

"A must read for all women"



"The ultimate escape"



He Took My Breath Away

Jennifer Lisa

Acclaimed Author of
"The Final Chapter"



*He Took
My Breath
Away*

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Published by Interval House Press
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
First edition: March 2026
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Chapter One

Opening Night

Olivia Hart arrived at the Calder Gallery five minutes late and already half-apologizing.

“I told you parking would be a nightmare,” Maya said, grinning as she looped her arm through Olivia’s and steered her toward the entrance. “Downtown openings are basically competitive sports.”

Olivia laughed, breathless, letting herself be pulled along. The night air smelled like rain and pavement, and the gallery’s tall glass doors spilled warm light onto the sidewalk. Inside, voices rose and fell in a low, cultured hum. It was the sound of people who wanted to be seen listening.

She smoothed her dress without thinking. It was simple, black, borrowed from Maya years ago and never returned. Comfortable. Safe.

“You look great,” Maya said, reading her mind as always. “And before you say it, no, you don’t look like you’re ‘just here for work.’ You’re allowed to exist socially.”

“I am existing socially,” Olivia protested. “I just catalogued half these pieces last month.”

“And tonight,” Maya said, lowering her voice

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conspiratorially, “you are off duty. No accession numbers. No gloves. No climate control anxiety.”

They stepped inside.

The Calder was new money pretending to be old, polished concrete floors, floating white walls, lighting so precise it felt surgical. Olivia recognized at least three works she’d helped prepare for transport, their surfaces now immaculate, scrubbed of fingerprints and freight dust. Seeing them hung and admired loosened something in her chest.

This is why I do it, she thought. Even if no one knows my name. Her phone buzzed in her hand.

Evan: If I see one more crate labelled “TEMPORARY” that’s been here since 2019, I’m quitting to become a barista.

She smiled despite herself. Evan had been there for the worst of it—the late-night installs, the funding freezes, the week they’d survived on vending-machine granola bars during inventory because no one had time to leave the building.

Olivia: Don’t you dare. Who would I complain to?

Evan: See? Irreplaceable.

She slipped the phone back into her bag, comforted in a way she didn’t think about too hard.

“Wine?” Maya asked.

“Yes,” Olivia said. “Please. Immediately.”

They took flutes from a passing server and drifted toward the centre of the room. Maya launched into a story about a disastrous third date involving a man who’d described his ex as “crazy” before the appetizers

arrived. Olivia listened, smiling and nodding, half-present, her attention tugged by the familiar tension of being in a crowd she knew but didn't quite belong to.

She felt eyes on her before she saw him.

It wasn't dramatic. No cinematic pause. Just a subtle awareness, like a shift in pressure—an attention that felt warm against her skin.

He stood near a large abstract canvas, dark blues fractured with gold, one hand wrapped loosely around a glass, posture relaxed but alert. Early forties, maybe. Well dressed in a way that didn't beg for approval. Strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, and eyes that seemed to catch the light like they were aware of it. He wasn't talking to anyone, yet people seemed to orbit him, drifting close, then away again.

When his gaze met hers, he didn't look away. His eyes lingered a beat longer than politeness demanded, as if cataloguing something specific about her.

Olivia's first instinct was to drop her eyes. Her second was curiosity, followed by the small, traitorous quickening beneath her ribs.

"That man is staring at you," Maya murmured, following her line of sight. "Do we like him, or are we pretending not to notice?"

"I think he's just... looking," Olivia said, though her pulse had begun to pick up.

"Mm," Maya said. "He's handsome. Older. Dangerous combination."

Before Olivia could respond, he approached.

"Hi," he said, his voice low and even. "I hope I'm

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not interrupting.”

“No,” Maya said cheerfully. “We were just gossiping. Please interrupt.”

He smiled at that, then turned his attention fully to Olivia, as if Maya had faded into background noise. Not rudely, just naturally. The directness of it sent a faint heat to the back of Olivia’s neck.

“I’m Adrian,” he said.

Maya angled her body closer to Olivia, an unconscious habit from years of crowded rooms and shared spaces. “She’s the reason this place doesn’t fall apart,” she said easily. “If anything gets mislabelled, Olivia’s the one fixing it at midnight.”

Olivia laughed. “That is a gross exaggeration.”

“It absolutely isn’t,” Maya said. “You should’ve seen her during the shipment from Berlin...”

“I wish I had,” Adrian said smoothly, though his eyes remained on Olivia. “You must be incredibly passionate about what you do. I couldn’t help noticing; you’ve been looking at the pieces like they’re old friends.”

Olivia blinked. “Oh. I, well. I work here. Sort of. Behind the scenes.”

“Collections?” he asked immediately.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Yes.”

He nodded, satisfied. “I thought so. You look like someone who knows how things arrive, not just how they’re displayed.”

Something warm settled in her chest. A flutter of anticipation whispered through her. “Most people don’t think about that part.”

“They should,” he said. “The journey matters.”

Maya cleared her throat, amused. “I’m Maya. I’m here strictly for the free wine and moral support.”

Adrian smiled politely, then turned back to Olivia. “Are you enjoying the show?”

“Yes,” Olivia said, surprised by how easily the word came. “It’s... cohesive. Thoughtful.”

“Careful,” he said lightly. “That’s how I describe things when I actually like them.”

She laughed. It felt unguarded. Her mind lingered on his words, longer than reason warranted.

They talked about the exhibit, about how certain pieces changed depending on how long you stood with them, about the strange performance of appreciation at openings like this. Adrian listened intently, head slightly tilted, eyes steady on hers. When she mentioned sketching in the margins of library books as a kid, he remembered. When she joked about the quiet satisfaction of properly labelled crates, he didn’t blink.

It felt easy. Too easy. Too much like electricity humming just beneath polite conversation.

Maya studied Adrian for a beat longer than necessary, then smiled. “I’m going to do a lap,” she said, squeezing Olivia’s hand. “Don’t disappear on me.”

“I won’t,” Olivia said automatically.

Maya’s smile softened, familiar and private. “I’ll find you.”

Adrian’s attention sharpened, as if the room had narrowed. “You’re close,” he observed. “You and her.”

“She’s family,” Olivia said simply.

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He smiled. "That's rare." Something unspoken hovered there, a trace of intensity that made her stomach tug.

They moved closer to the painting behind him. Adrian gestured to the hulking piece wrapped in an ornate frame.

"Do you see how it almost looks violent?" he asked. "Like something precious being forced through restraint."

"Yes," Olivia said slowly. "Or like it's trying to escape."

He looked at her then, not at the painting. "Exactly."

The word landed between them, charged. Heat threaded quietly through her awareness, a small, undeniable pull.

"You're not like most people here," he said after a moment.

Olivia flushed. "That sounds suspiciously like a line."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But it's also an observation. You're present. You notice things."

No one ever says that, she thought. No one looks like that at me. Her chest warmed, a subtle thrill she hadn't expected.

They were interrupted by a man greeting Adrian warmly. Adrian's posture shifted subtly, shoulders angling, voice modulating, charm deployed. Olivia watched him work the room without effort, noticing how often his eyes flicked back to her, checking. Counting.

When the man left, Adrian exhaled. "Sorry about that."

“It’s fine,” she said.

Maya reappeared, cheeks flushed from wine and conversation. “There you are,” she said, relief flickering across her face before she masked it with a grin. She handed Olivia a drink. “I thought I’d lost you to the art world.”

“Never,” Olivia said, smiling back.

Adrian stepped slightly aside now, courteous but distant. “You have a good friend,” he said.

“The best,” Olivia replied without hesitation.

Something unreadable crossed Adrian’s face, gone as quickly as it came. Her stomach fluttered, a tiny feeling of something she didn’t yet name.

Later, she wasn’t sure how much later, he walked her to the door. The night had deepened, the city slick with reflected light.

“At the risk of being too vulnerable, I’d like to see you again,” he said, direct. “Dinner. Somewhere quiet.”

Her instinct was to deflect. To say she’d think about it. Instead, she nodded. “I’d like that.”

He smiled, warm but intent. “Good.”

She slid her card out of her wallet and turned it toward him; delicately pressed between two fingers.

He didn’t kiss her. He took her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles—gentle, deliberate. A shiver of warmth threaded through her at the contact.

As she walked away, Olivia felt lightheaded, as if something essential had shifted.

Behind her, Adrian watched until she disappeared into the crowd. His gaze lingering a moment too long,

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memorizing the way she moved, the way she belonged
to the night.

Chapter Two

Following the Spark

The gallery was quiet in a way that felt earned.

Morning light filtered through the high windows of the Calder's collections wing, diffused and pale, catching dust motes that hung briefly before settling again. The air carried the faint mineral smell of concrete and the dry, papery tang of archival boxes. Even the silence had texture here, softened by insulation, broken only by the steady vibration of environmental controls and the occasional click of a latch somewhere deeper in the wing. Olivia liked this hour best. Before visitors, before voices, before the art had to perform. In the back corridors, the building exhaled.

She balanced a clipboard against her hip and checked the humidity gauge for the third time, squinting at the tiny needle. Her hair was in a loose knot that was already collapsing, wisps escaping around her ears. She wore black trousers and a cream blouse under a cardigan that had seen too many long weeks—familiar, practical and one coffee stain away from retirement.

“Still alive,” Evan said from behind her. “Still climate controlled. Still aggressively beige.”

She smiled without turning. “You say that now but

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wait until the dehumidifier rebels.”

Evan leaned against the wall beside her, coffee in hand, dark circles under his eyes that matched her own. He wore the same soft grey sweater he always did during install weeks, the elbows permanently threatening to fray, and his hair stuck up in a way that suggested he'd slept in ten-minute increments. His shoes squeaked faintly on the polished concrete every time he shifted his weight.

“I had a nightmare,” he said. “All the accession numbers were wrong, and you looked at me like I'd betrayed you.”

“That is my villain origin story,” Olivia said. “You should be afraid.”

He laughed, easy and familiar, and handed her the second coffee without comment. He knew how she took it. He always had. The cup was warm through the sleeve, the lid slightly off-centre the way the café always did it. Olivia inhaled the smell—bitter, comforting—like it could reset her nervous system by itself.

They walked together down the narrow hall toward storage, their footsteps echoing softly. The space smelled faintly of wood, dust and something metallic—crates, shelving and quiet order. A hand-written sign taped to a door read NO FOOD OR DRINK BEYOND THIS POINT, which everyone ignored until someone important came downstairs.

“You survive the opening?” Evan asked.

“Yes,” Olivia said. “Barely. Maya made it tolerable.”

“That tracks.” He nudged her shoulder gently.

“Anyone interesting?”

She hesitated, not because she was hiding anything, but because naming Adrian felt oddly intimate in the fluorescent calm of the gallery. In her mind, he belonged to candlelight; to that charged attention that had made her feel briefly, dangerously alive.

“I met someone,” she said finally.

Evan glanced at her, curious but uncharged. “Met-met?”

“Met-met,” she confirmed.

He grinned. “Look at you. Was he normal?”

She considered that, picturing Adrian’s steady gaze, the way he’d spoken like he already knew her. “I don’t know yet.”

“That’s a no,” Evan said, amused. “What does he do?”

“He’s an art dealer.”

Evan made a face. “Of course he is.”

“Be nice.”

“I am being nice.”

She laughed, shaking her head as she unlocked the storage room. Inside, rows of carefully labelled shelves stretched back into shadow, the quiet punctuated only by the hum of the environmental controls. The overhead lights were bright but cold, flattening colour, turning everything into a careful grid: crates stacked with precise spacing, acid-free tissue tucked into corners, barcodes that promised order even when life didn’t.

“I know what you’re thinking but he didn’t seem like the rest of them. In any case, he asked me to dinner,” she added, pretending the casualness wasn’t an act.

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Evan's expression softened into something openly pleased. "Good. You deserve a decent meal that doesn't come from a cart."

"You say that like you won't still make me eat stale microwave noodles at my desk."

"Tradition is tradition."

They set to work, falling into an easy rhythm of checking labels, cross-referencing inventory, making small notes in the margins of forms they both knew by heart. There was no need to explain things. They spoke in shorthand, years of shared frustration and small victories filling the spaces between words. Evan hummed under his breath while he worked, a barely-there tune that always sounded like a song Olivia almost recognized.

At one point, Evan paused, holding up a crate tag. "Do you ever think about leaving?" he asked, casual but sincere.

"The gallery?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah. Or... you know. Everything."

She considered it, then shrugged. "Sometimes. But I like knowing where things belong."

He nodded, understanding exactly what she meant—how order could be a kind of safety, a quiet proof that something in the world was still predictable.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

She ignored it at first, finishing her notation. Then it buzzed again, insistent, like a fingertip tapping a table.

Evan raised an eyebrow. "He didn't waste much time, did he?"

She pulled it out.

Adrian: Good morning. I know I should be waiting some sort of arbitrary amount of time before contacting you, but you don't seem like the type to play games.

A small, unexpected warmth spread through her chest. Her heartbeat ticked a little faster, and she found herself wondering what he was doing at that moment—what kind of morning he had, what his place looked like, whether he was already dressed like the night before.

“Art dealer?” Evan confirmed lightly.

“Yes,” she said, trying—and failing—to keep the smile out of her voice.

“Ah.” He smiled, teasing but kind. “Tell him hi from the guy who knows where all the bodies are buried.”

She snorted. “You absolutely do not.”

“Emotionally,” he clarified.

She typed back quickly, thumbs clumsy with that new, bright nervousness.

Olivia: You're right about that. I don't play games. Except I'm ruthless at Monopoly.

The reply came almost instantly.

Adrian: Haha. I knew my radar was on point. Still up for dinner? How about tonight? I know a place you'll like.

She hesitated, not because she didn't want to go, but because the certainty in his approach caught her slightly off balance. Such authenticity was foreign to her, and although it's what she had been searching for, she wasn't sure what to do with it—like a dog chasing a car and finally catching up to it, suddenly confronted

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with its own momentum.

Still, she typed:

Olivia: Yes. That sounds nice.

Evan watched her tuck the phone away. “You’re smiling.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s subtle. But I’ve known you too long.”

She shook her head, embarrassed, shifting the clipboard higher like it could hide her face. “Stop.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “Just... don’t disappear on us, okay?”

The word us landed gently. No pressure. No claim. Just inclusion.

“I won’t,” she said, meaning it.

But even as she spoke, her phone felt heavier in her pocket—warm, expectant—as if something new had already begun to rearrange the shape of her day. She couldn’t help a tiny, guilty smile as her thoughts lingered on him, imagining the curve of his smile and the warmth of his attention.

Chapter Three

The First Date

The restaurant was small, quiet, and exactly the sort of place Adrian had described in an email with measured enthusiasm. Olivia arrived first, shaking rain from her coat and smoothing her hair by habit as she stepped inside. The entryway was narrow and dim, with an old, framed mirror that made her look slightly softer than she felt. The air smelled faintly of charred bread and citrus, warm without being overwhelming, and somewhere deeper in the room a low jazz track threaded through the hush.

A waiter appeared instantly, dressed in black, expression neutral but attentive. “Table for two?”

“Yes,” she said. Her voice felt louder than intended in the quiet.

He led her past low-lit booths upholstered in worn leather, a row of candles in glass holders, and a small bar lined with bottles that caught the light like jewels. The tables were set with heavy cutlery and linen napkins folded with ceremonial precision. They stopped at a corner table near the window. Outside, the street shimmered with wet asphalt and neon reflections. Olivia slid into the chair, noticing how the seat cradled

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her in a way that felt almost... planned.

Adrian had texted her earlier: "Sit where you can see the room, but no one can block your view." She'd laughed quietly at the phrasing, thinking it overly precise, until she realized how effortlessly he had accounted for comfort and perspective. The thought returned now, less funny, more intimate.

Before she could take in more than the menu, a shadow fell across her. Adrian appeared beside the chair, coat in hand, eyes calm but attentive. He wore a dark wool coat over a tailored suit, no tie, collar open as if he'd chosen ease without sacrificing control. His hair was neat, his watch understated but expensive, and his hands looked like they belonged to someone used to handling delicate things without hesitation.

Without any warning, she felt a quiet, insistent pull toward him deep in her gut.

"Olivia," he said softly, and her breath caught.

He smiled, warm and deliberate, seating himself across from her. Every movement was natural, effortless, but somehow intentional, as if he had thought about everything and yet made it seem unplanned.

"I hope you didn't wait long," he said.

"I just walked in," she admitted, aware of the faint dampness at the ends of her hair from the rain.

He nodded as if her honesty mattered. "Good. I like punctuality. Shows respect for yourself and for others." His voice was light, conversational, yet carried a weight that made her aware she was being noticed. Not just looked at—registered.

The waiter returned, offering the wine list. Adrian scanned it quickly, then shook his head. "I have something in mind. Trust me?"

Olivia hesitated, then nodded. "I like your confidence. Let's see what you've got."

Moments later, he poured. The wine was precise, crisp, familiar, yet she had never tasted it like this before, carefully decanted, the room lighting catching the ruby edges. Adrian's eyes never left hers as he poured, small gestures that felt like consideration. Olivia caught herself studying him instead, feeling the unusual warmth of someone attending to her in ways that felt effortless. Her fingers tingled slightly as he leaned in, just a fraction, to steady the decanter.

"So," he said, leaning back slightly, "tell me about you. About the parts no one usually asks."

She blinked. "Parts... no one asks?"

"The sketches you hide in your notebook," he said. "The ones you never post. The moments when the museum is empty and you feel like no one is watching."

He remembered. He noticed. A small, delicious ache gathered in her chest, a quiet awareness of how much she wanted him to keep noticing.

She laughed nervously. "You mean my secret shame drawings?"

"Your secret treasures," he corrected gently. "The pieces that belong only to you."

Olivia wanted to say something clever, but the words caught somewhere between her chest and her throat. Instead, she simply nodded, fingertips tracing

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the edge of the menu like it could ground her.

Adrian smiled, not wide, showy, or performative, but one that reached his eyes. “You inspire attention without asking for it. That’s impressive.”

“Impressive?” She tried to sound modest. “Or dangerous?”

He leaned forward slightly, voice low. “Only if you let it be.”

The words felt like a gentle brush—light, teasing, but intentional. Her pulse quickened, and she felt a tenderness thread through her stomach and fingers.

They ate. Small dishes that seemed effortless and luxurious; foie gras, perfectly roasted vegetables, a dessert almost too beautiful to touch. Adrian studied her reactions with subtle intensity: the slight furrow of her brow at the first bite, the pause before she smiled at a flavour she liked, the way she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Each observation was careful and attentive, a quiet curiosity that made her feel seen.

He asked questions about her tastes, her impressions, her favourite flavours, and listened fully, making the conversation feel effortless and unique. The effect was comforting. She hadn’t realized how much she liked being noticed this way.

She mentioned Evan briefly, keeping it light, almost anecdotal. Adrian nodded, asked a few questions and listened. There was nothing sharp or judgmental in his tone—only interest, curiosity and a focus that made Olivia feel central in a room she often felt swept past. She caught herself lingering on the shape of his jaw, the

warmth of his gaze, and had to look away before the thought became too bold.

As the meal ended, Adrian reached across the table, brushing his hand lightly against hers. “I like this,” he said. “Being here with you.”

Olivia felt her fingers warm under his touch. “I... like being here with you too,” she admitted, almost without thinking.

“I’m not sure you can beat my view,” he said with a light tinge of embarrassment as he stared deep into her eyes, his thumb brushing the back of her hand. The touch lingered in her mind, a quiet ache she wanted to feel again.

The waiter cleared the table, leaving them alone with the soft murmurs of the room. Adrian stood and offered his hand to help her from the chair. “Shall we walk for a bit? There’s a quiet street not far from here, better than the neon outside.”

“You haven’t led me astray so far,” Olivia smirked.

Olivia rose, letting him guide her out. The night had deepened, the rain-slicked streets reflecting light in shards, turning the ordinary into something delicate and strange. Adrian’s hand brushed her elbow once, casual, almost accidental; but it made her heart catch. She wanted him to linger, even a fraction longer, just to feel that warmth again.

They walked along the narrow side street Adrian had mentioned. The city felt different in this quiet, intimate corner; smells of wet stone and coffee drifting from nearby cafés, the occasional distant hum of tires

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on asphalt. Olivia let herself slow, matching his pace, aware of the subtle space he gave her, as if letting her exist fully while still guiding the rhythm of the evening.

“You come here often?” she asked, gesturing at the dimly lit row of galleries.

“More often than I’d like to admit,” he said, smiling. “I know it sounds cheesy, but I like who I am around art. The way it makes me feel. Like ideas are a renewable resource.”

He glanced her direction, scanning for understanding and connection. She returned it with a smile she couldn’t help but disclose.

They paused at a corner where the street opened onto a small park. The fountain glistened in the lamplight, water moving in soft ripples. Adrian gestured toward a bench tucked under an overhanging tree. “Shall we sit?”

Olivia nodded, settling beside him. The bench was cold through her coat, the air damp enough to bead on her lashes. For a while, they simply watched the water, letting the quiet deepen the connection. Though he was mere inches from her, she wondered why he wasn’t closer.

Then, as if it were the answer to her unasked question, he slid his arm around her and pulled her close with such gentleness it made her feel weightless. She felt her thoughts slow, her usual alertness giving way to something lighter.

“How often do you still sketch?” he asked after a pause, eyes on hers.

“Just here and there,” she said. “Mostly at the

museum. Small things, just for myself.”

“That sounds wonderful,” he said softly. “I’d love to see them someday.”

She laughed lightly, brushing a damp strand of hair from her face. “Maybe. They’re nothing special.”

“All art is special. It all has meaning,” he said gently, leaning slightly closer. Her breath caught as his proximity brushed a delicate heat across her skin. “Even the small, quiet things.”

It was the kind of attention that made her chest swell, the kind that didn’t demand, didn’t intrude—simply acknowledged her. Adrian’s gaze held hers steadily, warmly, with a subtle intensity that drew her in without pressure.

He reached for her hand. Olivia didn’t pull away. She let him hold it, the feeling of his touch threading through her.

“Why does this feel so... effortless?” he said quietly.

“Effortless?” she repeated with a teasing smile.

“Yes,” he said, leaning closer to her, “and effort is overrated if you ask me.” He closed what little gap was left between them and placed his lips on hers. A soft, private gesture that felt entirely intimate yet wholly respectful. Olivia found herself hoping to freeze time if only to stay in this moment a little longer.

The city mirrored the electricity between them, lights glimmering on wet surfaces, people passing in distant shadows. For a suspended moment, Olivia felt the world narrow to the touch of his hand, the quiet of the fountain, and the gentle, effortless way he had made

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the evening feel like it belonged to them alone.

“I’m glad you came tonight,” he murmured, eyes soft.

“So am I,” she said, letting herself breathe in the relief of making the first brave choice she’d allowed herself in a long time.

They lingered a moment longer, the night stretching around them, before Adrian finally released her hand. He stood smoothly, offering her his arm as they resumed walking. She accepted it, not thinking—only feeling the simple contentment of being beside someone who seemed to notice the small parts of her world, the parts she usually kept to herself.

By the time they returned to the street where the evening had started, the city’s neon lights now blurred by rain-soaked reflections, Olivia felt lightheaded, exhilarated. Something subtle, something profound, had shifted. She didn’t question it. She didn’t analyze it. She only knew that tonight had been... remarkable.

Adrian paused at the curb, his gaze steady on her. “We’ll do dinner again soon.” he asked, tone light, confident, like it wasn’t a question at all.

Olivia nodded before she could second-guess herself. “I’d like that.”

He smiled, warm but intent, and inclined his head politely. “Good.”

He leaned in and kissed her softly once more. A brief, private seal on the evening they had shared.

As she walked away toward the cab waiting at the curb, Olivia felt as if she were floating; light, energized,

and quietly enchanted. Behind her she could feel Adrian watching her disappear into the night, unhurried but memorizing every detail: the sway of her shoulders, the warmth of her smile, the way the city seemed to bend around her presence.

For Olivia, the evening closed with the unmistakable thrill of new beginnings, a sense of being both admired and understood. It was intoxicating, entirely unexpected, and wholly unforgettable.

Chapter Four

The Spark Catches

The days after their first date unfolded gently, without urgency or spectacle. Olivia found herself noticing how often Adrian suggested simple things—coffee after work, a quiet walk through a side street she hadn't taken in years, a small neighbourhood restaurant where no one rushed them out the door. It felt different from the fast, performative dates she'd grown used to, the ones that arrived with exaggerated charm and left her feeling strangely unseen.

On Tuesday, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder at a coffee counter while rain drummed softly on the window. Adrian ordered without fuss, then slid her cup toward her like it was a small offering rather than a transaction. On Thursday, he walked her home and kept pace with her without rushing, as if her rhythm was the only one that mattered.

One afternoon, they wandered through a smaller gallery on the east end, one Olivia hadn't visited since her early days in the art world. The space smelled faintly of fresh paint and old wood, and the floors creaked just enough to feel human. A long bench sat under a skylight, and the walls were hung with pieces that didn't

try to impress, quiet, stubborn work.

Adrian moved slowly, reading plaques, stopping often—not to explain, but to ask.

“What do you think?” he said, gesturing toward a mixed-media piece mounted low on the wall.

She considered it. “I like that it’s messy without trying to be. Like it wasn’t worried about impressing anyone.”

He smiled, the kind that suggested he liked her answer more than the piece itself.

Later, over tea at a café nearby, Olivia caught herself talking more than she usually did. The café was narrow and bright, plants spilling over the window ledge, a chalkboard menu written in looping handwriting. Outside, cyclists wove through traffic like they belonged to a different species. Inside, the clink of spoons against porcelain punctuated her sentences in soft, regular beats.

She talked about work, about the quiet satisfaction of cataloguing pieces, about how much she loved being close to art even if she wasn’t the one creating it.

“I used to think I’d be an artist,” she said, surprising herself. “When I was younger, I mean.”

Adrian looked at her with interest, not pity or interruption.

“I went to school for it,” she continued. “Painting, mostly. But somewhere along the way it started to feel... impractical. Risky. Working in a gallery felt like the closest I could get without failing outright.” She shrugged, then added quickly, “I love my job. I really

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do. I just—sometimes I wonder.”

“What you’d have made,” Adrian said.

She nodded. “Or who I’d be.”

He didn’t rush to reassure her or wrap the thought in platitudes. “Do you miss it?”

“I miss the idea of it,” she said after a moment. “The freedom. The belief that it was enough to want something.”

“That doesn’t really go away,” he said. “It just finds other shapes.”

She smiled at that, feeling oddly understood—and oddly exposed.

It struck her, then, how much he asked: about her work, her routines, her favourite exhibits, the pieces that stayed with her long after she’d seen them. He didn’t redirect the conversation toward himself, didn’t slip in stories meant to impress. No talk of cars or status or how busy he was. It was new for her, this feeling of being the focus rather than the audience.

“You know,” she said lightly, “most men I’ve dated talk about themselves like they’re delivering a presentation.”

Adrian laughed. “I’m terrible at those.”

“That’s kind of my point.”

“What about you?” she said. “You know everything about my skeletons and my habits. I don’t even know how you ended up here.”

He paused, considering, gaze drifting briefly to the window like he was deciding how much to reveal. “I didn’t grow up around art,” he said. “But the first time I

stood in front of something that made me feel smaller—in a good way—I knew I wanted to be near that feeling. Art slows things down. Makes people pay attention.”

She watched him as he spoke, noticing how careful he was with his words, how he chose them like he was placing objects on a shelf. “That’s what I like about it,” she said. “It asks something of you.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “And most people don’t want to be asked.”

That evening, back at her apartment, the quiet felt different. Not heavy, not charged—just full. Her place was modest and warm: thrifted lamp light, a small stack of sketchbooks on the coffee table, mugs that didn’t match, a cardigan slung over the back of the chair like a habit. Adrian stepped into it as if he belonged there, without the awkwardness most people brought into someone else’s space.

They moved around each other easily, shedding coats, shoes, the small formalities that had marked the beginning of the night. Conversation drifted and slowed, tapering off into something wordless.

Adrian stood close enough that Olivia could feel the warmth of him without being touched. When he finally did reach for her, it was unhurried, as if asking rather than assuming. She answered by stepping closer, resting her hand against his chest, surprised by how natural it felt.

“This doesn’t have to be rushed,” he said softly.

“I know,” she replied. And then, after a beat, “I don’t want it to be careful, either.”

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His smile was quiet, approving. He leaned in, and the kiss that followed was deeper than the ones before it—unafraid, certain. When he pulled back, his forehead rested briefly against hers, a pause that felt deliberate rather than restrained.

They didn't speak much after that.

Clothes were left where they fell. The apartment dimmed to lamp light and shadow. Adrian followed her lead as much as he guided, attentive without urgency, as though the point was not the destination but the closeness itself. Olivia felt grounded in the moment, aware of every choice she was making—and how willingly she was making it.

Later, wrapped in the quiet that comes after, she lay beside him, tracing the edge of his shoulder with her fingertips. Outside, a car passed on wet pavement, the sound stretching and fading like a slow exhale. Nothing felt rushed now. Nothing felt uncertain.

This, she thought, was what it meant to arrive somewhere together.

They kept seeing each other. Slowly, then all at once. Days folded into evenings. Conversations stretched without effort. Olivia felt herself settling into something that didn't demand performance, only presence.

By the time their relationship shifted from possibility to certainty, it felt less like a leap and more like a natural next step.

Chapter Five

The Whirlwind Begins

Olivia woke to sunlight streaming across the bedroom floor, the sheets rumpled, her sketchbook lying open beside her. A pencil had rolled into the crease of the duvet, and the page was smudged where her palm had rested—half-finished lines, the beginnings of a face that looked almost like someone she knew. The faint smell of coffee beckoned from outside the bedroom, and for a moment she lingered in that quiet, easy peace.

Then her thoughts flicked to Adrian: already awake somewhere, moving, planning, and somehow aware of her in ways that made her wake just a bit faster.

She allowed herself a few extra moments to soak in how much had changed in her life over those few short months since their first date—how her calendar had filled with gentle certainty, how her body seemed to recognize his presence before she did.

By the time she reached the kitchen, he was standing at the counter, perfectly dressed even for a lazy Sunday: fitted dark trousers, a crisp shirt with the sleeves rolled to the forearm, hair tidy as if effort was simply his default. The kitchen itself looked curated under morning light, counters cleared, dish towel

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folded, everything placed with intention. A small vase of fresh stems sat near the window, cheerful in a way that felt oddly deliberate.

“Good morning,” he said softly, and the sight of him made her chest tighten pleasantly. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, already feeling the familiar warmth of being seen, attended to. A heat poured over her as his fingers brushed the edge of the cup near hers. The contact brief but specific enough to register as a choice.

They ate slowly, talking in easy rhythms about the gallery, her sketches, and small daily details. Adrian listened as though each word she spoke mattered profoundly. He commented on her drawings with intensity and nuance, asking thoughtful questions, complimenting without overdoing it. Olivia felt a thrill she couldn’t quite name: this was the kind of attention she had always craved, the feeling of being fully observed and appreciated. She found herself noticing the curve of his lips, the way the light caught his eyes when he looked directly at her, and a subtle ache blossomed in her chest.

After breakfast, Adrian suggested they visit a private exhibition at a nearby gallery, one not yet open to the public. Olivia’s heart lifted at the thought. The day unfolded like a carefully orchestrated symphony: sunlight glinting off polished floors, soft music filtering through tall halls, Adrian pointing out subtle brushstrokes, asking her opinion, noting her reactions with quiet precision. She caught herself travelling back

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to the night before in her mind; her cheeks rosy with a slight blush just thinking about it.

“You notice things most people miss,” he said at one point, gently brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. The touch stayed a beat longer than necessary, and a shiver ran through her, subtle but insistent. “It’s... rare.”

Olivia felt a blush creep up her neck. “I just... look,” she said.

He smiled, a slow, approving tilt of his lips. “No. You see.” The passion in his gaze made her pulse quicken, a delicious tension threading through her.

Later, as they walked along the cobbled streets after the gallery, Adrian suggested they stop at a small café he knew. The space was tucked away, quiet, almost secret—wooden tables nicked with age, a chalkboard menu written in imperfect letters, the smell of cinnamon lingering near the register. He ordered for them both without consulting her: espresso for him, tea for her, exactly as she liked it. Olivia hardly noticed at first, caught up in the easy intimacy of the day, the way he seemed to anticipate every comfort before she realized she needed it.

“You really think of everything,” she said softly, stirring her tea.

He shrugged, modest but proud. “I like seeing people happy. Simple things matter.”

Olivia felt a rush of excitement at the way he looked at her like he wanted to memorize everything about her. She caught herself smiling, almost forgetting to speak.

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That simple acknowledgment—the way he noticed the things she usually hid—made her feel central to the world in a way she hadn't realized she wanted.

When he finally drove her home, the sky was streaked with gold and rose, the streetlights flickering on early. They lingered in the car for a moment, the purr of the engine filling the silence comfortably.

"I've never felt this... certain so quickly," he said suddenly, voice low but steady, almost tremulous. "There's something about you, Olivia. I can't explain it. I just know."

She felt a rush of warmth, caught off guard by the intensity, the openness. A delicious excitement spread through her body in a way that made her aware of every inch of proximity between them. "I... I feel it too," she admitted, though she hadn't yet processed exactly what it was.

The moment lingered. Olivia left the car feeling light, giddy, aware that the day had shifted something inside her. It was all happening so fast, a reality that would normally terrify her, but this time was different. He was different. And for some reason, that terrified her more.

She felt herself being swept up in it all in a way her A-type personality rarely allowed. But what surprised her most was how much she loved letting it pull her along, her hands nowhere near the wheel with no say in where it was headed.



It was during a mid-week brunch that a small ripple passed through the day. Olivia was laughing with Evan;

he had stopped by to drop off a new sketching pad she'd requested when Adrian approached, impeccably timed as always.

She introduced them casually.

"This is Adrian," she said. "Adrian, this is Evan. He's been helping me with some of the collection prep."

Adrian's expression was neutral at first, but as his eyes lingered on Evan a moment longer than necessary, Olivia noticed the faint curve of a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Ah," he said smoothly, voice light. "So you're the one keeping her locked up in the archives so often." He nodded to Evan, then back to Olivia, the tone teasing but unreadable.

Evan chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it," he said, his voice a touch unsure.

Later, once they were alone, Adrian's tone softened, casual but intimate, as they strolled along the quiet streets after brunch.

"So..." he began, almost conversational, "this Evan... how long have you known him?"

"Years," Olivia said easily. "He's been at the gallery a long time."

"Single?" Adrian asked, a faint edge to his curiosity, as though testing something.

"Yes," she said, and noticed his eyes flick to hers for a beat longer.

He smiled then, slow and private, a little enigmatic. "Interesting," he said lightly, as if the word carried more than its surface meaning. "I like knowing who

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surrounds you... who shares your attention.”

Olivia felt a small discomfort, though she struggled to pinpoint its cause. The air had turned colder, or maybe she was simply more aware of her own skin.

“He’s a friend,” she said, almost laughing. “Platonic. You don’t need to worry.”

“No, of course not,” Adrian said smoothly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “But I do like knowing these things. Helps me... understand.” His smile softened, gentle, almost affectionate, but the flicker of intensity lingered in his eyes—a reminder that he noticed everything, even the subtleties she assumed were private.

Olivia caught herself smiling despite the odd flutter in her chest. “You really do pay attention, don’t you?”

“Only to the things that matter,” he said softly, and her breath hitched just slightly at the way his gaze caressed her features.

Olivia let herself relax. Feeling observed, appreciated, and entirely known, she realized how much she wanted more of this attention—more of him.

By the time Olivia reached her apartment that evening, the city had darkened into a velvet sweep of lights and distant traffic. She paused at the door, her fingers lingering on the handle, and exhaled slowly. The day had felt like a private world. A universe that existed only in the quiet attention of Adrian’s eyes, the easy rhythm of their conversation, the subtle brush of his hand at unexpected moments.

A gentle ache of wanting more lingered low,

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delicious and undeniable.

It wasn't just the attention, though that alone was intoxicating—it was the heat beneath it, the silent promise of something more, waiting for the next moment together.

Chapter Six

The Question

It was a Thursday evening when Adrian called to say he had a surprise for her. Olivia, finishing sketches in her small apartment, felt a thrill of anticipation at the thought of being pulled into one of his carefully curated experiences. The lamp beside her couch cast a honeyed circle of light, and the rest of the room fell away into quiet shadow; mugs in the sink, a cardigan on the chair, her life arranged in soft, imperfect piles.

When he arrived, the city was glowing with late winter light reflecting off wet sidewalks, the whirr of streetcars in the distance. Adrian looked perfectly composed in a dark coat, collar turned up against the cold, his cheeks faintly pink from the outside air.

He led her through narrow streets she had walked countless times, yet tonight they felt transformed—lights twinkling on boutique façades, the scent of roasted coffee and distant bakeries mingling in the cold air, the rhythm of the city settling into something cinematic. Olivia's boots clicked on the pavement in time with his, like she'd been folded into his pace.

"Where are we going?" she asked, her voice light, teasing, trying to sound less curious than she felt.

“You’ll see,” he said, eyes glinting with that same unreadable warmth that had drawn her in months ago.

They entered the building through a narrow industrial doorway, paint scuffed at the edges, the kind of entrance you’d miss if you didn’t know to look for it. Adrian guided her to a private lift. The elevator doors slid shut, and for a moment they stood close—closer than they needed to. Her shoulder brushed his. Adrian didn’t step back.

His hands followed the curve of her hips, subtle but deliberate, as if testing how much space she was willing to surrender. Olivia felt a fizzy rush of awareness as the elevator climbed, the metal walls humming around them, their shared breath warming the cold air between them. She didn’t move away either.

He leaned in and kissed her with such quiet passion she instantly knew it would replay in her mind for days to come.

They emerged into a small, private rooftop gallery he had arranged, a hidden gem tucked atop a converted warehouse downtown. The city stretched in all directions: skyscraper lights glowing faintly against the sky, the distant buzz of traffic, the soft rhythm of life far below. Inside, the space was intimate, white walls illuminated with warm, precise lighting, and curated paintings from a local exhibition that spoke of motion, colour and quiet chaos. A couple of low chairs sat near the far wall, and a small side table held two glasses and a bottle of something amber that caught the light.

Olivia’s breath caught. The gallery felt impossibly

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private, like a secret world they alone had been granted access to.

Adrian guided her gently from one piece to another, commenting softly on brushstrokes, textures, the tension in abstract lines. He never crowded her, never demanded attention.

“Do you see this one?” he asked, pointing to a canvas streaked with cobalt and crimson. “The way the colour shifts from one extreme to another like something being transformed against its will so delicately it was hardly noticed up close.”

Olivia studied it carefully. “Yes... but when you step back. It’s hard to imagine how you could miss it,” she said, surprised by the immediacy of the thought.

Adrian turned to her, not the painting. “Exactly,” he said softly, the sound of his voice low and intense. “You understand.”

Her pulse quickened as he followed her out to the rooftop terrace. The city sprawled endlessly below, lights twinkling like a sea of stars. The air up here was sharper, clean and cold, wind tugging at her hair.

Adrian turned to her, hands brushing lightly against hers, eyes never leaving hers.

“Olivia,” he began, voice trembling with a quiet intensity, “I’ve never felt this certain so quickly. I know it’s fast, but I can’t wait any longer. I need you to know... I want you. I want to share everything with you. You are it—the part of life I’ve always searched for.”

Her chest tightened with emotion. The winter chill, the buzz of life around them faded into a quiet bubble

of intensity.

Then he knelt—not dramatically, not for spectacle, but with a simple, deliberate reverence—and produced a ring.

“Olivia Hart,” he said, voice low and steady, “will you marry me?”

She stared down at a ring more gorgeous than any she could have ever pieced together in her mind. A perfect shimmer of a circle carrying the weight of a stone so flawless she questioned if it was all in her imagination. The way the light bounced off each perfectly cut side, forming a colourful prism that seemed to trail on for miles.

Part of her wondered if she was the type of woman to wear something so braggadocious. She quieted that part quickly by telling herself that maybe this ring was the start of a newer, better version of herself; one that was only possible with someone who supports you so wholly by your side.

Her hands flew to her mouth. Words faltered.

“Yes,” she whispered finally, tears welling in her eyes. “Yes, of course.”

He smiled, slipping the ring onto her finger, his eyes never leaving hers. Then, as if the moment were theirs alone, he pressed a soft, deliberate kiss to her lips; the same gentle intimacy that had started their connection.

Olivia’s heart raced, a dizzying mix of awe, relief, and the intoxicating thrill of being so chosen. In that instant, the city beneath them, the gallery around them, even the ordinary rhythm of her life—all of it seemed to

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align perfectly with him. And in that alignment, she felt herself surrender, completely and unreservedly, to the whirlwind that had captured her so swiftly.

Later, in the private elevator descending back to the street, he kissed her—slow, thorough and intentional. Olivia rose into it, her fingers threading behind his neck. When the doors opened into the quiet lobby, Adrian drew her quickly toward the car with a quiet laugh, as though the world shouldn't get too much of them at once.

By the time they reached her apartment door, his hand rested at her waist, warm and confident. She unlocked the door, they slipped inside together, then the door clicked shut, the rest of the night left unspoken.

Chapter Seven

The Plans

The engagement happened quickly, but the planning began even faster.

Adrian suggested a small wedding early on, framing it as intimacy rather than limitation. “Something quiet,” he said, standing in the kitchen of his loft with his sleeves rolled precisely to the same point on each forearm. The room smelled faintly of freshly ground coffee and the lemon cleaner he liked, the counters wiped so clean they reflected the under-cabinet lights. “Just the people who really know us.”

Olivia liked the idea at first. The thought of something understated felt romantic, intentional. She pictured soft candlelight and a room that didn’t echo; a ceremony where she could hear her own breath. “I don’t need a spectacle,” she said, and meant it.

“Neither do I,” Adrian replied. “And honestly, a lot of my family won’t be able to attend anyway. Distance, work, all of that.”

She nodded, imagining a balanced gathering—her people, his people, equal and easy—seated in warm coats hung on the backs of chairs, cheeks flushed from the cold.

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Maya was supportive when Olivia told her, hugging her tightly before stepping back to search her face. They were in Maya's apartment, where a wool throw was perpetually draped over the couch and there was always a half-burned candle on the coffee table. Outside, the streetlights blinked against misted windows. "I'm happy for you," Maya said. "It's just... fast."

"I know," Olivia said. Her fingers worried the edge of her sleeve, a small, unconscious habit. "But it feels right."

"I trust you," Maya replied, voice careful, as if laying something fragile down between them. "I just want to make sure you're not being swept along."

The comment stayed with Olivia longer than she expected. It followed her into the elevator at work, into the quiet of the collections wing where the air was controlled and steady. Swept along. The phrase made her think of water—how a gentle current could feel like comfort until you realized you'd drifted somewhere unfamiliar.

Wedding decisions piled up quickly. Venues, dates, guest lists. Adrian took the lead with calm efficiency, presenting options as if they were collaborative even when they arrived fully formed: tabs open on his laptop, a neat list of pros and cons, phone calls already placed. Olivia watched him move through it all with smooth confidence, the way he seemed to anticipate questions before they were asked.

When it came time to choose a dress, Olivia and Maya sat together in a small boutique tucked off a

quieter street. The shop was soft and hushed, the kind of place where the carpet muffled your steps and the mirrors were lit to flatter. There were pale gowns hanging like ghosts along the walls, and the air smelled faintly of fabric starch and perfume that had settled into the upholstery.

They flipped through lookbooks, circling styles that felt like her. Simple lines. Soft fabric. Something that didn't shout.

Adrian arrived midway through, smiling apologetically. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Olivia hesitated, the pen pausing above the glossy page. "Adrian! I... wasn't expecting you here. What a nice surprise." Her smile felt a fraction too tight, like she was holding it in place.

Maya noted the shift but stepped in to lighten the mood. She held up a photo from a bridal magazine. "This one feels very Olivia."

Adrian glanced at it, then shook his head gently. "It's beautiful," he said, "but it doesn't quite suit the setting I have in mind."

"The setting?" Maya asked, brows lifting.

"The venue," Adrian replied easily. "Trust me." He spoke as if the word were a bridge you simply stepped onto without needing to see the ground beneath it.

Olivia hesitated. "I like it, though."

He smiled, touching her arm lightly, two fingers at the soft inside of her elbow, a contact that read as affectionate and final at once. "I know you do. But you'll thank me when you see everything together."

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She nodded, unsure why it suddenly felt difficult to insist. Around them, a salesperson pretended not to listen, adjusting a hanger that didn't need adjusting.

Maya was less convinced.

"Olivia, are you sure?" she said. "You were practically glowing when you saw it. After all, you're the only one wearing it." She shot a look in Adrian's direction. More subtle than she wanted to make it, but not one that slipped past his detection.

Olivia nodded her head as if she were convincing herself. "No, no. I just got swept up in the excitement. Adrian's right. I want it to all fit together on our big day. We'll find something we all like."

Maya bit her tongue, a talent she found herself practising far too much lately, but not one that was getting any more enjoyable. Olivia disappeared back into the changeroom after Adrian said his goodbyes. The curtain swished closed, and Maya sat in the softened silence of the boutique, listening to the faint hum of a heater by the front window and wondering how knowing her place had gone from something that was second nature, to something she could not pin down.



The day of the wedding arrived quietly. The city wore that particular kind of cold that made your nose sting, the sky bright but thin, as if the colour had been diluted. Olivia took in the setting that had been born from Adrian's mind. He had planned everything down to the last candle and napkin fold, claiming he wanted to "take care of things so Olivia wouldn't stress." She

had laughed at his meticulousness, but even then, a small part of her had marvelled at the ease with which he seemed to orchestrate the world.

The space was beautiful in a controlled, curated way: warm light pooling on white linens, arrangements placed with measured symmetry, music low enough to feel like a private thought. Olivia stood at the edge of the room, her dress brushing her ankles, fingers clasped tight around the bouquet stems until the ribbon pressed into her skin. She scanned the chairs, taking in the unfamiliar faces filling the seats—many more than she'd expected. Adrian's family. His friends. People she'd heard about but never met. Their coats were dark, expensive-looking, hung neatly in a row; their laughter was low and assured.

"You said they couldn't come," she whispered, leaning toward Adrian when he stepped beside her, his suit immaculate, his expression calm as if nothing could ever catch him off guard.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he said. "They made it work."

The ceremony was beautiful. The vows sincere. To preserve the beauty of the day, Olivia told herself the imbalance didn't matter. What mattered was the way Adrian looked at her, steady and certain, as if everything had finally settled into place.

And when Olivia looked out at the crowd, Maya caught her eye from the third row and gave her a small, encouraging smile. As if by reflex, Olivia smiled back, grateful for something familiar in a room that suddenly

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felt more like his than theirs.

Later, as the music played and glasses clinked, she scanned the room and couldn't help but think about how few of her own people were there by comparison. She watched Adrian move through clusters of guests with effortless charm, accepting congratulations like something owed. She wondered when the plans had stopped feeling like hers. And why she hadn't said anything sooner.

Chapter Eight

Settling In

Days later, in the quiet of their apartment, the day settled into memory. Shoes were kicked aside near the entryway, damp from slush. Cards were stacked neatly on the counter, most of them signed with names Olivia was still learning, ink looping in unfamiliar handwriting. The air in the loft carried a faint scent of cedar from a candle Adrian liked, something “clean,” he always said, something that made the space feel finished.

For the first time since the ceremony ended, there was nothing left to organize. Nothing to decide. Just the soft hush of evening, the distant whoosh of a streetcar somewhere below, and the sense that something had been completed—and something else had quietly begun.

When Adrian insisted they move into his place, she wasn't sure at first. She tried to suggest they find somewhere new, somewhere that was a fresh canvas to build a new life. But Adrian confessed how much his place meant to him, and how he'd always dreamt to make a life there when he finally found the one. It was too sweet to turn down. Too earnest. Too perfectly phrased to argue with.

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Now, the apartment was theirs; a bright, airy space in a converted loft downtown. Sunlight slipped in through tall windows during the day and turned the concrete floor pale gold. At night, the city's lights smeared across the glass like watercolour. Her belongings, those that Adrian hadn't suggested were out of place in their new home, were still trickling in. Olivia found herself watching Adrian move through it, the quiet way he arranged furniture, the precise tilt of picture frames. There was something grounding in his presence, the sense that he had thought of everything.

"You've made this beautiful," she said, leaning against the kitchen counter as he unpacked a small box of their wedding mementoes. Her voice sounded softer in the open space, swallowed by the high ceiling.

Adrian looked up, a smile softening his sharp features. "Not as beautiful as you," he said, voice low. "But I like that you're happy here."

Olivia felt a warm flutter in her chest. It wasn't just the words, it was the way he noticed—the way he attended to the little details, as though the world revolved around keeping her comfortable. She wanted to believe that, and she did.

Yet, amid the calm, there were small shifts, almost imperceptible, but present. The first evening, Adrian had suggested she leave her phone on the kitchen counter while she sketched, "so you won't have any distractions." He said it like a gift. Olivia had laughed, amused by the way he found even the smallest ways to show he cared, and slid the device out of her bag

without thinking. It didn't feel intrusive. Something closer to protective.

Over the next days, routines settled in. Adrian had opinions about everything: how the apartment should be arranged, which errands could wait, even what she should wear to certain events. It landed as thoughtfulness, guidance, or love, never command. And Olivia, caught in the comfort of his attention, accepted it without hesitation.

Her art table, once tucked in a corner, became a small shrine of her own, filled with brushes and sketchbooks he had thoughtfully purchased. "For your creativity," he said one morning, gently placing a new set of pencils beside her. "Because you deserve space to create." The pencils were expensive, their wood smooth and pale, laid out like a promise.

It should have been purely kind, and it was. But Olivia noticed how every gift, every suggestion, every gesture of care seemed to pull the day into his orbit. She didn't mind. In fact, she liked it. Liked the ease of letting him think for her, liked the sense that someone had thought of everything.

Even Maya's visits became more measured. Adrian always greeted her warmly, offering tea, pulling out a chair, settling easily into the room. On the surface, nothing was amiss. And yet there was a subtle tension Olivia hadn't noticed before; a quiet undercurrent suggesting that Maya's world wasn't quite part of theirs.

One evening, as they sat around the kitchen table, Maya mentioned a recent date in passing. "Nice

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enough,” she said with a shrug. “Not a repeat, though.”

Adrian smiled faintly. “You always seem to have another one lined up,” he said lightly. “I admire the energy.”

The comment landed softly, disguised as observation, but Olivia saw the way Maya’s expression shifted—just for a moment—before she smoothed it away. “It’s not that dramatic,” Maya replied, her tone easy. “Just... dating.”

“Of course,” Adrian said, already turning back to Olivia. “Some people enjoy variety. Others prefer focus.”

The silence that followed was weighted. Maya said nothing more about the topic, choosing her next words carefully, steering the conversation elsewhere. Olivia felt the pause register in her chest, then dismissed it almost immediately. Adrian hadn’t meant anything by it. He was just making conversation. Maya was sensitive sometimes—she always had been.

Later, when Maya left, she hugged Olivia a little tighter than usual. “You look happy,” she said. “That’s what matters.”

Olivia nodded, relieved to accept the reassurance at face value.

In these quiet, shared moments, Olivia thought she had never felt so seen, so chosen. Yet somewhere, in the gentle patterns of Adrian’s attention, a small whisper of unease flickered at the edges of her mind. It was faint and easy to ignore, like a draft you tell yourself is just the building settling.

As the days unfolded, Adrian’s attentiveness

sharpened so subtly it could be mistaken for devotion. He began rearranging her brushes after she worked, claiming certain palettes looked better “when grouped,” and moved her sketchbooks into neat stacks because “it keeps you focused.” When she mentioned meeting Maya for coffee, he suggested a different day, saying the café was always too loud for talking. When she came out dressed for a gallery opening, he paused, fingertips grazing her waist as he murmured, “The black dress suits you more. And doesn’t put so much of you on display.” Olivia changed without argument.

And Olivia, swept up in it, fought hard not to question it all. She knew things would change when they got married. It wasn’t something to complain about. It was what she had always hoped for. The shedding of ‘her’ simply made room for ‘them.’

Chapter Nine

Invisible Fences

The first weeks of married life had largely been the peace Olivia had always hoped for. Adrian's attention was constant but never overwhelming; it was easy to forget that the small gestures of care—the way he prepared her morning tea just so, the way he remembered which art supplies she liked, the way he always seemed to anticipate her mood—were beginning to shape her day, her choices, her rhythms.

On some mornings, the light through the loft windows was so clean it felt like it had been polished. On others, the sky pressed close and grey, and the whole city seemed to move slower beneath a wet sheen of slush and traffic. Inside, everything stayed the same temperature. The air stayed the same dryness. The order stayed intact.

One Sunday morning, Olivia noticed her phone buzzing insistently on the kitchen counter. Adrian had suggested she leave it there while she sketched, “so you can pour yourself into your work and shut out the noise.” At the time, she'd laughed it off, amused by the way he found even the smallest ways to show he cared.

Now, frowning slightly, she picked it up. The screen

was bright against the muted kitchen, a cluster of notifications stacked like little demands. A notification sat at the top—something about location sharing, a prompt asking her to confirm settings. She clicked through, curiosity sharpening into confusion as a menu opened: “Share My Location.”

Her name, her settings. And beneath it, Adrian’s.

She stared at the screen for a beat longer than made sense, thumb hovering, as if hesitating could change what it already said.

“Adrian?” she called.

He appeared in the doorway a moment later, relaxed, unhurried, as if he’d been standing just out of view the whole time. “Yeah?”

She held up the phone. “What’s this?”

He glanced at the screen and smiled faintly, as though she’d pointed out a forgotten receipt. “Oh. That.”

“That?” she echoed, the word catching. “Why is my location being shared with you?”

He stepped closer, calm as ever. The space between them closed with the easy confidence of someone who assumed the outcome. “It’s not about tracking you,” he said easily. “It’s just a safety thing. In case something happens and I can’t reach you.”

“You didn’t mention it,” she said. Her fingers tightened around the phone, knuckles whitening slightly.

“I didn’t think it needed a big conversation,” he replied. “We’re married now. We share things. It’s just

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peace of mind.”

The words were reasonable. Familiar. He spoke the way he always did when explaining something practical, something he'd already decided was sensible. Behind him, the living room looked staged; throw pillows squared, the coffee table bare except for a book placed at a perfect angle.

“You know how unpredictable the city can be,” he added. “I just want to know you're okay. That's all.”

Olivia hesitated. A small, uncomfortable question surfaced—why it was already set up, why she didn't remember agreeing—but she pushed it aside almost as quickly as it appeared. She didn't want to turn something benign into a conflict. She didn't want to seem suspicious when he was being attentive. “Okay,” she said finally. “I just—next time, tell me.”

“Of course,” Adrian said, already reaching for her, smoothing the moment back into place. His thumb brushed the side of her wrist, warm and steady, like a seal pressed into wax.

She nodded, letting the reassurance settle. Told herself it made sense. Told herself this was what partnership looked like; looking out for each other, even when it felt unnecessary.

And yet, as she set her phone back on the counter and returned to her sketchbook, the question she hadn't asked hovered quietly in the back of her mind.

She chose not to examine it. Not yet.

He began suggesting subtle adjustments to her routines. “You could work from home more,” he offered

one morning, voice mild as he adjusted the collar of his shirt in the hall mirror. "It would give you uninterrupted time to draw. Those coworkers are so distracting, and you need space to create."

She agreed easily. Who wouldn't want that? And yet, she began to notice fewer trips downtown, fewer lunches with colleagues, fewer casual chats in the gallery halls. Each time she hesitated, Adrian's tone softened, reassuring: "I just want the best for you, Olivia. I don't want anything or anyone to pull you away from your life here."

Visits from Maya, once casual and frequent, became more calculated. Adrian always welcomed her warmly, but Olivia noticed his subtle shifts: a raised brow here, a quiet comment there. "Maya's energy can be... exhausting," he remarked once as they prepared dinner, the knife in his hand slicing vegetables into uniform pieces.

But the comments were constant. "You're in different places in your life," Adrian said one night after a visit. "She's single and frankly, she lives like it. Like a restless teen looking in all the wrong places for what we already have."

Olivia brushed it off. He was only looking out for her. He was right. Maya could be intense, and she did drain her sometimes. She could easily recall a handful of times when Maya guilt tripped her into staying out dancing far later than she wanted to.

Even when Adrian seemed distant, withdrawing when she expressed minor opinions or made small

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decisions, the wealth of his attention always returned—genuine warmth, unexpected gifts, words of praise. It was intoxicating, and Olivia didn't question the rhythm. She was too tired to question it. Too drained by the thought of Adrian's sharp turn of mood to make the conversation worth it. Between the silent treatment when she put up a fuss, and the praise she received staying home with him, it did at times make her feel like a dog that was being housetrained.

And in the quiet moments between suggestions and reassurances, there were the other kinds of attention—Adrian pulling her into his lap while she sketched, kissing the side of her neck as she protested half-heartedly, laughing when she wriggled but didn't truly try to leave.

"Stay," he'd murmur against her skin, voice low and amused, as if the idea of her moving even two inches away was absurd.

She did.

Once, when she reached for her phone mid-sentence, he caught her wrist and nuzzled her cheek in a gesture both playful and unmistakably possessive. "Eyes on me," he teased, and she felt a small, delighted flutter that drowned out the tiny voice noting how easily she obeyed.

As the weeks turned to months, Olivia realized something both thrilling and disquieting: she had allowed someone else's preferences to shape her days so completely that she barely remembered what her routines had been before.

And yet, she told herself, it was love. That had to be enough.

Chapter Ten

Small Cracks

Olivia had started the week with good intentions: coffee with Evan on Wednesday, a quick visit from Maya on Thursday. It felt manageable, balanced. Something close to the life she'd had before everything began to orbit more carefully.

She wrote the plan down in her head the way she used to catalogue objects at work—date, time, place—because naming it made it feel real. Wednesday: the café near the gallery that smelled like espresso and toasted bagels, the one with the chipped mugs and the worn wooden bench by the window. Thursday: Maya at the door with her messy hair and her bright scarf, the kind of visit that used to happen without scheduling at all.

By Wednesday morning, Adrian suggested a change.

“You could stay in today,” he said mildly as they finished breakfast. The kitchen was warm and sunlit, the light making steam rise off the mug in soft curls. Adrian’s voice matched the calm of the room, as if his words were just another part of the routine. “It might be easier than running all the way downtown. You’ve

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had a long week already and no one could blame you for being tired.”

Olivia hesitated only a moment before nodding. It didn't feel like a request so much as a sensible adjustment. The thought of avoiding the cold and the crowded streetcar was tempting. She texted Evan while Adrian rinsed his mug, the water running steadily, controlled.

Olivia: Can we reschedule? Things got a little busy today.

Evan replied almost immediately, the familiarity of his quick response tugging at her chest in a way she didn't name.

Evan: Of course. But I'm holding you to it next time.

She smiled, though the exchange left a faint tightness in her chest. Evan had been a constant at the gallery; through delayed shipments, underfunded installs, and long evenings when everything seemed to go wrong at once. Their plans had always been loose, flexible. Cancelling had never felt like a pattern before. But this was the fourth time in a few weeks.

Thursday came with rain and Maya at the door, shaking water from her jacket and grinning as if nothing had changed. The smell of wet wool filled the entryway, and droplets dotted the mat by the door. Adrian greeted her warmly, offering coffee, settling easily into the room. If there was a difference, it was subtle—small pauses before he spoke, a watchfulness Olivia didn't quite know how to name.

Maya chatted about work, about a new place she

wanted Olivia to try with her, about nothing at all. Adrian listened politely, occasionally interjecting with mild observations like how late it was getting, how crowded the neighbourhood had been lately, how nice it was to have quiet evenings at home.

None of it was overt. None of it sounded unreasonable.

Still, Olivia found herself shifting, aware of an invisible balance she was trying to maintain. Maya noticed, too. Her eyes flicked between them once or twice, curiosity sharpening before she masked it with a smile.

When Maya reached over to squeeze Olivia's shoulder in farewell, Adrian stepped just a little close—close enough that Maya's hand retreated first. Olivia felt the faintest brush of Adrian's hand at the small of her back, the pressure a fraction firmer than necessary, steadying her in place as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Later, when Maya left, Olivia collapsed on the couch, sketchbook in hand. The loft felt larger without another voice in it, the corners too quiet. Her drawings had started reflecting the quiet tension she didn't want to name: narrow doorways, confined spaces, figures hovering over one another. She pushed the images away quickly, telling herself they were just exercises, nothing more.

The rest of the evening passed gently. Adrian praised her latest work, ordered dinner from her favourite place without asking, pressed a kiss to her

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temple as they ate. His affection felt steady, grounding. It was easy—too easy—to let the earlier discomfort fade.

At one point, when she mentioned seeing Evan “next week, maybe,” Adrian’s thumb traced the line of her jaw, tilting her face up, not hard, but with an unyielding precision that allowed no ambiguity. “If you’re sure he doesn’t drain you,” he murmured, the softness of the words undercut by the control in the gesture. “You get so tired after those long days.”

Olivia nodded, agreeing to abandon her plans in a way that felt like it was her idea all along. He released her only then, smoothing her hair as though he’d done her a kindness.

But as the months went on, Olivia noticed the small absences stacking up. Evan’s messages slowed. Maya’s visits became shorter, pencilled in rather than assumed. Each shift was minor, explainable on its own. Together, they formed a pattern she didn’t quite recognize yet.

And Adrian, attentive as ever, never once raised his voice or issued a demand. He simply learned which touch or tone would make her agree. Sometimes a hand on her waist guiding her toward the couch, sometimes a gentle correction framed as concern, always with the smug certainty of someone who believed he knew what was best for her.

After all, this was what the age-old task of balancing two lives into one looked like, wasn’t it? This was what marriage demanded. Right?

Chapter Eleven

The Rift

Maya brought it up first.

They were sitting across from each other at a small café, steam fogging the windows, the city moving past in soft blurs outside. The place had mismatched chairs and a chalkboard menu that always seemed to smudge no matter how often it was rewritten. A wet line of umbrellas leaned in the corner by the door, and every time someone came in, a gust of cold air swept through, carrying the sharp scent of snow and street salt before the heat reclaimed it.

It had taken three reschedules to make this coffee happen, and Maya didn't miss the irony. She wrapped her hands around her mug as if anchoring herself, shoulders tight beneath her coat.

"You've been hard to pin down lately," she said lightly, stirring her drink. The spoon clicked against ceramic, a bright, repetitive sound in the low murmur of conversation around them.

Olivia smiled, already bracing herself. She kept her posture neat, controlled, as if sitting properly could keep the moment from tipping. "I'm married now. That tends to rearrange things."

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“Of course,” Maya said quickly. “I just mean, you used to text me back in emojis and chaos. Now I get... paragraphs.” She smiled to soften it, but her eyes stayed searching, scanning Olivia’s face like she might find the answer tucked in a blink or a twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Olivia laughed. “Is that really a problem?”

“No,” Maya said. “I’m worried you’re under someone’s thumb.”

The words landed in the space between them like a dropped utensil—small, sharp, impossible to ignore. Olivia’s fingers tightened around her mug.

They talked about safer things after that: work, mutual acquaintances, a show Maya had started watching. Still, Olivia felt the weight of what hadn’t been said settle between them. It was there in every pause, every time Maya opened her mouth and chose a different sentence instead.

When they stood to leave, Maya hesitated, then hugged her longer than usual. Her coat smelled like cold air and shampoo, familiar and oddly comforting.

“Just don’t disappear on me,” she said quietly.

“I won’t,” Olivia replied, meaning it. She meant it the way people mean promises they think they still have control over.

Evan was less careful.

He caught her at the gallery a few days later, cornering her near the storage room while they waited for a crate to be logged. The hallway was narrow, lit by harsh fluorescents that made everyone look slightly

tired. The air held that familiar blend of wood, dust and cold metal—shelves, crates, the steady hum of environmental controls. A clipboard hung crookedly on a hook like someone had abandoned it mid-thought.

His tone was casual, but his brow was furrowed in that familiar way she'd seen a hundred times during stressful installs.

"Okay," he said, "real talk. Are you okay?"

She blinked. "Yes."

"That was too fast," he said. "You used to complain about people managing your time. Now I can't get lunch with you without a calendar invite."

Olivia crossed her arms. The gesture felt defensive the moment she did it, like a door slamming shut. "Adrian isn't managing me."

"I didn't say he was," Evan replied. "I just said something's changed."

"Things are supposed to change," she said sharply. "That's what happens when you build a life with someone."

Evan sighed, running a hand through his hair. He looked tired in a way that wasn't just about work. "I know. I just..." He stopped, choosing his words. "I miss you."

The simplicity of it caught her off guard. It wasn't accusation. It wasn't drama. It was the kind of honest that made your chest ache.

"I'm still here," she said, softer now.

"I know," he said. "I just don't want to become optional."

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That night, Olivia repeated their words to herself as she lay beside Adrian, his arm draped firmly across her waist. The sheets were cool against her legs, the room dim except for the thin wash of city light through the curtains. Adrian's breathing was steady, assured, as if he belonged there more than she did.

She told herself they were projecting, that they didn't understand what it was like to be this loved, this chosen.

Adrian noticed her silence.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said quickly. "Just tired."

He kissed her shoulder. "You do too much. People pull at you more than they should."

The words should have felt comforting. Instead, something in her chest tightened, the way a muscle clenches before a flinch.

When she reached for her phone on the bedside table, Adrian's hand closed over her wrist. Not hard, but with a suddenness that startled her. "Leave it," he whispered, voice even. "They can wait."

He let go a beat later, as if nothing had happened, and Olivia pretended it hadn't made her pulse spike. The moment sat in her mind like a flicker of a light turning on and off—brief, undeniable, hard to explain. That night, she laid her head down replaying that blip of a moment over and over. She closed her eyes and tried to stop the questions in her own mind. They wouldn't let up. Despite her best efforts, she went to sleep angry.

A few days later, she caught a glimpse of herself in

the hallway mirror; phone in hand, hesitating before replying to a message from Maya. Not because she didn't want to talk, but because she was calculating how long it would take, whether Adrian would notice, whether it would shift the evening's careful calm.

The realization landed softly, but it landed.

She sent the text anyway.

The reply came quickly, relief bleeding through the words. Olivia stared at the screen, her reflection staring back at her from the darkened glass.

For the first time, she wondered—quietly, privately—when she had started asking permission to simply exist.

Chapter Twelve

Worlds Collide

The event was billed as a discussion, not a celebration: a public panel on contemporary collecting, followed by a walkthrough of the new exhibition. Folding chairs filled the gallery's central space, a small crowd gathering with programs tucked under their arms, coats draped over backs. The air carried the faint smell of damp wool and cheap white wine waiting somewhere behind a curtain. In the corners, staff adjusted spotlights by fractions, the way they always did; making sure every surface looked intentional, every shadow earned.

It was the kind of evening Olivia usually enjoyed—structured, purposeful, familiar. The gallery felt like itself again: polished concrete underfoot, floating white walls, lights so precise they made people look like they were being photographed without consent.

For the first time in weeks, she felt steady.

Maya arrived early, slipping into the seat beside her with a smile that softened when she saw Olivia. She had on a long coat and a scarf patterned with small bright shapes that made the grey room feel warmer. "I'm glad you came," she said quietly. "I was worried you'd been swallowed by... domestic bliss," she added, almost

sarcastically.

Olivia laughed, the sound quiet in her throat. “Not swallowed. Just... adjusting.”

Maya studied her for a beat longer than necessary, then nodded. “You look good.”

Evan appeared moments later, hovering at the aisle until Olivia caught his eye. He leaned in. “Didn’t know if this was still my territory,” he said lightly, but there was something careful in the way he said it, like he was testing the ground.

“Always,” Olivia replied, meaning it more than she realized.

They settled into the easy shorthand of shared history, whispering observations about the panelists, exchanging glances when someone said something particularly self-important. Olivia felt herself relax into the rhythm of it; listening, reacting, existing without monitoring herself. Her shoulders lowered. Her breath felt like it belonged to her again.

Adrian arrived late. He didn’t apologize. He simply appeared at her side as if he’d been there all along, his coat perfectly pressed, his hair neat, his presence cutting through the room. His hand settled at the back of her chair, fingers resting possessively against her shoulder. The contact was light but unmistakable—an anchor, a claim.

His eyes moved immediately to Evan, then to Maya.

“Adrian,” Olivia said, too brightly. “Look who made it.” She gestured toward Maya and Evan, smiling as if she could smooth everything into normal with tone alone.

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“What a pleasant surprise,” Adrian said, extending his hand to Evan. His grip was firm—too firm.

Evan blinked, surprised, then recovered. “Good to see you.”

Adrian turned to Maya, his smile sharp at the edges. “Wasn’t sure you’d show up today,” he said. “Impressive, given your schedule.”

Maya frowned. “My schedule?”

“You’re always busy,” he replied lightly. “I never know which version of you we’re getting.”

There it was. Not quite an insult. Not quite a joke. The kind of comment that could be denied if challenged, but still left a mark.

Maya held his gaze for a moment. “I didn’t realize I’d been assigned versions.”

Adrian smiled, as though amused. “We all play roles.”

The panel began, but Olivia found it hard to focus. The speaker’s voice droned on about provenance and investment value while Olivia’s attention kept snagging on small things: the way Adrian’s hand didn’t leave her shoulder, the way Evan’s jaw tightened, the way Maya’s smile became practiced.

When Olivia leaned toward Evan to whisper a comment, Adrian’s hand pressed more firmly into her shoulder, as if to remind her where she was supposed to face. When Maya spoke, Adrian interrupted with small corrections, reframing her points, redirecting the conversation back toward himself. None of it was loud. None of it was a scene. It was control delivered in a suit

and a calm voice.

During the exhibition walkthrough, Evan gestured toward a piece near the far wall. “This one came in during that mess last spring,” he said to Olivia. “Remember? Three crates mislabelled.”

Adrian stepped between them before Olivia could answer. “I’m sure Olivia remembers,” he said. “She doesn’t need reminders from everyone who’s passed through her life.”

Evan stiffened. “I wasn’t—”

“It’s fine,” Adrian continued smoothly. “Some relationships don’t age the way people expect.”

Maya stared at him. “What does that mean?”

Adrian tilted his head. “It means people change. Priorities shift. Some adapt better than others.”

Evan’s face shifted, sitting somewhere between hurt and bewilderment. “Not all change is for the better, apparently.”

Adrian took a step forward. “And some change is long overdue.”

The silence that followed was unmistakable. It spread like ink in water. Nearby, someone cleared their throat. Someone else laughed too loudly at a different conversation, trying to fill the gap.

Olivia felt it then—the sharp awareness that this wasn’t subtle anymore. That whatever Adrian was doing, it wasn’t just for her. It was being witnessed.

Maya said nothing more. Evan stepped back, folding his arms, his expression carefully neutral. The rest of the walkthrough passed in strained fragments,

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conversation splintering, momentum lost. Olivia watched the art on the walls become backdrop to a tension she couldn't ignore.

The drive home was quiet. Outside the car windows, the city slid by in streaks of light and wet pavement. Adrian's hands were steady on the wheel. Olivia's sat clenched in her lap, nails pressing half-moons into her palms.

Once inside, Adrian didn't wait long.

"I don't like the way they talk to you," he said, removing his coat with precise movements, hanging it in its place as if order could swallow the night.

"They weren't doing anything," Olivia replied.

"I watched," he said. "Evan acts like he has a claim on you. And Maya, she's constantly testing boundaries."

"She's my best friend."

"That doesn't excuse it."

Olivia crossed her arms. "You embarrassed them."

Adrian looked at her then—truly looked. "I protected you."

When she tried to move past him, his hand closed around her arm, harder than before. Not enough to bruise. Enough to stop her. The grip felt like a door locking.

"Don't walk away," he said quietly. "Not when I'm explaining something important."

He released her after a moment, smoothing her sleeve as if correcting a wrinkle. "You don't see it yet," he added. "But I do. And it's my job to keep you safe from people who don't know when to step back."

Later, lying awake beside him, Olivia replayed the evening. Maya's expression. Evan's silence. The way the room had shifted when Adrian spoke.

She told herself they'd misunderstood him. That they were sensitive. That she was overthinking.

Still, when her phone buzzed with a message from Maya—that wasn't okay—Olivia stared at the screen longer than she meant to.

And for the first time, she didn't know what to say back.

Chapter Thirteen

Winter Light

The morning after the opening felt unnaturally quiet. Snow had fallen overnight, muting the city, smoothing everything into a clean white hush. The light coming through the loft windows was pale and diffuse, as if the world outside had been wrapped in cotton. The street sounds were softer, tires moving through slush with a gentle hiss. Even the building seemed calmer, as though the storm had pressed a hand over everything and told it to stay still.

Olivia stood at the kitchen counter with her coffee growing cold, replaying the evening in fragments: the sharp shift in the room when Adrian spoke, Evan's sudden stillness, the way Maya had gone quiet and stayed that way. The memory moved in loops, like she couldn't find an exit.

Adrian moved behind her without a sound.

"You didn't sleep much," he said.

She glanced over her shoulder. "I guess not."

"I'm sorry," he said, and the word caught her off guard.

She turned to face him fully. He looked composed, almost gentle, his voice lower than usual. "I shouldn't

have let things escalate the way they did last night. I know it put you in an uncomfortable position.”

Relief loosened something in her chest. The apology felt like a blanket being laid over exposed nerves. “It was... tense.”

“I know,” he said. “And I hate that I contributed to that. The last thing I want is to embarrass you.”

He pulled his hand out from behind his back, revealing an obnoxiously large bouquet of flowers. They were ones she’d seen before. A mix of garden roses, peonies and eucalyptus from the bodega down the street that was conveniently open early enough for him to start these days off on the right foot again. The same bundle he’d used to apologize for many of his outbursts in the past.

“I picked this up this morning.”

She smiled despite herself, the way someone smiles when they want to believe something is simple. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to,” he replied. “You deserve to feel taken care of.”

They sat together after that, the apartment wrapped in morning light. Adrian made breakfast, asked her what she needed for the day, listened as though every answer mattered. The smell of eggs and toast filled the loft, warm and comforting. For a while, the previous night felt distant, smoothed over by his attentiveness.

For a few days, he stayed like this. Lighter. Softer. Almost familiar in the way that had first pulled her in. He didn’t mention Evan again. He didn’t make a

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comment when Maya's name appeared on Olivia's screen. He even said, once, like it cost him nothing, "If you want to see her this week, go. I don't want you feeling boxed in."

And Olivia tried to believe it. She let herself unclench. She answered Maya's texts without rehearsing them first. She moved through the apartment like the air belonged to her again.

But the softness didn't erase anything. It just covered it.

On the fourth morning, her phone lit up beside her coffee. A message from Evan.

Evan: Hey. I'm around the gallery Thursday if you want to swing by. No pressure. Just miss your face.

She hesitated only a second before typing back.

Olivia: Maybe. I'll let you know.

Across the counter, Adrian's eyes lifted. Not sharply. Just enough.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Evan," she said. "He's... checking in."

A pause.

"I thought we'd agreed to give things space," Adrian said mildly.

"We didn't agree to anything," she replied.

He nodded slowly, as though filing something away.

Later, as the morning light thinned and the apartment settled into its usual hush, Adrian spoke again, his tone deliberate.

"I don't want you to think I was angry," he said. "I was worried."

“About what?” she asked.

“The way Evan speaks to you,” Adrian said. “The familiarity. He’s a colleague. He doesn’t need to be demanding all your attention, cracking jokes, standing so close to you. And Maya—how she watches us. Questions things.”

“Maya doesn’t watch us,” Olivia said.

“She does,” he replied calmly. “You might not notice, but I do.”

That unsettled her more than if he’d raised his voice. The certainty of it. The implication that his perception mattered more than hers.

“They’re my friends,” Olivia said. “They care about me.”

“I know,” Adrian said. “That’s why this is complicated.”

He took her hand. “They don’t see what we’re building. They still think they get the same access to you they always had.”

“They weren’t trying to interfere.”

“Intent doesn’t change impact,” he said, the phrase delivered gently, as if it were a truth he wished she already understood.

She withdrew her hand. “So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I didn’t feel respected,” he said quietly. “Not by Evan. Not by Maya.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?” he asked. “Evan talks like he knows you better than I do. Maya encourages you to question things instead of trusting us.”

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“Us,” Olivia repeated.

“Yes,” Adrian said. “Your marriage.”

The word settled heavily between them, heavier than it should have been for something that was supposed to feel like home.

That afternoon, Maya texted.

Maya: You’ve been quiet this week. Everything okay?

Olivia stared at the screen longer than necessary.

She typed, deleted, typed again.

Olivia: Yeah. Just decompressing. It’s been a lot lately.

A moment later:

Maya: I know it has. Just... if you ever want to talk about the other night, I’m here.

There was no accusation in it. No pressure. Just steadiness.

Olivia’s throat tightened.

Olivia: It wasn’t a big deal. Things just got tense.

The lie slid into place more easily than she expected, like it had been waiting for her.

That evening, a courier arrived with flowers—too many for the vase she owned. Adrian waved it off when she mentioned it.

“I wanted to keep the week light,” he said. “You seemed unsettled after everything.”

After dinner, Evan called.

Once. Then again.

Olivia watched the screen glow on the coffee table before answering the second time, her voice small in the

loft's open air.

"Hey," he said. "I wasn't sure if you'd answer."

"I've just been busy," she said.

A pause.

"I keep replaying that night," Evan admitted. "And the last few months, honestly. I don't want to push, but... are you okay?"

She closed her eyes briefly.

"I'm fine," she said. "It just got blown out of proportion."

"Did it?" he asked gently.

The question lodged somewhere behind her ribs.

"Yes," she said anyway.

After she hung up, Adrian appeared in the doorway of the bedroom.

"That was Evan?"

"Yes."

His expression tightened, though his voice stayed measured. "I don't think one-on-one calls are appropriate anymore."

Her breath caught. "What?"

"I'm not saying never," he added smoothly. "Just boundaries. For our sake."

"For your sake," she said before she could stop herself.

"I thought you wanted peace," he replied.

"I do."

"Then trust me when I tell you who threatens it."

That night, Olivia lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The city's light shifted faintly across it, as if even the

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darkness outside had movement. She thought about the softness of the past few days—how easy it had been to believe the worst had passed—and how quickly it had shifted the moment Evan’s name re-entered the room.

Adrian turned toward her.

“Can I say something without you thinking I’m trying to control anything?” he asked.

Her chest tightened. “Okay.”

“I worry that you’re stretched too thin,” he said. “Between work, people pulling at you, expectations that don’t belong to you.”

“I love my job,” she said.

“I know,” he replied. “That’s why this isn’t about quitting. Just space.”

“From what?”

“From noise,” he said. “From everyone else’s ideas of who you should be.”

He took her hand again. “What if you took some time off? Just for a while. No pressure.”

“I can’t just—”

“You can,” he said. “We’re good financially. I’ve got us.”

The ease of it unsettled her. The way he said it, like an answer to a question she hadn’t asked.

“You’ve spent so long meeting expectations,” he continued. “Maybe it’s time to choose yourself.”

The words sounded generous. Loving.

Still, beneath them, Olivia felt something shift—not sharp, not loud—just the quiet click of something closing.

She didn’t answer.

Adrian squeezed her hand once and turned onto his side. "Think about it," he said. "But we shouldn't waste any more precious time."

She lay awake long after his breathing steadied, trying to understand why being cared for had begun to feel so much like being guided somewhere she hadn't agreed to go. At the same time, half of her saw his point. Maybe what she was feeling was a symptom of trying to be too many things to too many people at once. Maybe some focus was just what she needed to set this new chapter of her life off in the right direction. Her marriage deserved at least that.

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Chapter Fourteen

Time Off

Olivia told herself it was temporary.

She said it out loud to Maya first, then to Evan, then finally to herself as if repetition could anchor the idea. Just a few months. A pause. Time to breathe and recalibrate. The phrase sounded tidy, like a label neatly printed and affixed to a box.

The gallery director looked surprised but not shocked. They sat in her small office with its overstuffed chairs and walls crowded by framed exhibition posters from years past. A plant drooped in the corner, half-forgotten. “You’ve been here for years, and we know burnout happens,” she said kindly. “We’ll hold your position if we can.”

Olivia nodded, throat tight. She didn’t say how quickly the decision had crystallized once she’d voiced it. How easy it had felt once someone else told her she didn’t have to stay.

When she told Adrian, he reacted exactly the way she hoped he would. He didn’t celebrate. He didn’t push. He just opened his arms and let her sink into him.

“I’m proud of you,” he said into her hair. “That took courage. And you desperately need this.”

The days that followed softened. Mornings without alarms. Coffee lingering in mugs instead of travel cups. The loft held a steady warmth. The windows collected soft winter light. Adrian checked in often; not hovering, just present. Asking how she felt. What she wanted to do with her time.

At first, the attention felt like a gift. Like being wrapped in something gentle after years of bracing against fluorescent lights and deadlines.

Maya didn't see it that way.

They met for lunch midweek, Maya tense, fingers worrying the edge of her napkin. The restaurant was bright and busy, the kind of place that tried to feel rustic with exposed brick and hanging plants, but the noise was constant—cutlery, conversation, the espresso machine hissing like steam under pressure.

"You love that job," Maya said. "You fought for it."

"I was tired," Olivia replied. "Adrian just helped me see that."

Maya's eyes flicked up. "Helped you see it?"

Olivia bristled. "Why does everyone think he's behind everything I do?"

"Because every time something changes," Maya said carefully, "it seems to make your world smaller."

"That's not fair."

"I'm not attacking him," Maya said. "I'm worried about you."

"You don't trust my judgment anymore," Olivia said, standing.

"That's not what I said."

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“It feels like it.”

She left before Maya could respond, heart pounding, shame and anger tangling in her chest. Outside, the cold slapped her cheeks awake. Her breath came out in sharp clouds as she walked too fast down the sidewalk, trying to outrun the feeling.

Evan tried next.

After walking into work, half expecting her to be there, Evan realized this break was real. He'd have to call Olivia if he wanted to talk to her. A feeling much more formal than their friendship usually called for.

“I just can't believe you left,” he said, incredulous. “Just like that?”

“I needed space.”

“For what?”

She hesitated. “For myself.”

There was a pause. “Is this what you wanted?”

“Yes,” she said, too quickly.

Another pause. “Do you want to grab coffee? Just us?”

She thought of Adrian's voice. Boundaries.

“I don't think that's appropriate anymore,” she said, hating the way the words sounded in her mouth.

Silence.

“Wow,” Evan said finally. “I don't know what's happened here, Olivia, but I hope you're taking care of yourself.”

When she told Adrian about the conversation, his mouth tightened.

“I was afraid of this,” he said. “They're having

trouble respecting your choices.”

“They’re just worried.”

“Worry can still be calculated,” Adrian said gently. “Especially when it comes from people who don’t want to let you grow.”

The framing slid into place. It did what it always did: made her doubts feel like disloyalty.

Later, when she went to shower, she realized her phone was gone from the bathroom counter. The tiled room felt suddenly too bright, too echoing. By the time she returned to the bedroom, it was sitting neatly beside Adrian on the bed. He didn’t mention touching it, and she didn’t ask, the silence between them suddenly delicate, like glass held by someone else’s hands.

That evening, Olivia sat on the couch with her sketchbook open but untouched. Instead of drawing, she traced the margins of the page again and again, darkening the edges until the centre felt exposed and unfinished. She closed the book with a snap, unsettled by the sense that she no longer knew what belonged in the middle.

Adrian sat beside her, glancing at the page before she closed it.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to anyone anymore,” he said. “This time is yours.”

That night, when she rolled away from him in bed, he slid closer, kissing the back of her shoulder.

“You’ve been distant,” he muttered, with no accusation in the tone, only expectation. When she didn’t respond right away, his hand guided her hips

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toward him, firm but not rough, and she let him. Consent came not from want but from the fear of what refusing might invite: disappointment, tension, withdrawal. When he finished, he kissed her temple and whispered, “See? We’re fine.”

The reassurance felt strangely like permission, but not identical.

Chapter Fifteen

Narrowing Circles

The first week after leaving the gallery passed in a blur of slow mornings and listening to Adrian take conference calls in the next room while she tried to make sense of the sudden stillness. The apartment felt different; more hers in theory, though every glance at the meticulously arranged furniture reminded her that someone else had decided how this space should feel.

Adrian watched her with a light attentiveness, not hovering but present enough that every decision she made—when to wake, when to eat, when to step outside—felt noted, catalogued.

“You should stay in today,” he suggested one morning, as she hesitated at the door. “The roads are slick, and I wouldn’t be able to focus with you out there. You know I worry. I’ll handle the errands.”

It wasn’t a demand. It was concern. But it nudged her into staying home again.

By midweek, Olivia realized she hadn’t touched her phone to call the gallery once. The thought passed like a shadow: I’m losing track of my old life.

When she finally asked about paying her credit card, Adrian offered instead: “You shouldn’t worry

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about money right now. I've got all the bills covered. Focus on yourself."

The generosity felt comforting. It felt safe. But underneath it, a subtle tether tightened; every dollar he spent, every arrangement he controlled, made her less of her own woman.

Friday afternoon, a thought of the gallery drifted through her mind. She lingered over her phone, then grabbed her coat and stepped outside, deciding to walk to the corner café she and Evan used to visit on Wednesday mornings. Just to be out of the apartment for a while. Just to feel a little air that belonged to her.

The café smelled of espresso and baked bread, familiar and grounding. The windows were streaked with salt from winter storms, and the radiator near the seating area clanked softly like an old animal shifting in its sleep. She ordered a latte, found a corner by the window, and let herself watch the streets, letting the vibration of city life fill her chest. People hurried past with scarves pulled high, shoulders hunched. For a moment, she felt like one of them again—just a person moving through her own day.

When she returned home, Adrian was in the living room, glancing up from his book.

"Out for a walk?" he asked. His voice was calm, but the slight tightening around his eyes made her stomach clench.

"Yes," she said. "Just for a bit."

Adrian tilted his head, a faint edge of curiosity in his gaze. "Isn't that the café you and Evan would go to? Did

you see him there?”

Olivia froze, a flicker of panic rising in her chest. How would he know where she went? She hadn't mentioned it, hadn't planned to. And yet here he was, aware of her small act of independence as if he had followed her steps. Then in a flash, she recalled how she'd agreed to share her location with him “for safety,” and how quickly she'd pushed the discomfort away to avoid rocking the boat.

“No,” she said quickly. “I was alone.”

“Good,” he said, and smiled softly, putting the book aside. “And you'd never dare to lie to me.” He continued.

She smiled reassuringly, but the unspoken weight of his attention pressed down on her like an almost invisible boundary, reminding her that her world was being watched, measured, contained.

That evening, she picked up her sketchbook, but the pages resisted her. Lines twisted into shapes she didn't recognize. Figures seemed to fold into themselves. Every stroke felt second-guessed, restrained.

Adrian noticed immediately. “You've been drawing less,” he observed quietly as he settled beside her. “Do you want me to help you find your rhythm again?”

She shook her head. “I can manage.”

When she closed the sketchbook, he took it gently from her hands and flipped through the pages without asking, pausing on certain drawings as if searching for meaning that belonged to him. “Your mind runs too loud,” he said. “That's why you need stillness. I'm helping you find it.”

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The phrasing landed like ownership.

A few days later, an email from Maya suggested lunch. Olivia typed a hesitant, “Maybe,” then paused. Across the room, Adrian was reading a book, but she caught the corner of his eye lingering on her. His calm attention made her fingers freeze over the keyboard.

“Is there a reason you’re hesitating?” he asked lightly, voice steady.

“I... I just thought Maya wanted to see me,” Olivia admitted.

Adrian tilted his head. “She’s worried about you, yes. But what does that matter? She clearly doesn’t understand what’s best for you right now.”

The question froze her. She clicked “delete,” leaving the email unsent.

That night, when she crawled into bed, Adrian pulled her close without asking. His grip was firm, his breath warm against her neck. “You’re safest with me,” he whispered, as if it were a comfort rather than a verdict.

Olivia nodded, though the word safest twisted strangely in her chest like safety and captivity had become indistinguishable.

For the first time, she understood that the peace he offered required a narrowing of choices, of friendships, of self. And peace that required surrender was not peace, but compliance.

Chapter Sixteen

Shadows in the Light

Olivia had almost forgotten her birthday this year. The week had passed in a quiet blur, and the date arrived without fanfare, like a page turning when you weren't looking. The loft felt too calm, too contained, as if even time had been arranged to Adrian's preferences.

Maya had insisted on organizing a small gathering at a rooftop bar with string lights twinkling over the city. Just a handful of close friends looking out over a whole world below them.

"You deserve a little celebration," Maya said, looping her arm through Olivia's as they arrived. The elevator ride up had been crowded, the air scented with perfume and cold air trapped in coats. When the doors opened, warm light spilled over them. "Tonight is for you. Cake, drinks and bad dancing if you feel like it."

Olivia smiled, grateful. "Thanks, Maya."

Adrian followed behind, polished and calm. His coat looked expensive and immaculate, as if it never encountered weather. His hand brushed hers as they stepped onto the terrace. But the ease in his smile didn't reach his eyes.

The night began gently. Familiar faces. Laughter

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carried on the cold air. A heater glowed red in the corner, radiating warmth that drew people into loose clusters. Someone ordered a round of drinks Olivia hadn't asked for but accepted anyway. The city below was a spill of traffic, like thin ribbons moving steadily through the streets.

Maya hugged her first—long, tight, the way she always had. “I’m really glad you’re here,” she said quietly.

Evan followed, pulling Olivia into a quick, affectionate embrace. “Happy birthday,” he said. “I wasn’t sure you’d show.”

“I almost didn’t,” Olivia admitted. The words came out like a confession.

Adrian saw the end of it.

His posture changed instantly. He crossed the space between them in sharp strides, his voice cutting through the noise. “That’s enough.”

Evan froze. “What?”

Adrian stepped between them, close enough that Olivia felt the air shift. “You don’t touch my wife like that.”

“It was a hug,” Evan said, incredulous. “For her birthday.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what you’re doing,” Adrian snapped. Heads turned. Conversation stalled. A laugh died mid-syllable. Someone lowered their glass slowly as if unsure what to do with their hands.

Maya moved forward. “Adrian—”

“No,” he said, not looking at her. “This isn’t your place.”

Evan stared at Olivia, searching her face. “Is this

really happening?”

“Adrian, please,” Olivia said, her voice thin. The wind tugged at her hair, cold against her flushed cheeks. “You’re making a scene.”

“I’m setting a boundary,” Adrian shot back. “One you’ve ignored for too long.”

Evan stepped away slowly, hands raised. “I’m done,” he said. “I’m not going to stand here and be treated like this.”

He turned to Olivia one last time. “I care about you. But this—” He glanced at Adrian. “This isn’t safe. For you either.”

Then he left, weaving through the crowd without another word.

The space he left behind felt hollowed out. The heater’s hum seemed suddenly loud. The sound of ice cubes in a glass was deafening. Someone else checked their phone, pretending to be absorbed by it.

No one quite knew how to recover. The night staggered forward.

Later, as Maya and Olivia stood near the railing, trying to reclaim something normal, Maya lifted her phone. “Let’s get a picture,” she said. “Just us.”

Olivia hesitated.

Evan’s absence loomed. When another friend offered to take the photo, Evan’s empty place seemed louder than his presence ever had been.

“It’s fine,” Olivia said quickly. “Just—make sure Adrian’s okay with it.”

Maya lowered the phone. “Okay with what?”

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“With... who’s in the photos,” Olivia said, forcing a smile. “He likes to look at them later. Just to see what everyone was up to.”

Maya stared at her. “He goes through your photos?”

“It’s not like that,” Olivia said immediately. “It’s not a big deal. He just—likes to know.” Her words tumbled too fast, as if speed could make them harmless.

Maya’s concern sharpened, unmistakable now. “Olivia.”

“It’s really nothing,” Olivia insisted. “He says he gets FOMO.” She forced a smile, hoping it would be convincing enough.

The photo was taken, but Maya didn’t smile.

By the time the night wound down, Adrian was quiet. Watchful. He stayed close as they moved toward the elevator, his hand firm at Olivia’s back, guiding her as if she might drift away.

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper,” he said once they were inside. The elevator was mirrored; Olivia could see their reflections—Adrian composed, Olivia pale.

She exhaled, relief washing over her. “You scared everyone.”

“I know,” he said. “And I hate that I did that to you. You didn’t deserve it.”

Back home, he didn’t stop apologizing. He pulled a gift she hadn’t known about from the top shelf of the closet—jewellery she’d once admired in passing. He ordered late-night food from her favourite place. He held her, told her how much he loved her, how the idea of losing her made him reckless.

“I just get afraid,” he said softly. “Afraid someone will take you from me. You’re just so amazing. They’d be crazy not to try.”

She wanted the night to end differently. Wanted to hold onto the part of it that still felt like celebration.

By the time she forgave him, it felt easier than staying upset.

That night, Olivia woke suddenly. The room was dark except for the thin orange light from the street filtering through the curtains. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust—long enough to register the sound of breathing that wasn’t hers.

Adrian sat in the corner chair, elbows on his knees, watching her. Not looming, not tense—just sitting there, gaze steady.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was soft, hoarse from sleep.

He blinked, as if surprised by the question. “You looked restless,” he said quietly. “I couldn’t sleep. I was making sure you were still here. Still all mine.”

His tone was gentle, undeniably sincere. But something in the way he said it made the back of her neck tighten. She nodded, unsure if a response was required. Adrian stood, kissed her forehead, and climbed back into bed as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

Olivia lay awake long after his breathing softened into sleep. The words “all mine” reverberated off the sides of her mind. She was nothing more than a possession to him. A wild horse he was eager to subdue. And she felt it

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working.

She didn't know what unsettled her more—the moment itself, or how easily he'd made it sound reasonable.

Chapter Seventeen

A Crack in the Quiet

It happened on an ordinary night, which somehow made it worse.

Olivia was washing brushes in the kitchen sink, sleeves pushed up, hair loose around her face. The loft buzzed with that careful silence they'd fallen into lately; too civilized to be hostile, too strained to be comfortable. The overhead light made the water in the sink glitter in small hard flashes. A dish towel lay folded too neatly beside the soap dispenser, and the counters were clear in the way Adrian liked; no clutter, no evidence of messy living.

Adrian stood at the counter behind her, scrolling through his phone. The faint tapping of his thumb was the only sound besides the running water.

Maya's name lit up Olivia's phone on the table. A photo from earlier that afternoon; coffee cups, rain-streaked patio, a crooked heart drawn in foam. No caption. No context needed.

Adrian's gaze flicked to the screen. "You saw her," he said quietly.

Olivia hesitated. The brush in her hand dripped a thin line of water down into the sink. "Yeah. Just for an

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hour.”

He nodded, but the nod wasn't acceptance—it was tallying. “You're getting pretty comfortable lying to me. I can't have that.”

“I didn't think I needed permission,” she said, still facing the sink. Her voice came out steadier than she felt.

Something in the air shifted. Small, but decisive. Like a lock turning.

“It's not about permission,” he said. “It's about honesty.”

Olivia turned off the water, drying her hands on a cloth. The fabric scratched slightly against her skin. “I am being honest. You just don't like the answers.”

Adrian set his phone down with care. “Maya doesn't respect us. Neither does Evan. They keep pulling you away.”

“They're my friends.” Olivia's voice stayed steady. “They're allowed to exist.”

Adrian moved closer. The space behind her felt suddenly too narrow. “I forbid you from seeing them. They make you think you're better off without me.”

Olivia met his eyes. “Maybe I am.”

The words landed like a spark in dry grass. His eyes roared with anger. He stiffened. His fists clenched.

His voice grew louder. “So, you think you could do better? A washed-up, jobless dreamer? Maybe Evan would take you off my hands. If he could afford you.”

She felt like she'd been stabbed in the gut. She stood there, shocked at how such a small amount of resistance

could make his whole disguise crumble. But there was another feeling after the pain subsided—anger. Anger at herself for ending up here. Anger at him for dragging her by the hand in a way that no one else could even notice. It all swelled within her, and she hurled back at him the worst way she knew how.

“I was so much more before you. And I’ll be better once I’m out of here, away from you once and for all.”

Something flickered across Adrian’s face—shock, humiliation, fury—too quick to name. He closed the distance in two steps, crowding her, his voice trembling with a rage disguised as reason.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered. “You’re never going anywhere.”

“I’m tired,” Olivia said. “I’m tired of being someone you manage.”

Adrian’s hand shot out, grabbing her wrist; firm, insistent. “I’m not managing you,” he said. “I’m...”

“Let go! You’re hurting me.”

He didn’t.

The shift was sudden and clean; rage without hesitation.

Adrian’s other hand rose, gripping the back of Olivia’s neck. Suddenly, a shove not born of panic or flinch or misjudgment. It was force chosen in the moment, an act of control sharpened into intent.

He slammed her head against the counter; once, brutal and exact.

The crack of impact cut through the kitchen, followed by the scrape of shattered glass as she collapsed

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to the floor.

Silence.

Adrian stared, chest heaving, as if the room had failed to follow his commands. The loft's quiet returned too quickly, as if it were trying to erase what had just happened.

"You did this," he said.

She didn't move.

Blood trickled toward the broken glass, collecting at the edges before soaking into the grout.

Adrian didn't kneel or touch her. He watched; still, composed, the fury clean now that it had purpose.

His voice, when it came, wasn't horrified. It was almost clinical.

"I told you," he whispered. "I won't let anyone take you from me."

The loft held its breath. A distant elevator dinged in the hallway, light and ordinary.

Through a dizzying haze, Olivia heard Adrian's muffled voice telling her to get up. The life she would never live flashed before her eyes, and in one final act of defiance, she slipped away instead.

Then there was nothing.

Chapter Eighteen

Starting Over

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Chapter Nineteen

The Dream Job

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The Dream Job

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The Dream Job

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Chapter Twenty

The Big Move

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Chapter Twenty-One

A Better Love

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Becoming a Mom

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Watching Them Grow

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Watching Them Grow

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Watching Them Grow

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Mother of the Bride

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Mother of the Bride

HE TOOK MY BREATH AWAY

Mother of the Bride

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Mother of the Bride

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Chapter Twenty-Five

The Golden Years

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Epilogue

Write a New Ending

In most novels, this is where you'd find a neat little wrap-up telling you all about our heroine and how her life carried on after the final chapter; a tidy conclusion that leaves you with that bit of closure you're craving. But you won't find that here. Because at Interval House, Canada's first shelter for abused women and their children, we know that the stories of too many Canadian women end the way Olivia's did; with fear, control and violence. But we've also helped thousands of women rewrite their story and start an amazing new chapter. Our hope is that if you're experiencing abuse in your relationship, this book can help you turn the page too.

Each story is different, but they all share similarities. A consuming whirlwind of romance that begins like a fairy tale, but slowly, methodically, is rewritten into a jarring reality. A hand too tight on a wrist, a seemingly well-meaning suggestion, a slow and disguised thread of control that builds over time. Before they know it, they're trapped in a cage that was slowly built around them. And it could happen to anyone because the danger is far too often wrapped in a cloak of charm, at

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least at the beginning.

If you recognized Olivia's fear, her bargaining, her shrinking world—this book has found the right hands. This epilogue will offer help on how to prepare yourself to leave an abusive relationship and start a new chapter. It's far from easy, but with the right support, it can be done.

Before we get into the signs and advice, it's important to know that if you are ever in immediate danger, call 911 right away. If you're unable to speak, just dialing 911 and staying on the line will automatically dispatch police to your location.

How to Name It

Intimate partner violence doesn't always look like bruises, yelling and broken things. It can often be coercion, financial control, isolation, jealousy disguised as love, or surveillance framed as concern. In Canada, almost half of women and girls will experience some form of it in their lifetime. Many never use the words abuse or violence, even in their own heads.

You do not have to be certain to seek safety and counselling. Doubt counts. Unease counts. The sense that your world has gotten smaller counts.

If they dictate who you see, how long you stay, what you wear, who you text—that is control.

If apologies come packaged with blame like “you made me do this,” that is manipulation.

If the good times feel like they're designed to make you forget your pain, and the bad times feel like your fault, that is the cycle of abuse working as intended.

If you see any of these signs, trust your instincts. Abuse almost always escalates. But we're here to walk alongside you to a safer, brighter future.

How to Prepare to Leave (Even If You Aren't Leaving Yet)

Safety planning is not disloyalty. It is life-saving logistics.

Here are some practical things to start doing today. Memorize or write down emergency contact numbers and store them somewhere your partner won't look. Photocopy IDs, health cards, passports, immigration documents, and financial records, and keep copies of these documents somewhere safe. Create a small "go kit" with essentials and place it with someone safe or somewhere your partner will not check. Cover your tracks, use your browser's private or incognito mode when doing research so your partner can not track your web browsing history. Change passwords they have access to or can guess—control of your inbox is control of your life.

Tell one person that you really trust the truth, even if only once. It can be very helpful to have someone keeping an eye on the situation, discreetly.

Leaving can be the most dangerous period of time.

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It is often not the end of danger; rather, it can be the start of an escalation. This isn't said to scare you. It's to ensure you are prepared with the right tools to take the path many women have walked before you. You can do this and we are here to help.

If You Need Help in Toronto (And Beyond)

Interval House in Toronto has been doing this work longer than anyone in the country. We offer emergency shelter, crisis support, safety planning, legal advocacy, housing services, employment assistance and so much more. Our Virtual Counselling Services reduce barriers and provide free, accessible counselling to survivors across Ontario. You do not need proof or a bruise to access our services. You only need to be ready to leave.

Start by reaching out to us. We've hidden the crisis line in this book so it's not easily detected by anyone who might be watching. The page numbers repeat the hotline every 10 pages. To make it simple, we'll include them here as well, written in a way that someone skimming these pages won't notice. Reach out at one eight eight eight two nine three five five one six. Memorize this number and if you write it down, ensure it's kept somewhere where no one will find it.

If You're Not Ready Yet

Not being ready to end your relationship yet is very common. Women return on average four to seven times before they leave for good. This is not due to weakness—it can be survival, financial pressure, children, immigration status, hope, shame, love, habit.

But as hard as it is, leaving is a must; for your safety, for the safety of your family members, and for your well-being. Violence and abuse almost never dissipate on their own—they only intensify, sometimes rapidly and out of nowhere. The sooner you reach out for help, the sooner you can turn the page.

If You Think It Might Be Too Late

It is never too late. There are many confidential resources you can contact to help support your safe exit, including local police, emergency shelter crisis lines, victim services, healthcare professionals, and community organizations.

Ask a social worker. Ask a nurse. Ask a friend. That's all it takes to begin planning your escape.

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Before You Close the Book

Someone else you know—a cousin, a co-worker, the friend who cancels plans more often than she used to—may be living in isolation and fear. If you're not experiencing abuse yourself, this book can help you learn how to spot the signs in the relationships of those you love. This epilogue can guide you to the ways to best support them. This book is a perfect tool to pass on to anyone you suspect might need it. Stories don't rescue people, but sometimes they open a door that wasn't visible until someone else pointed at it. If you suspect someone might need that door, leave this book on a table, in their bag, or in their hands. Remember to be discreet for their safety.

Together, we can ensure that no one else's story will have to be cut short at the hands of their partner.

About the Author

Jennifer Lisa is a fictional author, created in homage to the thousands of Canadian women whose lives and experiences inspired this novel.

Her name is drawn from two of the most common first names of women who lost their lives to intimate partner violence. It stands not for one story, but for many. Stories that are often carried in silence and rarely told on their own terms.

This book was written to reflect the realities those women shared: how abuse so often begins not with violence, but with romance; how control can masquerade as care; how isolation is built quietly, piece by piece; and how leaving is rarely a single moment, but a process shaped by fear, love, logistics, and hope.

While Olivia's story is fictional, the patterns within it are real. They echo the experiences of women across Canada who have navigated coercion, surveillance, financial control, and escalating abuse—often while appearing, from the outside, to be in loving relationships.

Jennifer Lisa exists so those stories are no longer anonymous. So they are not reduced to statistics. So they are recognized as human, complex, and worthy of being seen.

This book is for the women who lived it, the women who are still experiencing it, and the women who may recognize themselves in these pages before they have the words to express why.

Their courage is the true authorship behind this story.



Toronto, ON, Canada

This book is a work dedicated to the resilience, courage, and lived experiences of survivors of Intimate Partner Violence. Names, identifying details, and certain events have been changed, condensed, or combined to protect privacy. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, is coincidental unless otherwise stated with permission.

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First edition: March 2026

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