

The background of the entire image consists of a series of horizontal, wavy bands in a teal color, alternating with white space. The waves vary in amplitude and frequency, creating a rhythmic, ocean-like pattern.

P Flores

**WINDOWS  
TO THE  
SOUL**

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## **CHAPTER 1: THE PLAN**

So...what time shall I pick you up?" he said, cheeks red like a tomato. You could tell he didn't do this very often, but neither did she. She was calm, on the outside but inside she knew that the only reason was to be left alone once and for all.

"Um...how about 6 pm, after work, we could just go for a burger and just you know, talk. I barely know you and it would be nice to you know, at least pretend to be mad about each other."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry, it's just that it feels odd you know. You don't want to date me and still be willing to sacrifice time for this." He said a bit uncertain, like it was an insult.

"It's not that, you're a nice guy and in other circumstances, I would be thrilled but this now it's not for the best. I'm not there, I'm only doing this to be left alone. My colleagues won't leave me unless I find someone and you're the only one who can save me. I'm sorry, we'll make a great day out of this and then, everything will be alright." She said, putting her hand on his arm.

She normally avoided touching anyone but this time, he needed comforting. He smiled, placed his hand on hers and pat it gently. "I'm in, I'll be happy to help you. So... what will we do when they're you know, in the office?"

"Hugs in the beginning, I'm totally okay with that. Kisses, well...on the cheek is also okay. In a month or so, we can kiss you know but no tongue...I've never done that and frankly I just don't think it's a good idea.

In 6 months, we can tell them it didn't work out and part ways as friends. That's the plan, what do you think?" she said and felt a bit restless.

She hadn't kissed a guy since high school and that was barely a kiss, she did love him though. Thomas was a big part of her life, and he was the first guy she kissed on the lips, they were after all dating. Well, at least so she thought after staying loyal to him for 1 ½ years to find out he was cheating 6 months back with one of her friends. Since that moment, she only kissed one other guy: Manuel from camp. He on the other hand didn't cheat, he wasn't ashamed of her and he did like her. In fact, they never broke up...

Anyhow, now everything was working towards the perfect fake relationship without dying in the process. Luckily, David was one of those guys that could help in any situation, even though they only knew each other a few months. He wasn't bad, kind of cute even but she just wasn't interested. All her life Celia had been alone, apart from those 2 guys in her life. Then of course was John, her biggest regret since they were remarkably close and could've become more in the end of high school. He saved her more than once in the hallway from nosy classmates, but after the graduation they lost contact and about 2 years later he moved into her building with his wife.

She was happy about him though, since they stayed friends until they never saw each other again. Celia kept studying and began working later, where she met regret number 2: a doctor named Tom. He was the sweetest guy and pretty much in love with her, but she was too shy to take another step closer.

They had a lot of close encounters like lunch times or afternoon snacks but more than that, nothing.

Once she managed to ask him if he had a girlfriend to which he replied: "No, I just date my sofa". But before she could ask him more, he was moved to another department

and that was it. They did run into each other years later, said hi and still as shy as ever, she didn't ask him anything more.

Celia moved on, away from guys. She fell for some, but from a distance everything looked better, she couldn't manage to take more steps into having a relationship because she was afraid. Afraid that it would happen again, to be cheated on, to be lost in someone that she barely could recognize herself... No, no it would not come to that. She was strong enough to stay away from guys, in hope that when the right one would come along there wouldn't be any doubts. When the right man would come along, he would love her just as she was. No changes, no surgeries, no fake...just her.

But she knew that it was lie. Men lie, it's kind of their nature. Well women lie too, maybe not for the same reasons though. At least not her.

Today was a new day, Celia was walking in the sunshine on her way to work. Funny enough that it didn't feel grim to get up in the morning. Maybe because she had a plan, to finally make them understand that she didn't need a man in her life. She could do so much by herself: she had travelled within Europe and Latin America; her next plan was to visit the US and Hawaii. All that she did by herself, afraid yes but it didn't feel scary at all. God was with her.

"Hey, there she is...someone left this for you." Andy said smiling, she recognized the scheming smile. A bouquet of flowers, red and pink roses with a small card closed in an envelope. Wow, David really did an effort to make this believable.

"To Celia, light of my life. With love, David" Oh jeez, this man is giving it away to quickly!! She smiled, pretending it was a surprise. "Aww he's sweet."

"Well, what did he say?" said Andy trying to read the card. "That's private! But he likes me, and I think I like him too." She said and put the card in her bag. The flowers were in

water, but she put them on the common table in front of the lounge sofa.

She put on the computer and opened all the portals she used daily, a message popped up: From David: "Hi, sorry for the flowers. These aren't part of the plan, I just wanted to give you something to remember me by. Hope you like. D."

Oh God, what was he doing? She just agreed to keep it casual until some months pass but he's really pushing it. She wrote an email back:

"Hi, saw them and thank you. They're lovely and it's overly sweet but aren't you going from zero to 100 now? We haven't even had a date yet. Maybe we should talk about that. Call me during lunch. Take care/C."

That was a cold message, she thought to herself. Maybe I should try to be more, female-ish. Celia wasn't used to be the girlie girl, more like Lara Croft, apart from the knives and cool ass kicking vibe. She picked up the phone and dialed David's number, answering machine:

"Hi David, it's me. Sorry for the cold email, I think I panicked. You know, I'm not used to have someone liking me or thinking of me more than just "office rat". Thank you, the flowers are beautiful, and I took a picture. I'm keeping the card, I have this dorky box of old keepsakes and this one is a keeper. Talk soon, bye."

She felt strange, almost unrecognizable. What was her biggest fear? That it might work? That she could have a relationship with this guy, marriage and maybe even a family? No, no. But why not? There was nothing wrong with her as a person, apart from her fear of relationships and men. That fear came from a trauma back in the day, that guy that ruined her life but also her father's abandonment. She grew up with her mother and grandparents, they were her parents, the ones that went to parent teacher night or picked her up from school.

Celia missed her family, especially grandpa, her father in so many ways. The one supposed to accompany her to the altar when she would have gotten married, died 3 years ago and it almost killed her not being able to say goodbye. Tears were running down her cheeks as she remembered his smile, the chocolate bar in his pocket or his way of teaching her about a skeletal anatomy. My grandpa, she thought and grabbed the small chain she wore around her neck, it was his.

“Hey, are you okay?” a voice said, she looked up and it was him. It was David.

“Yeah, yeah I’m fine. It’s just, I was thinking about my grandpa and I, I...” she couldn’t hold back anymore. He immediately came to her side of the desk and held her in his arms, his hands stroking her back. She moved a little and he looked into her brown, tearful eyes. Before she knew and could wipe her tears, he caressed one away before leaning in on a soft kiss on the lips. Celia was in shock, but her brain sent a signal to continue the kiss. Now she leaned in, and he met her halfway, it was almost like getting electrocuted. She couldn’t move away but she didn’t want to either, instead she stayed in his arms until he finished the kiss and smiled. “I, I don’t know what to say. But I’m not sorry for this, not for a second Celia. I like you too much, I don’t know what...” Before he could finish the sentence, she was kissing him again. This time it was different, it felt natural, almost like when she dreamt of dating a leading guy from a movie. David was here, he comforted her, he wanted to help her in getting rid of her nosy colleagues, but it was more than that.

Did she love him? No, no it wasn’t that kind of love but affection yes, or I don’t know, maybe she just felt lonely.

“Wow, that was...that was...” he said, trying to catch some air and she couldn’t stop smiling. “I know, I didn’t mean to you know but I, I think this is something else.” She



said and let him go, she adjusted her dress and moved away. It was shameful to be like this, so attached, so needy.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE KISS AFTERMATH**

Celia, I like you. I do, trust me this was great! But I don't want to be just that, some help in your life to get rid of them. I want us to be more. Just, give me a chance." David said moving closer to her chair, she stared at the floor, partially ashamed for what she just did but also for those words...she wouldn't have let anyone to use her like that, why should she? He deserved better.

"David, I...I don't know what flew into me. But I don't want to hurt you. I don't know if I can make this work, I don't know how to be a girlfriend." Celia said without lifting her eyes towards David, whom by now stood again by her side, put his arms around her shoulders and pushed her closer to his stomach. She laughed a bit when she heard his stomach growl and he kneeled in front of her to hug her properly and took a deep breath to feel her perfume. Calvin Klein never smelled so good. "Well, I think we need something to eat. Maybe talk about us for a while, not as partners in crime but more partners. What do you fancy?"

Celia was scared but somehow it felt right, he felt right, she smiled and said "I'll be happy to have a good steak and fries, but for now...I just want to kiss you again."

Did she just say that? This strange feeling, she felt was warming and reassuring, all she knew was that she couldn't stay away from his lips any longer. David took her hands, kissed them, and embraced her. When both let go, they engaged in a kiss again. They moved towards an empty couch, and he laid backwards to have her by his side.

He stroked her back, while she smelled his aftershave, they stayed like that for a while. It was a warm afternoon with a slight breeze, they were all alone and just enjoyed the silence. "You know, there's this great steakhouse in the city. How about we go there for some food and then we can, go for a walk?" he said, kissing her head and continued to stroke her back.

"Mm...that sounds great. But this is cozy, to stay like this. I like your arms...to be like this with you." She said and looked up to his face, who beamed at the sight of her big brown eyes. "We can go to my place after dinner, my couch is big enough for both of us." He said, hoping that he didn't ruin the moment, Celia was after all extremely sensitive and easily frightened in these kinds of situations that she almost was like a deer.

Celia sat up carefully, David right behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She smiled, the fright was silently quieting down and maybe the relationship wasn't all bad. Maybe it wasn't her the problem lied but with the guys she was interested in.

"So...want to go for a ride?" David said and kissed her cheek, she turned around to respond "Car?" He smiled, showing off his keys "Yeah, it's parked in the garage. Shall we?"

Celia took his hand and he put his arm around her, her feeling of panic was rising again but the thought of not kissing him again ever made her hold him even tighter. In the parking lot he clicked the key to open the car, before he let her in, he embraced her again and leaned in for a kiss.

She couldn't resist him, responded until he whispered, "If I could choose something in my life, would be to stay like this forever." She smiled, it almost felt like she was a teenager again but only with a more mature man. "Me too David, I don't know why I was so afraid of dating you."

Dinner at the steakhouse was great. They talked, laughed, shared anecdotes of their lives before meeting, suddenly

Celia's phone rang "Hi mom, yeah sorry. I'm having dinner with a friend, oh okay, yeah, I'll just finish up and go. Okay, okay, bye."

"Sorry, I have to go...my mom needed me to stop by and do some grocery shop on my way home. Can we continue this tomorrow?" she said and put her phone in her bag.

"Sure, sure. Want me to drive you to a supermarket?" David said and called the waiter for the check. Celia stood up and grabbed her bag, leaned towards him, kissing him a long time. "That would be nice, sure you don't mind?"

He was still recovering from their kiss and said "Not at all...besides, I think I need one more of those before letting you go. Come on!" David was a gentleman, he paid before grabbing her hand and they headed out towards the car. He opened the door and let her in, he couldn't believe that she was his girlfriend. But was she? He didn't ask her properly, just a bunch of kisses and no direct proposal. He should address this right away.

"So, um, which supermarket? There's one of those big ones like 15 minutes away or do you prefer something close to home?" he began, starting the car and headed out of the parking lot.

She smiled, it didn't matter to her. "Take the one you said, let's see if I can find some good bread, my sister is so picky!"

He smiled back, he didn't want to ruin their perfect evening. At some points he put his hand on hers and she squeezed it back, but he knew he had to ask. "Celia, um...I don't want this night to end but I need to ask you something. Is this real? I mean us, are we together now?"

She turned her head, not surprised nor worried but happy. In the stop sign she leaned in towards him, kissing him again. He let go of the wheel to answer, she still tasted sweet, and his heart raced. "Yes David, we are for real. I wouldn't have kissed you if I didn't want to, and I do...if you

are my boyfriend.” She said shyly and moved away from him.

He took over the wheel again and smiled, his heart was warm and this woman next to him finally let her guard down. He loved her so much, from the very moment they met.

“What are you smiling about?” she said, having that same smile on her face.

“Celia...I love you; I always have. Ever since you walked through the office door, I just couldn't stop staring at you. I don't want to freak you out, I don't want you to run away, I just want us to happen, to be like this, like today.” He spoke with some concern in his voice.

Celia looked out the car window, this was serious. David loved her. After all this time, he just had this love hidden and never told her.

She sighed quietly: he was a good man, had a 8-year-old daughter, hard worker and was responsible. It was no problem for her that he was a father, since she could-n't have her own children. She met Ally, cute girl, very cheerful. Her mother was a bit complicated though, sometimes called during work and demanded to talk to David or just to drop of the child. Poor Ally with a mother like that, she needed a stable woman to raise her and why couldn't Celia be that woman.

“I...love you too David, I think I also feel the same but never really addressed it. I've always been on my own, thinking maybe that's all I could do, but now, with you. I want this, us.”

David stopped the car in the nearest lot, they had to walk for a few minutes to the store, but he just wanted to have her in his arms again. He turned off the engine, turned in his seat towards her and reached for her hands. Celia stretched them towards his and they held on for a few minutes before she pulled him closer to kiss him again. The man was a friggin' magnet!!

“OMG! It’s almost 8:30!! We really must go, one more! “Letting him go, got out of the car and waited for him. He came around and grabbed her hand, walking towards the store. If she could tell her middle school boyfriend to sod it, tell her younger self that things will be better, she would.

“I’m going to grab a cart, do you have a list, or you make it up as you go?” he said bringing the cart over to her. She smiled big, took out her phone and showed him a list: “Right here, although I might need some stuff too. Do you want something?”

David grabbed her hand, pulled her close and said, “I have everything I want, right here.” He kissed her gently and they went inside.

From afar they looked like this married couple, he rolled the cart, and she checked the list. As they stopped for some sweets, David received a call: “David...yeah, yeah, Tamara hold on a sec. This was supposed to be your week, she’s your daughter too! No, no I can’t right now. Hey honey, I’m sorry, what? Okay, yeah, I’ll pick you up, okay? Okay sweetie, bye.”

Celia came back with a bag of bread and saw David’s sad eyes: “What is it?” David scratched his head and said “Tamara called; she wants me to pick up Ally earlier because she’s having someone over. I’ll drop you off and then I’ll pick up my daughter.”

“Let’s pass on our way home, I do want to say hi, poor thing. Maybe she wants some cookies. Come on, let’s go.” She said and took the cart towards the self-help cashier. He took out his wallet and she put on her card on the reader, teasing him “Too slow!” They laughed, they took one bag each and headed for the car. Left everything in the back end of the car, before driving off.

It was a quiet but happy ride, they stopped at a big building and a small girl with braided hair and a suitcase was standing outside. No mother to be seen.

“Ally, hey honey, how are you?” Celia said and hugged her, the child was very tired, still in her pajamas. “Mom has a visitor; she gave me a paper to daddy. I want to sleep Celi, so tired.”

She picked up the girl and carried her to the car, David gave his daughter a kiss and said “I’m going upstairs, wait here.” She looked at him with some sadness, this won’t end well.

## **CHAPTER 3: DAUGHTER INTERRUPTUS**

Celia sat back in the car with Ally in her arms, she was sleeping heavily. She took out the phone from her bag and sent a text to her mom: "Hey mom, it's been a delay but I've bought the things we needed and, on my way. David is taking me."

Ally woke up for a minute, she just hugged Celia more and fell asleep again. She kissed her head and kept her close, sleeping was not a bad idea.

When she finally woke up, David was pulling over to her apartment. He smiled, his 2 best girls were together and maybe now they could be a family. "Hey babe, we're here. Want some help?" Celia nodded, she put Ally in the seat with her fluffy bag underneath her head so she could continue resting, gave her a kiss on the forehead and closed the door gently. David got out, helped her with the bags and stopped to give her a long hug: "I'm sorry, I just couldn't take it anymore. She's having some guy over and sends Ally away like she's nothing. I'm going to apply for sole custody, she agrees, says that it would be best if I kept her. I'm just sorry for my baby, she doesn't have a mother who cares enough." He took a deep breath of her shoulder, and she could hear him tearing up.

"Listen, you're doing what's best for Ally, she knows that. And I'm happy to be part of your lives and would be honored to be her bonus mom. I love her, and you." Celia was surprised to talk like that, but it just felt right. She didn't know that she wanted to be a mom until she met Ally and



since they got along well, it wasn't an issue. To support the man, she loved, and his daughter felt natural.

"You and Ally are the most important people in my life, to have you close it's just perfection for me. I love you so much. I'm sorry I can't meet your mother today but there will be other days. I hope. Goodnight honey, talk later?" he said and kissed her goodnight.

He drove off and she entered the building, in the elevator she took out her keys and opened the door on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. Mom was sleeping on the sofa, while her sister was watching tv. She jumped out to greet her: "Hey, you're late. What did you bring?"

"Hey, sorry, David's ex-wife just left their daughter on the street. Poor kid was still asleep! Have you eaten?" Celia took out the groceries, washed her hands and left her bag in the bedroom. Claire followed "Yeah we had dinner 2 hours ago, mom wanted something for tomorrow that's because she was in a hurry. Guess the batteries are low ha-ha."

Celia went to get a blanket for mom, she woke up: "Hey, you're home. What time is it?"

"It's after 10, mom, sorry but David had an errand to pick up. He told me to say hi to you." Celia said and took a seat next to her mother. "What happened?"

"Well, his ex-wife turned the child out of the house, because she had a date over. Ally was still asleep while standing in front of their building when we arrived, I put her in the back of the car while waiting for David." Celia said and took a deep breath, something she often did when a lot of questions came.

"His wife shouldn't do that, poor child. Does she know you?" said mom and took a bite of one of the buns Celia brought from the store.

Celia closed her eyes "His ex-girlfriend mom, they've broke up 5 years ago. David is single."

Mom continued “Still, they should’ve thought about the child. Who’s going to raise her if her mother isn’t supportive? What is he going to do with her alone?”

Celia got up and went to the kitchen, poured a glass of water and went back inside “He’s not alone mom, we’re sort of together now. I’m going to help with Ally, she’ll be my stepdaughter. She’s known me for a long time and we get along, we’ll manage.”

Mom sat up in the sofa, moved away the blanket and said “How on Earth will you do that? She’s not yours, you cannot raise her! Tell David he can forget about it.”

Celia was furious! How could she say something like this?

“Uh mom, what are you talking about? Of course, I can, Ally is a bright kid.

We’ve known each other ever since David began working with us 5 years ago and she loves me! Besides, I’m going to be her stepmom any way since David and I are together, I’m not going to leave him alone.”

Mom got up from the sofa, she couldn’t accept what I was saying: “I don’t think it’s a good idea, she needs to be with her mom and dad, not some stranger.”

“Mom, this is 2022, we can raise a child together. Besides, I’m going to be supportive of both. You should think about it, this is the closest you’re getting to grandchildren on my side.” Celia said and headed for her bedroom, mom didn’t reply anything.

She picked up her home clothes and went to shower, thinking about what she experienced that day: she had become a girlfriend and a stepmom in one day. Everything was so great, why would mom be so opposed? Celia had been single for 25 years, never dated more than once and was only committed to work and family.

As she got out of the shower, she overheard her mother and sister talking: “Mom, she’s 30. You know that she can’t have kids of her own? What’s wrong with her raising her