The music droned in his ears, loud enough that he could feel the bass pulsing through his entire body. All around him people jumped up and down to the rhythm. It was warm in the room, all the moving bodies heated the air up. He had arrived about an hour earlier with two friends. Now he was balancing drinks, while crossing the room from the bar where he had bought their second drinks to the place he had last seen Julian and Chris. He recognized the song the DJ was playing, electronic sounds intensifying in pace and volume, about to reach their peak in the refrain. Then the beat dropped and the music swelled to its climax in a half-melodic blur. And then the DJ switched on the strobe lights.

In this staccato of black and white, he saw her in a group of people. Darkness. A bright floodlight askew behind her illuminated her. Darkness. She jumped up, with her wavy brown hair following the movement with a slight delay. Darkness. She had her arms raised into the air. Darkness. She laughed a little, an expression of unbound happiness. Darkness.

Then the refrain was over, and the verse of the song continued with regular lighting. He realized that he had stopped, and then he continued his mission of bringing drinks to his friends.

“Here you go, Juli, Chris,” he said and handed over the drinks.
“Thanks Lucas,” Julian replied.
“Hey guys, I’m going to go again, I’ll probably be right back,” Lucas said.
“Did you meet someone nice at the bar?” Chris asked while raising an eyebrow.
“Kind of,” Lucas said after a short pause.
“See you later.”
“Yeah, see you.”

* 

The DJ was playing one of her favourite songs, and she was dancing wildly; she even sang some of the Lyrics.

“Hi.” She turned to the left, where the voice had been coming from. The speaker was a brown-haired guy about her age. He was slightly taller than average, skinny and good looking. Not model-good, but still.
“Hi,” she said.  
“Do you like the song?” he asked.  
“Yes. It’s one of my favourites. I like the artist a lot.”  
“What’s your name?”  
“Zoey. And yours?”  
“Zoey, that’s a nice name. I’m Lucas. Nice to meet you.”  

*  

“So her name is Zoey?” Julian asked. They were walking to the closest taxi rank, which was only about two minutes from the club. The air had cooled down rapidly after sundown, but they welcomed the chill on their skin after the warmth of the discotheque.  

“Yes. She studies business-economy here at the university,” Lucas said. After he had first introduced himself to Zoey, they had gone over to the bar and talked for quite some time.  

“Is she hot?” Chris said, participating in the conversation for the first time in a while.  
“Yes,” Lucas said. “And best of all, I got her number.”  
“You should text her, man,” Julian said.  
“I will.” Lucas smiled a little. “Tomorrow.”  

*  

She was lying on her bed in the apartment room she shared with her friend Annika. She had been texting with Lucas for nearly an hour. He seemed like a really nice guy. And he was good looking.  

I’d like to see u again (: , he wrote.  
Me too, she texted back. After a second she added Where?  
There’s a nice café on Beech Street, close to the subway. She knew the café, it was neat and served good coffee. She especially liked the Cafe Latte.  
Great! How about 2morrow at 3:30? she answered.  
Yes, that works perfectly. I’ll see you then :D  

*  

Lucas was reading the drink menu for the third time now and he had already checked all his social media in an effort to waste some time. He had arrived ten minutes early and now it was 3:37 pm. He knew she was only seven minutes late and that it wasn’t serious, but that didn’t keep him from being nervous.  

What if something had happened to her on the way? Or more likely, she’d changed her mind and decided that she didn’t want to meet him? Or her neighbour’s apartment had caught on fire and she had had to heroically save someone? Or she had been abducted by aliens? No, now I’m getting ridiculous, he thought. It’s probably nothing.
He had just resumed reading the menu when the door of the café was opened. It was Zoey. She was wearing grey skinny jeans, a white, knitted cardigan over a dark top, and a yellow scarf. He raised his hand for a half wave. She looked around the room. When she saw him, she smiled a little and came to the table where he was sitting:

“Hey, sorry for being late. The bus didn’t come on time, so I missed the subway and had to wait ten minutes until the next one came.”

“No problem. I didn’t wait too long.”

*They were walking down the street in the darkness. Neither of them had a car; however, they really didn’t need one, since the public transport was working well. And in the rare cases that they did need one, Lucas usually borrowed the one of his parents, who lived nearby, or from one of friends. They hadn’t done either today. Instead they had taken the bus.*

Now they had already nearly reached the building Zoey lived in. She had one room in a flat-sharing apartment that she rented together with another girl. Luckily he and Zoey lived in roughly the same area, which made it easier for Lucas to bring her home. They walked side by side, holding hands.

“That was a pretty good movie,” Zoey said.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Lucas answered.

“It had some good action scenes, interesting characters, a little love story on the side,” she said. “It also wasn’t too predictable. I like to watch romantic movies sometimes too, but most of the time it’s just completely obvious what’s going to happen the whole rest of the movie after the first five minutes.”

“The same goes for many horror movies,” Lucas added.

“I don’t like those much.”

“Why not?” Lucas asked.

“Because when I was still young, maybe eight or so, I went downstairs to the living room, where my parents were, because I couldn’t sleep. When you went into our living room, there was a kind of ‘blind spot’ you couldn’t see from the couch, but from which you could see the T.V. fairly well. My parents were watching some kind of horror movie, and I just stood there for a couple of minutes and watched too because I was curious what it was. When some blonde girl was torn apart by a monster from the woods, I did realise it and I was afraid my parents would find out that I watched it, so I just quietly went upstairs again. I had nightmares for years.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you. If any monster comes, I’ll be ready and defend you heroically with an axe,” Lucas said grinning.

They reached the door of the apartment building and stopped. “No, but seriously, don’t worry,” Lucas said. “I’ll protect you if you need me.”

She unlocked the heavy glass door to the staircase and opened it. Then she turned back to face him directly. “I know,” she said. They leaned closer together and kissed. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, good night.”

“Good night.”

* 

“What should I wear?” Zoey asked. She pushed a couple of clothes on hangers to the side, to take a closer look at a black simple dress.

“I don’t know,” Annika answered. She sat on the edge of the bed in Zoey’s room. “It depends on where you are going.”

“Lucas is taking me to Le Bistro” Zoey said. “Ah, fancy.”

“Yes, it’s because we have been together for three months now. He’s so romantic,” Zoey said. “The black dress, or the pants and my blouse?”

“I’d go for the dress. You could wear your new heels with it.”

“Good point. I think I’ll do that.”

* 

He looked at his phone to see what time it was. His lock screen background was a picture of Zoey and him, smiling, with a lot of colourful trees in the background. They had taken it about two months earlier when they’d gone to the park together one afternoon. The wind had been blowing, and flame-coloured leaves had been drifting through the air. They had just talked for hours, but it had been some very happy hours. 10:45 a.m. He pressed the lock button, and the screen went dark.

* 

They were sitting on the small couch in Lucas’s room, because it was bigger than hers, and watching a movie. It was coming to an end, now a romantic scene between the protagonist and his love interest was playing. After overcoming hardships and surviving adventures, they were now going to be happy ever after. She had thought that this was how it was going to be with Lucas too. Now she wasn’t sure.

“Hey, Zoey, are you all right?” Lucas asked, interrupting her train of thought “You’ve been so quiet.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, I’m just tired,” Zoey said. Besides it was stupid. Lucas was being a good boyfriend, and caring about her by noticing things like that. What was bugging her then?
“Are you sure you’re okay?”
“Yes, I’m fine,” she said. “I’ll try to go to bed earlier today.”

“Hi, Zoey, do you want to come over and hang out?” Lucas said while walking back and forth in his room. He always walked while he was talking to someone on the phone.
“No, sorry, I can’t. I still have to write a really annoying nine-page essay and I didn’t have time to start it earlier this week, so now I’m kind of stressed out.”
“I could try to help you,” Lucas offered.
“Thanks, but I don’t think that I could focus very well on my essay with you around and it’s pretty important.”
“Okay, I understand. Well, I don’t have any time tomorrow, so I guess I’ll see you on Tuesday then.”
“Yes, on Tuesday. Love you.”
“Love you, too,” he said and hung up.

Zoey was lying in her bed in the dark. She had tried to sleep, but her thoughts kept her awake. She had been thinking a lot lately, about her goals, her relationship with Lucas, herself. She felt as though she was missing something. Like there should be more to it, especially in regard to Lucas.

It was nothing concrete, not a singular thing or event that she would have been able to name and say: “This is where it went wrong” or “That’s the reason why this doesn’t work.” It was rather that all the small things over the last few months didn’t quite add up. The whole was less than the sum of its pieces, especially of late. Sometimes you don’t explode, you just fade away. Love’s the same. She didn’t want to hurt Lucas, and she knew that it would hurt him, but staying together without love was worse. She made her decision.

“It just doesn’t work anymore.”
“I know we’ve had problems, but we can work on it. Just give it one more chance.”
“It’s not that simple, Lucas. When we first got together and starting dating, I was crazy about you. I couldn’t go for longer than five minutes without thinking about you, hoping that you’d text me, or looking forward to seeing you again. Even later, after we’d settled into more of a routine, I loved you, I really did.” She paused and looked down at her shoes, as if the brown boots could provide answers. She pulled her head back up and continued. “But now I just can’t imagine this going on for much longer. I used to envision us in thirty years or so, suburban life with kids and all, and we would have been happy, but now I can’t. It’s not the same. I’m not the same. You are a nice person, and I’m sure you’re going to find a great girl one day, but I’m not her. Sometimes it’s not one big dramatic thing
like in the movies that drive two people apart. Sometimes two people simply don’t fit
together.”

“That’s why you wanted to meet me here,” he said, gesturing at the park area around
them. The trees had long lost their last leaves, and the sky was overcast with grey featureless
clouds. “On neutral ground, so to speak. To tell me it’s over.”

“Yes. I’m breaking up with you.”

“Zoey…” He paused, searching for words to change her mind. He reached out for
her hand, but she pulled it back.

“Goodbye, Lucas,” she said, turning around to walk away.

He took a step in her direction, then stopped. Instead he simply stood there and
watched her walk around the corner of the path, disappearing behind a dense group of
bushes, then partially visible for a second, until she was blocked from his view completely by
a little hill. He took a deep breath, drawing the cold December air into his lungs. Then he,
too, turned and walked away.

* 

She turned around and walked away, leaving Lucas behind. She had managed well to
keep her composure, but now tears started streaming down her cheeks. She knew it had
been the right thing to do, not that this made it much easier. She hoped that in this case the
debris of the ashes at the end of this relationship would prove to have a fertilizing effect,
that God would open a window, after closing a door. In the end you don’t have to learn how
to fly, just how not to regret. And she didn’t regret a second.