. I bite my lip — I'd been so looking forward to it. "You knew that wasn't my thing," he adds, as if I'd forced him into it. "You shouldn't have asked me in the first place." I feel irritation rising. And I refuse to let it stop me. "Then I'll go by myself," I say firmly.

I email the dance school to ask if I can come without a partner. Luckily, that's no problem. Then I get an idea — and text Bart.

"Hey Bart, would you like to come with me?"

I don't have to wait long for a reply.

"Absolutely YES!"

Problem solved. I'm going salsa dancing.

From that moment on, Thursday nights become our thing. We dance, laugh, talk, and tease each other. Bart picks me up at the Van der Valk Hotel. I always park my car there so we can drive to class together.

It doesn't take long before we're completely crazy about each other.

In the first few weeks, we have a drink at the hotel after class, but soon we drive straight to Bart's house to continue "dancing" in his bed. Salsa becomes our prelude — our ritual.

And it doesn't stop at Thursdays. We see each other whenever we can — on Fridays when we're both off, and on Saturdays, when I'm 'out with friends' more and more often: wellness days, saunas, shopping, dinner, a movie night.

Bart and I become completely attuned to each other — especially in bed. The intimacy we share feels like a revelation — he's attentive, inventive, and I rediscover a part of myself I'd long forgotten.

We experiment with chocolate and strawberry sauces, whipped cream, ice cubes, fruit—everything Bart can dream up. He buys books about intimacy, desire and exploration and gives them to me as gifts.

"For our research," he laughs.

But I leave them at his place — I can't take them home.

Autumn 2017 – Two worlds and a seed of change

At home there's nothing. No conversation. No touch. Not even a trace of expectation. I avoid the house I once dreamed of and live to the rhythm of work, friends, and Bart. With him, at least, I feel alive.

I feel loved. Bart remembers everything I say. He knows my friends' names, what my days look like, what my favorite things are. He does such sweet things for me. He's always there. I can tell him anything. I feel special.

I tell two of my friends, Inge and Lianne, about Bart — that we now have a kind of relationship. They respond warmly, with understanding. They know Frank. They know how things have been at home for years. They want this happiness for me.

Then I decide to tell my friend Suus about Bart as well. We're together at the wellness center where he works, and she's dying of curiosity. I tell her how we ran into each other again, how intense the connection is, how good it feels.

"Is he coming in today?" she asks. "No," I say. "He's not working today."

But I'd love for him to come by. I just can't call him inside the resort — that's against the rules. So I ask a colleague to call Bart for me and ask if he can stop by for a moment. Just because I'd like to introduce him to a friend.

A few hours later, Bart walks in — his wide smile leading the way, as always. But there's something in his eyes I can't quite place. Something distant. Detached. Suus seems to notice it too. She doesn't say much. She just observes.

I brush it off. Things are good between Bart and me. We're together. Aren't we...?



Time flies. Before I know it, it's November.

Bart and I are crazy about each other — we're really coming alive. We meet as often as we can, which takes some creativity and planning on my part. But I love living in his world.

Bart sends me endless sweet messages. One of his pictures stays with me: *I'll be here. I'll wait. I love you more than anything.*

Those words give me a deep, warm feeling — as if he truly sees me, as if he understands what I need, as if I've finally found someone who puts me first. Someone to whom I truly matter.

80

We spend an afternoon together at his father's house. Bart wants to introduce me again — even though I already know his father from years ago. It feels a bit as if Bart is looking for some kind of permission. Approval. The visit is pleasant; we reminisce and share stories. But the way Bart's father sometimes reacts — so controlling — leaves me with an uneasy feeling I can't quite name. Still, I don't dwell on it. I won't be seeing his father that often anyway.

Bart, on the other hand, becomes more and more open about how crazy he is about me — and how serious he is about us. He even writes a song for me: *Just be my baby*. I listen to the words. It feels intimate. Special. I'm flattered. In a careless moment, I play it for Brenda.

One morning, half-awake and dreaming, thinking softly of what might change. So much happened, so much fading — life keeps moving, never stays the same. New chances, faces, hearts around me, and the ones who truly stay. It doesn't take much to make me happy — 'cause you, oh you, you make my day.

Just be my baby, you light up my sky. When I look into your eyes, I know the reason why. Just be my baby, stay right here by my side. You, oh you — you are my light.

We meet again, the past returning, memories laughing, young and wild. Old emotions softly burning, written pages from my child. In your diary we are younger, silly dreams and foolish rhymes. Still the message shines much stronger — you, oh you, through all this time.

Just be my baby, you light up my sky. When I look into your eyes, I know the reason why. Just be my baby, stay right here by my side. You, oh you — you are my light.

Now we're here, the past forgiven, dancing through a second chance. Hearts wide open, life still given, lost in love's unending dance. Let's keep writing our own story, filled with laughter, hope, and grace. All I need is this — your glory, you, my love, my saving place.

Just be my baby, you light up my sky. When I look into your eyes, I know the reason why. Just be my baby, stay right here by my side. You, oh you — you are my light.

That was something I probably shouldn't have done. "He can't do that!" she says sharply. "He knows you're married, doesn't he?" I wave off her reaction. "He's just enthusiastic. He's an old friend." A half-truth. Actually, a lie. But I'm not ready yet to face reality.



December comes faster than I expected. Whenever possible, Bart and I are together — even if it's only for an hour. I feel lighter, freer, more alive than ever. My colleagues notice. "You're glowing," they say. I know.

Every Thursday night is a celebration — dancing, laughing, teasing each other. The intimacy keeps growing. After class, we now drive straight to Bart's house. We make love like the stars might fall from the sky. Intense, thrilling, boundary-pushing. We experiment with toys, challenge each other — sometimes wildly passionate, sometimes downright hilarious.

Bart promises that one day — as soon as he can — he'll take me on a trip. "So you can swing by the beach in some sunny place," he says. One of my bucket-list dreams. My heart melts. Bart seems to understand everything. To remember everything. To want to do everything for me.

☺

Halfway through the month, it's my birthday.

Sven, my youngest son, gives me a ski lesson as a gift. He wants to go on a winter sports trip — maybe this is his way of convincing me to join him. I'm happy to give it a try. The lesson is scheduled for the day after Christmas.

The morning starts early. Sven and I pull on our ski gear and head to the indoor slope. Once we're on the skis, it becomes clear that skiing isn't exactly my talent. Sven, on the other hand, glides down the hill effortlessly — as if he's been doing it all his life.

After the lesson, we drive to our favorite restaurant — the one with the best club sandwiches you can imagine.

We chat the day away, the atmosphere light and easy. But during lunch, Sven suddenly looks at me with a serious expression.

"Mom, I actually want to really talk to you for a minute..."

I look at him, curious.

"I'm worried about you. You and Dad... you never do anything together. You just live alongside each other. When Tom and I move out, you'll be alone. You'll get isolated. You deserve someone who truly fits you — someone who actually wants to do fun things with you."

His words hit me harder than I expected. I take a sip of tea and frown. I thought I'd hidden it well — that no one really saw how things were between Frank and me. But Sven had seen it all along.

“Maybe you should get a divorce,” he says.

A seed is planted.



In the days that follow, I’m still moved by my conversation with Sven. It’s stirred something inside me. Deep down I know I’ll have to make a choice. I can’t go on like this for much longer.

I call my friend Tess to talk it all through. She instantly says I should come and spend New Year’s Eve at her place. It sounds fun. Her mum, Vera, and her husband, Jon, will be there too. Tess adds that I can bring Frank or Bart if I want. “Just give me a heads-up,” she says lightly.

I talk it over at home and with Bart. He’s immediately enthusiastic. He’d love to come along — but he makes sure to say I should do whatever feels right for me. The situation is, of course... kind of unusual.

Then suddenly Frank says he wants to come too. I didn’t see that coming. He never wants to go anywhere. Never wants to do things together.

I’m torn. Going with Bart is really... not done — I know that much. But with Frank, I know for sure it won’t be any fun.

What am I supposed to do?



It’s New Year’s Eve.

Tom, my eldest son, has his birthday tomorrow — he’ll be twenty. He hasn’t been feeling great lately and doesn’t have any plans with friends that night. I find out around noon.

Because of that, Frank thinks I should cancel with Tess — he doesn’t want to leave Tom home alone. I tell him I’d rather not. Tess is counting on me,

on us, and I really want to go. As a compromise, I suggest that he stay with Tom while I go to Tess's on my own. Frank agrees, though a bit reluctantly.

I'd agreed to let Bart know in the afternoon what the plan would be — whether he could come to Tess's or not. Early in the afternoon I send him a message:

"I'm going to Tess's but decided to go on my own. Just want some time with her. Want to grab a drink at Van der Valk?"

That way we can at least see each other for a bit before I head off. Bart says that's fine. But a little later, another message pops up:

"You should do whatever feels right for you, but can I ask why...?"

I don't reply right away. There's still a lot to do before I leave, and we'll see each other soon anyway. It's better to talk about this face to face, I think.

When I arrive at the hotel early in the evening, Bart is already waiting outside. I'm startled by the look on his face. He seems sad — like he's been crying. Where is this coming from? He knew I'd be going to Tess with either him or Frank. Given the situation with Tom, and after my talk with Sven, surely he understands that I'd want to go on my own for now?

We go inside to talk, but Bart hardly says a word. He's really down, and I have no idea why. From the few things he does say, I can tell he's having doubts — about me, about us. But he knows how things are, doesn't he? That I've been torn for months?

After barely fifteen minutes, I decide to head to Tess's. Outside, Bart gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then he turns around and walks away — without looking back, without waving. It feels strange. Like a goodbye that hasn't been spoken. Why is he acting like this?

Once I'm at Tess's, a message from him comes in:

"Michelle, I'm sorry I came by and confronted you like that. I love you so much, and I'm incredibly happy with you, but maybe I'm just too attached

to you... I'm sorry you had to see me like this. I understand your story — and at the same time, I don't understand it at all. Sorry, such a pity, oh well. Have a lovely New Year's Eve and sleep well 🥺."

Now I really don't understand what's going on. What is this? I try calling Bart, but he doesn't pick up. There's no reply on WhatsApp either. His phone is off.

The evening with Tess feels a bit awkward. We play some games, but I can't really focus. Tess is understanding — I told her what's been going on. We both try our best to make the best of it.

Just after midnight, I see Bart is back online. I send him a message: *"Happy New Year."*

He replies: *"SORRY! I just wanted so badly to be with you right now — the one I'm madly in love with."*

And then:

"My darling, I never doubted you for a second — I was just confused and overwhelmed. A thousand times sorry, my apologies. Just be my baby 🥺😁🥺😁"

Then Frank calls. Tom is completely upset — inconsolable. He feels lonely and abandoned by everyone on his birthday. Frank wants me to come home right away. I jump in the car and drive back home.

On the way, I call Bart. I want to know what's going on with him. To me, it feels like he just ended "us" with that *"sorry, such a pity, oh well"* — not literally, but that's how it came across. And the fact that he was unreachable for so long really doesn't sit right with me.

During our call, Bart says he was surprised that I decided to go to Tess's on my own. He wonders what role he actually plays in my life — whether he's

even important to me. It sounds like he's looking for clarity. For reassurance.

I try to explain that ever since my talk with Sven, a lot has been running through my mind, and I wanted to discuss that with Tess. But I already told him that. I thought he knew. I thought he'd understand.

Bart keeps saying how left out he feels. That he thinks he's become too dependent on me.

"My bag for the night at Tess's was already packed this afternoon," he keeps repeating.

Chapter 2:
2018 – Forever Together

Winter 2018 – The decision

When I get home, it turns out things aren't as bad as I thought. Tom had an emotional moment around midnight, but by now he seems fairly balanced again. Still, there's an uneasy atmosphere. It feels like I was lured home. As if that phone call was deliberate.

But what occupies my mind much more is Bart. His emotional reaction at Van der Valk. He seemed... broken. Why? What could have changed so drastically in such a short time? Just the day before yesterday, we'd had such a wonderful, intimate day together. And now this? It feels as if he suddenly doubts me. Doubts *us*. And that hurts.

I send him a message:

"You rejected me so harshly with that text and your sudden silence. We always communicated openly. I trusted you completely. I had finally told you that I love you too. I did everything with you and was willing to turn my whole life upside down for you... Yes, this really hurts me."

Not long after, his reply comes. A long one. He calls me "dear Michelle," says he feels terrible. That he doesn't want to hurt me — quite the opposite. That maybe he says he loves me too often, and that it might feel suffocating, but it's only because he wants me around him so intensely.

"You are my happiness. My everything."

Bart asks if we can just move on. Together. And as a seal on it, he sends an audio file — a song he wrote for me. Recorded in one take. Straight from his heart. He asks if I'll listen to it later.

"Because I've never created something so beautiful for someone so effortlessly as I did for you."

The song is called *Live Your Book, Intensely — Letter by Letter*.

I stare at my phone. I don't know what to feel. His words are sweet. But also a lot. And fast. And completely opposite to what he showed earlier tonight. The confusion lingers. I don't respond right away. I want to let it sink in.

Later that day we text a bit — briefly, because it's Tom's birthday. Only one comment from Bart strikes me as odd:

"Hope the only reason you're losing sleep over me now is because of exciting thoughts."

He moves on from it so easily, while I feel the opposite — I need more explanation. What *was* that? Where did it come from?

☹️

The next morning, I get up early to go to work. Luckily, I've slept fairly well. Bart wants to call, but I keep it off. I have a serious job and no room for relationship drama during working hours.

On the way, my phone rings. It's Bart. He's at a parking lot near my work and asks if I can stop by. Something in his voice moves me. I change my route.

When I arrive, I see it right away: Bart is exhausted. Tired. Sad. As if he's been awake all night. A bit uncertain, I get into the car with him. He immediately wraps his arms around me. A kiss. Silence. Warmth.

Then he starts talking. He tells me how much he had looked forward to the evening at Tess's. How great his disappointment was when I said I was going there alone. That he didn't know how to handle it. That it felt as if he'd lost me. As if his world had collapsed.

"You are my everything," he says. "Just be my baby. I never want to be without you again."

We talk — or rather, we sit close together, sniffing softly, wrapped in each other's arms. Few words. Just warmth. At his urging, we decide to let the incident rest. We'll just move on as things were.

Fortunately, no one at work notices that I'm almost an hour late. I switch gears quickly. But the situation with Bart keeps tugging at me. Something doesn't feel right. Bart's love is intense. His behavior, unpredictable. And I don't quite know what to make of it.



A few days later, following the conversation with Sven in December, I start doing some research. What would a divorce actually mean for me? Not that I want to take that step *now*. But I want to know where I stand. Our situation isn't a standard one.

In the past, I received financial gifts from my parents with an exclusion clause. As it turns out, that's a blessing in disguise: I could reclaim those amounts in the event of a divorce. And they're not small sums. Our financial situation is shaky — the house is underwater, there are loans, credit cards. We earn well, but the money goes out faster than it comes in.

Still, I know this isn't the right time for a divorce. Sven has his final exams in May. I don't want to disrupt that. So I put the idea on hold. June will come soon enough. July is fine too. Deep down I know: postponement isn't cancellation.

Bart, meanwhile, focuses on his work. It looks like he's about to get a promotion. I encourage him to put his energy there, but he wants everything at once. He's bursting with energy.

"It's because of you," he says. "You give me wings."

In the meantime, our relationship is blossoming. Every week we go to salsa. And those nights almost always turn into foreplay for the rest of the

evening. We go to his place. Make love. Intensely. Connected. Passionate *and* tender. I've never experienced anything like this before.

One evening I dare to share something vulnerable: that ever since giving birth, it's been harder for me to reach orgasm. That I'm physically a bit damaged.

Bart doesn't flinch. He doesn't judge. On the contrary. A week later, when I'm at his place again, there's a stack of little books waiting — with positions, toys, and most of all: his full attention.

Everything says, "*We're in this together.*" For me. For us.

☹️

Frank is sick. The first week of February he stays home with the flu. Lots of time in bed. Lots of sighing. Lots of groaning. And comments on everything I do. It weighs on me. As if there's no oxygen left in the house. Luckily, I still have to go to work. At least it's fun there. I feel free to be myself.

By the end of the week, Frank is feeling a bit better. That Friday, I'm sitting at the kitchen table filing my nails when he suddenly stands in front of me. "I'd like to talk sometime soon," he says. I put the file down, look up. "Well, I'm here, so go ahead."

Frank looks at me seriously. He asks what I think about our marriage. Whether I'm still happy. I don't have to think. "No. Honestly, I don't feel happy with us anymore."

He swallows. Falls silent for a moment. Then: "What can we do about that? Couples therapy? Something else?"

I shake my head. "Me? No. I don't want to do anything about it anymore."

He stares at the floor. "Then... it'll be a divorce."

"Yes," I say. "Then it'll be a divorce."

Frank is shaken. Shocked, it seems. He suggests continuing the conversation the next day — and not telling the kids yet. Then he grabs his keys and leaves for his sister's place. Brenda.

I stay behind at the table. A bit numb. No sadness. No panic. Just a quiet emptiness. Relief, maybe? I pick up my nail file again and finish my nails. Because what else can you do?

Meanwhile, my thoughts are racing. What does this mean now? What's coming my way? And still... I feel free. For the first time in a long while. No more pretending. No more secrets. No more lies.

That evening, we have dinner as a family. As if nothing happened. Small talk. The kids chat, laugh, tell stories. They fill the room with noise. Thank goodness for that.

The next day, Frank and I talk again. We decide that, for now, we'll both keep living in the house. Frank already sleeps in the attic anyway. We agree that each of us will pick two mediators. From those four, we'll choose one together next week — the one that feels right for both of us — to guide us through the divorce.

I make plans to have lunch with Bart. He doesn't know anything yet.

When I'm about to leave, Frank asks where I'm going. "I don't think that's really your business anymore," I say calmly. "Just like I won't be asking you that question either." I do tell him I'll be home in time for dinner.

During lunch, I tell Bart the news. He remains noticeably calm. I suspect he's happy — but he doesn't really show it. Maybe he needs time to let it sink in. Maybe he's being considerate of me, aware that this isn't an easy step.

But me? I feel free. Truly free. As if a heavy coat has slipped off my shoulders.

That night, I sleep like a rock.

•

A few days later it's Valentine's Day. Technically a workday, but I've taken the day off.

I drive to Bart. He's already waiting for me, grinning. In the living room, a trail of rose petals winds its way toward the bedroom. The bed is made with a special Valentine's duvet cover. It doesn't stay neat for long. The tension, the relief, the attraction — it all comes together.

After we make love, Bart surprises me with a giant red inflatable heart. Hanging underneath it is a small gift. Inside: a gold necklace with a tiny heart pendant. *His* heart. For me. So sweet.

We stay in bed, cuddling. I trace my fingertips over his chest. When I touch the little hollow of his breastbone, it happens — Bart flinches. Not dramatically, just a reflex. As if my touch triggers something he'd rather avoid. I freeze and look at him questioningly.

He tells me that spot is extremely sensitive. That he doesn't like being touched there. A fleeting touch is fine, he says, but repeated or firm pressure feels too intense. "Something with crystals in my sternum," he adds — a strange explanation, half joke, half serious. It was examined once, but nothing much came of it.

Now that I know, I'm extra careful — I keep it in mind.

❧

Over the following week, I select two mediators, as Frank and I agreed. I print out the information and leave it for him to review. But nothing happens. No response. No interest. No effort.

A week later I ask about it. Frank says he has an appointment with a lawyer to get information about the divorce process. The meeting isn't scheduled until early March, he claims — that's why it's taking longer.