

WHEN LOVE HAPPENS

A Romance Novelette



AMY SPARKS

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Chapter 1

OLIVIA

Mount Olympus was packed with customers even though the night had barely begun. There was a small part of me that would rather go back to jail rather than endure the torture that this night was about to bring.

Dan looked right at home with his leather jacket and bright smile. His dark hair fell in curls around his high cheekbones and his blue eyes shone with glee as he surveyed the characters in the bar. Olympus—as it was often called by the locals—played host to all kinds, the most notable of the bunch being those seeking to drown their sorrows in alcohol, followed by those trying to self-medicate after a hard day's work..

The air was stale with the heavy stench of perspiration mixed with booze. I wrinkled my nose as I walked past a table where a middle-aged man laughed at no one in particular, as he downed yet another glass of beer. My senses were keen like a predator's, even though the music that thudded through the speakers tried to dull them.

The fluorescent bulbs hanging in various corners of the dimly lit room flickered with a certain harmony, creating sinister shadows that danced along the walls of the bar as if they held the secret of every soul that had ever set foot in the building.

The transition to normalcy after serving a sentence, no matter how brief the time, is never really discussed. It had been almost a month since I left life behind bars and the outside world was as unwelcoming as I left it, if not harsher.

Dan enthusiastically waved at me, beckoning me to a polished counter where a bartender was serving drinks. My blonde hair fell in waves down my back as I did sexy stroll across the floor, and I knew that anyone who smelled my alluring perfume would be right to assume that I was here for a good time.

Dan's girlfriend had dressed me in sluttiest dress she could find. It hugged every one of my firm curves. However, It would only take a split second to look past the facade and slutty dress to see that I was an emotional wreck. I know the tension in my body was etched on my face like graffiti. I wasn't a fan of places like this and Dan knew it, but he was convinced all the same that this was where we needed to be. ,

"You look like you're going to snap if someone looks at you the wrong way," Dan said as we both took our seats on the stools next to the bar. "Relax."

Brands and bottles lined the mirrored bar shelves behind and the smiling bald bartender poured drinks with the expertise of a performer familiar with every curve and dip of a liquor bottle. Some customers hovered longer than they should, sharing a lingering handshake as he passed them his creations; feeling compelled to tip him a little more.

"This is my relaxed face," I stated with a shrug as I turned away.

"Right," Dan drawled. I could hear the heavy sarcasm in the tone of his voice. "It doesn't matter though. We're here to have fun, you should be more excited, you finally got a job after weeks of searching."

"As a nanny," I hissed at him. "I have a Master's Degree in Accounting and the best job you can find me is as a fucking maid."

"The family that owns the house is loaded. Trust me, the pay is good plus you get the option to live with them. A few months from now you'll be able to get your own place and save up a little money for your dad's treatment."

I quickly shoved every thought of my dad's sickness into a dark corner of my mind. I'd only upset myself by dwelling on the cost because in a way I was responsible for what happened to him.

"It's not like I have a choice," I scoffed as I watched him order another round from the bartender. "No company wants to hire an ex-con."

"There's no room for moping tonight, Olivia. There's only room for shots," he said, passing me an ounce of glowing liquor.

A few shots later, we stumbled out of the bar, laughing at something Dan said.

"Move, bitch," A man yelled and pushed Dan and I aside. He strode past us, oblivious to my glare burning holes into his back. Something was clutched in his hands, and when Dan started patting himself down, I quickly realized what had happened.

"Where's my phone?" Dan asked, just as I yelled "Stop, thief!" at the retreating figure.

A string of swear words flew from his lips and he took off instantly. He ran as if he had the hounds of hell snapping at his heels, and I chased after him with all the strength my slim body could muster.

My boots slammed against the tarred road and every jolt sent through my body propelled me to go faster. Adrenaline pumped through me, making my heart pound furiously and my reflexes even sharper.

He turned a sharp corner, stumbling for a split second before finding his footing and dashing off again. That split second was all I needed though. I flung myself through the air and slammed myself against his body, the momentum caused us both to tumble onto the ground. I pinned him beneath me before he could make sense of his surroundings.

“Get off me, you dumb—” A wad of spit flew, propelled by his panicked defiance, and hit me right in the face. My hand balled into a fist and connected with his nose, before I could even tell myself it was a bad idea.

“Ugh!” he yelled as his face contorted in pain. He cupped his bleeding nose muttering strings of incoherent curses, while I dug into his pockets and snatched the phone.

The adrenaline flowing through my veins slowly subsided, and so did my bravado. I was eager to get back to Dan and into his car and drive off before the man I assaulted pulled himself together and came seeking revenge.

I was so wrapped up in picturing all the terrible things that could happen if Dan and I didn’t leave immediately that I didn’t notice the car coming at me. All I saw was a blur of light speeding my way with sinister intent. I went rigid with terror, mesmerized by the headlights of the approaching vehicle, shouting at myself to “Move!”

“Maybe you deserve this,” a quiet voice whispered in the back of my head. My panic was replaced by an even greater emotion, a fear so potent that I could taste it on my tongue. A flashback to three years ago brought back the searing sensation of getting knocked around inside the twisted piece of metal that was my car after the crash.

“Olivia!” Dan’s voice reverberated in my skull as something threw me back several feet in the air. Instead of colliding with the cold ground and breaking a few bones from the impact of steel ramming my frail bones, warmth radiated from beneath the soft rock I laid on—No. It was a person. Someone had pushed me out of harm’s way, and cushioned my impact with their body.

“Are you alright?” I heard a voice ask, but it sounded so far away. My mind was crumbling, I could feel it falling apart, it was a strange feeling but I didn’t

fight it; my memories played right in front of my eyes like I had a front row ticket to relive the worst day of my life.

I could hear more voices now but they sounded far away. All I could see was blood, the sound of my screams filled my ears but yet my mouth didn't move. Images of the past flashed in my head and I could smell the sharp metallic odor of blood in the air even though I wasn't currently injured. The scent was one that had plagued me for weeks after the incident. I could almost feel blood dripping from my fingers as I remembered how I tried to stop the flow gushing from the man's body while I screamed for help.

"The paramedics are on their way," a voice called out from behind Dan.

"Olivia?" Dan's calm voice called out to me breaking through my memories and for a fleeting second more images flashed through my brain so quickly I couldn't tell which were real and which were churning through my mind, and threatening to detach me from reality.

"Olivia!" This time a firm grip on my shoulder dispelled the gory images that plagued my mind and reality slowly colored my vision again.

"Is she all right? I think I pushed her too hard?" I heard the man tell Dan.

"No, no. You saved her life. I'm not sure what the situation would be right now if you had not stepped in to save the day."

So he was the stranger that saved me? I opened my mouth to say thank you, but when the stranger turned to face me, I felt my heart drop into my gut and my ability to communicate flow somewhere else.

"Shit, I've got to go. Is your friend going to be okay?" he asked, staring at me but without recognition.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did for my friend," Dan said as he turned to leave.

“Don’t mention it,” He chuckled and waved at me as he left. I didn’t know what to believe. Did the man I killed in a car crash three years ago just save my life or was this his exact doppelganger?

Chapter 2

NICHOLAS

The music boomed around me and the bar's chatter seemed to get louder as the minutes passed or maybe I was getting drunk. I paused and stared at the drink in my hand. What the fuck did Adrian give me?

I had asked for the lightest beverage at the bar, something to help calm my nerves without getting me tipsy. I had another argument with my dad after working at the hospital and came out to the bar with my friend to chill out and clear my head. After a few minutes lost in the crowd, I quickly realized I was out of my element.

It was a busy night at Mount Olympus but I had never seen it this. Maybe it was because I never stuck around long enough to see it crammed with bodies. I liked my quiet, seemingly boring life, but I knew I had to talk to someone tonight.

Since the death of my twin brother, I had no interest in anything. The only thing I cared about was raising his daughter, but my dad was a harsh critic of my parenting skills. Dad insisted that I move back from L.A so he could be closer to her, but I quickly regretted my decision.

“Hello, pretty ladies,” Adrian said approaching two female patrons in a booth ahead of us. His messy blonde hair was styled in his usual surfer boy look.

“Reyna, you look gorgeous as ever.” He settled on one of the chairs at their table and waved to me. “Nic, come meet these beautiful ladies.”

“Thanks. I’m good,” I replied taking a sip of my drink.

Adrian has been my best friend ever since I was a kid. Even after I moved to L.A to continue my practice as a medical doctor, our friendship flourished. He was a serial womanizer and I on the other hand didn't enjoy meeting new people. I had only my passion for medicine and I was content.

Adrian returned to our table in the company of two ladies.

"Hey Nic," one of the ladies said as she slid into the spot next to Adrian. "Hope you're having fun?" she asked with a wide smile. She was a pretty black woman with curly hair.

"Yeah. I'm having a blast," I muttered, not even bothering to attempt to speak over the music.

After a few minutes of watching Adrian flirt, I decided I was better off alone and excused myself. When I walked out of the bar, it felt like every sound around me ceased at once. The bar music faded away and all I could hear was the sound of my heart thumping in my ears as I dashed forward into the cold night to throw myself in front of a speeding vehicle.

The chill in the air was a sharp contrast to the warm atmosphere of the bar and the wind felt like a slap to the face, but I didn't think about the pain as I threw myself at the woman that stood frozen in the middle of the road. A car was racing towards her at full speed.

With no intention of stopping.

Like a silent movie character moving in slow motion, I landed on top of her and shielded her with my body as the car sped by.

Seconds later, sound slowly returned to my ears as someone dashed over to us. From the look in his eyes I could tell he cared for her a lot; he was probably her boyfriend.

I don't know why I saved her, maybe it was because my oath as a medical doctor is to protect lives, or maybe it was the look of terror on her beautiful face as she stood frozen like a deer in the headlights; or maybe it was the thought that my brother died in a car accident and there was nothing I could do to save him; the thought that haunted me for the last three years.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, my dad was calling. I wanted to check if she was alright, but didn't want to upset her boyfriend by fawning over her. She appeared to be in shock but I knew she wasn't hurt so I called paramedics to help. I left a few minutes later even though I really wanted to stay and assist the girl till the paramedics arrived.

When I arrived home, I went to check on Debbie, my twin brother's daughter, now my daughter. She was fast asleep so I quietly left her room. Her mother died in child birth and she lost her father at four. She experienced so many tragedies at such a young age that I promised myself I was going to do everything in my power to make sure the rest of her life would be filled with happiness.

A few minutes after I went into my room, I heard a knock on the door and my father stepped in even before I could say a word, my younger sister was right behind him. The tension that bloomed in the room was so thick that I was certain that I could cut through it with a scalpel.

“You want to explain why you didn't bother returning my calls?”

I shrugged. There was no point. My words would be twisted and the argument escalated. I wasn't in the mood for a family fight.

“Don't act that way with me when you're under my roof,” he said.

“You made me come back to this town, Debbie and I were quite content in L.A.,” I snapped back. I just couldn't help myself.

“Come on, Dad,” Emily said. She could feel the tension growing, “there’s no need for a scene, this isn’t why we’re here.”

Emily made eye contact with me. It was the look that tells me to behave. Emily had long, dark hair, like my father while I got my blonde hair from my mum.

“You’ve always disappointed me. You’re not half the man that your dead brother was....”

My fists clenched but I bit my tongue, I had made the mistake of speaking previously, but I wasn’t going to do it again.

“I told you that we are hosting a fundraising event next month but instead of helping out, you were out having fun with friends! You keep insisting that Debbie is safe with you, but if this is the kind of reckless behavior you exhibit, then I’m scared for her.”

“I can’t help with your event. I have patients to care for at the hospital and Debbie also needs my full attention,” I muttered stiffly. I did not want to be a part of an event that had always been Richard’s responsibility. It felt like my father wanted me to replace my brother.

“I’m interviewing a nanny tomorrow then; you no longer have an excuse.”

Shit. I no longer had an excuse. Was it so wrong to just want to treasure memories of my brother, undisturbed by my presence?

He stalked out of my room, but Emily lingered a bit longer.

“It sucks to watch both of you get at it over and over again. You might be fine with it b–but,” She paused, her voice was cracking as she spoke.

“I don’t know how long I can keep pretending to be fine with all of this.”

She had tears in her eyes I reached out for a hug but she pulled away. She paused at the door and stared at me.

“Do you know I was the only one at the murder trial? Dad was so distraught he acted like nothing was happening and you refused to leave L.A. You didn’t even come back for his funeral. I should be more upset, but I’m not.” She took a deep breath.

“Richard was my brother too but I’m slowly making peace with the fact that he’s gone. It’s not easy but it’s all we can do. Everything must change at some point, Nicky. You can’t fight it forever.”

She walked out of the room, leaving me to my thoughts.

I knew she was right, but I didn’t know how to begin to make peace.

Chapter 3

OLIVIA

The chandelier that hung above us seemed to absorb and disperse light in the same breath. Taking in the glow from the sun and bouncing diamonds off the giant bookshelves. A cold breeze whiffed through the window at the far corner of the room, somehow managing to lift my hair.

“I expect you’ll be able to take care of her needs, I think you’re the best person for the job,” Mr. Hale said from behind his laptop. Between us was a large mahogany table with some files neatly arranged on the left, while others were scattered like playing cards on the right.

Last evening’s events were buried in a dark corner of my mind just like every other bad memory. I must have imagined the resemblance between both my victim and my rescuer. Both incidents occurred in darkness and I barely got a proper look at the both of them. The scare triggered everything but I was fine now, everything was behind me and I was ready to forget the accident from three years ago as well as the man from last night.

“Thank you so much—” He cut me off before I could finish.

“Yeah, hold on a sec,” he said as he raised his phone to his cheek to answer a call.

“Yes?” He paused to allow the person on the second end to speak. “I thought I told you to handle that already?”

Another pause.

“Have you informed Emily? How about you learn to go through the proper channels next time?” He said with a sharp tone and ended the call.

“Fucking Idiot,” he muttered to himself as he scrolled furiously through his phone. “This wouldn’t be happening if Richard was here.”

His dark black hair was gelled back; not a single hair out of place. He wore an Armani suit. From how well it hugged his lean body it was obvious that the suit was specifically tailored for him. His icy blue eyes seemed to shoot daggers at his screen. I sat in silence, observing him work.

“Emily,” he said as he placed his phone against his cheek. “Meet me at the office. Jason, the fumbling idiot is screwing things up as usual.” He paused to listen. “Yeah, Nicholas has everything under control here, whatever you said to him last night made him a bit more committed to helping. I mean, I expected better though. I’ll see you in ten minutes.”

He was on his feet already, barely giving me a second glance as he searched the contents on his table till he found his keys hidden between two files.

“One of the maids will show you to your room. If you don’t want to move in immediately, that is fine, just know it is available for you whenever you want. I have to get to work, whatever you think I should know that’s urgent, send it via email.”

He tossed me his card and pressed a button on his table. I heard a little ding outside the office. There was a timid knock at the door. I quickly rose to my feet. A maid gently pushed open the door.

“Take her to the room beside Debbie’s.”

She motioned for me to follow her. The mansion was Elysian and that is a mild way to describe its magnificence. From its enormous size to the pieces of art that adorned it, everything was carefully chosen and arranged to create one beautiful structure.

From above, beautiful chandeliers glistened with bright lights that reflected off the white walls. Exquisite pieces of artwork, from sculptures to drawings stood on both ends of the spiral staircase that led further into the mansion this family called home.

An aquarium spanned the length of one wall in the living room, or at least I assumed it was the living room. Little fishes scattered away in the glass prism stationed in the wall. I couldn't even imagine what kind of rich family owned an indoor aquarium this big. The room spoke of affluence and wealth and though I never considered myself someone covetous, or believed in imagining myself as something above my station, but for the briefest second, I wished for a moment that it was mine.

Every object, stick of furniture could pay a year's worth of the salary I earned as an accountant. Giant cream sofas rested on the dark marble floor, each angled to face the massive television that embodied half of the wall in. From the corner of my eye I spotted the dining and its umbrella of crystals that hung freely and tinkled softly against each other whenever a maid walked past.

All thoughts about the mansion quickly melted into oblivion when I saw him...

It was hard to not notice him. He had an aura that was impossible to miss. From the way he dressed to the way he walked, to his deep baritone and his deep husky spurts of laughter, he looked every bit like someone that belongs in a place like this. I know I didn't.

His blonde hair fell in lazy curls around the soft features of his face. His facial structure wasn't chiseled. Instead, he had round cheeks with a dimple in each one. He was tall, very tall. He didn't dress formally. He wore a casual shirt with the first three buttons undone, revealing his lean swimmer's physique.

He stood next to the glass fireplace that glinted beneath a wall of dark stones that looked like they were hand-carved. The interlocking blocks added a touch

of class to the already fancy living room filled with designer furniture and expensive chandeliers.

His icy blue eyes offered the room a lazy gaze as he dialed his cellphone and pressed it against his ear. His skin was smooth and he had full pink lips. When he laughed at what whoever was on the other end said, I could see the dimples in his cheeks.

His eyes glanced around the large room till they landed on me. He decided to make his move and approach me. I have never felt more self-conscious in my entire life.

It was like yesterday evening was happening all over again. There he was, a man that I watched die. The room suddenly felt smaller and my legs became unsteady. I averted his gaze and pretended to be appreciating one of the paintings on the wall.

Was I having another meltdown? It didn't feel like that. I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts. The only way to figure out what was happening was to have a conversation with this doppelgänger.

The hairs on the back of my hands and neck quivered as I felt his touch against my bare skin. I turned around and caught a close-up view of him for the first time. For a split second, I was breathless.

Calling him gorgeous was an understatement. I'd say beautiful but Dan had told me many times how men found the compliment somewhat condescending.

Luckily, my body didn't betray me and I was able to hide my shock and fascination.

His tall frame towered over me and I was grateful for the extra inches my high heels gave me.

"Hi!"

His warm baritone sounded even better now that he was close. It felt like phantom hands brushing my cheeks.

"H-Hi," I responded, my voice unsteady. I hoped he didn't notice how attracted I was to him.

Was he going to talk about saving me last night, or about his look-a-like, who I pretty much murdered? I was a bit nervous.

"I couldn't help but notice how much interest you had in my art. Are you by any chance an artist?"

An artist? Was this a sick game or something?

"Not exactly..." My voice trailed off. I did learn how to use the potter's wheel when I was eleven, but that didn't matter right now.

"Who are you?" I wanted to yell.

Oblivious to my internal turmoil, he smiled at me, flaunting his deep concave dimples.

"So what do you do then?" he asked. He paused then said, "You have a little..." He went silent as he brushed back a few strands of hair that had strayed across my forehead. He smiled at me as his hand returned to his side.

Was he flirting? I wasn't sure but whatever it was, whatever he was doing, it made my body react in a way I didn't expect.

"Hi, Sir. This is the nanny your father hired for Debbie," interjected the maid as she stepped up to make an introduction.

I stopped holding my breath and exhaled. I was stuck in a rabidly alternating state of attraction and caution. One didn't triumph over the other. . I wasn't processing emotions properly, this man was doing strange things to me and my body was responding in ways it never had.

“Oh, that’s nice. I’ll show her around then,” he said. The maid nodded and walked away without looking back.

“Thanks...” My voice trailed off as I watched her leave me alone with him and his sexy, bemused gaze. My brain told me to run away from him while there was still a chance. However, my fluttering heart was giving me different advice.

"Pardon me, I sometimes forget my manners when a pretty lady comes around. I'm Nic by the way, Nicholas King."

"Olivia Baker. Nice to meet you," I murmured. He reached out and kissed my hand, and butterflies fluttered through my belly. The touch of his lips against my skin thrilled yet unnerved me at the same time.

“I don’t know why I feel like I’ve met you before,” he said.

“Oh really?” I replied, even though a part of me was glad I would finally get some answers. ‘I think I killed you three years ago and I went to jail for it.’ I said in my head not daring to speak the words ‘til he said it.

“Oh, yes! You’re the weird girl from yesterday that almost got run over!” He exclaimed slight laugh I turned red with mortification.

“Are you sure that’s the only place we’ve met?” I asked. Did he rise from the dead and develop amnesia?

“You live in L.A.?” He asked, his brows knitted together as he stared at me.

“What?” I asked. Now I was confused.

“I’ve lived in L.A for the last seven years. I’m new in town. So unless we met in L.A then I’m certain yesterday was the only time we’ve met. Or do you often stand on roads waiting for men to save you from impending doom?”

I felt myself grow even redder at his words but my guard dropped as well. He wasn't a dead man back to haunt me, he was just an annoying lookalike that I happened to find very attractive.

"Let me show you around." He wasn't asking, his big hand held mine as he towed me past maids that scurried in groups around the huge mansion.

I arched a brow and our gaze locked for a moment, "Yeah, sure, drag me off into a scary basement in a strange house," I muttered dryly.

I felt the reverberation of his deep laugh in my palm, and somehow deep in my bones.

"You're funny, I like that," he said. I felt my stomach flutter. Why did I care so much whether he liked me or not? I don't even know him.

"I wasn't trying to impress you. I don't even know you,"

"Want to change that?" He asked. I was surprised at his words.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The responsible thing to do is to get to know my daughter's nanny. What if you're a serial killer or something?"

The way he spoke made me laugh and I felt at ease as he gave me the grand tour of the mansion.

Chapter 4

NICHOLAS

The fluorescent lights in the lobby ceiling seemed to make the silver gown she donned sparkle. It hugged her curves all the right places and had a slit to the thigh that showed off her smooth legs. Her red heels that made her almost five inches taller so that we were nearly at the same height.

Mischief glinted in her eyes. She looked more confident than all the previous times I had seen her, she looked so beautiful, I wanted to kiss her right there. I wore a white shirt under my suit and I left a few buttons open to show the dip in my chest; we both dressed properly for the occasion.

“A table for Nicholas and the most beautiful woman on the planet,” I told the maitre’d at the door.

The maitre’d wore a big smile that looked forced and his black hair was slicked back in a way that probably took hours of gelling. He wore a white suit with a name tag on its breast pocket but I couldn't make out the name.

“I’m guessing that I am supposed to fall at your feet from the flattery now that you’ve made that declaration.” Her saucy smile told me that she was teasing.

“Who am I to stop you?” I chuckled.

The waiter awkwardly cleared his throat. I arched an eyebrow at him.

“Allow me to show you to your seats,” he said making a grand gesture.

“I think we'll manage on our own,” I replied. “Now where was I?” She slipped her hand into mine as I led the way into the restaurant.

Red Pine Cuisine was a beautiful place with glass walls and a transparent ceiling. Enchanting classical music filled the air and I could tell she was impressed by the restaurant's simple but elegant aesthetic.

"Over there," I pointed as I continued to guide her through the room that was alive with whispers from different corners. A giant chandelier hanging in the middle of the restaurant rivaled the brightness of a miniature sun.

I chose to sit far from the glare at a round glass table that was tucked in a corner far from the glare. This intimate spot was illuminated by tiny twinkling LED stars embedded in the ceiling. There was also a giant couch and a mahogany coffee table with a flower pot and tiny bell.

"That looks awfully uncomfortable," she muttered. I chuckled to myself as I took my seat.

"Hello, I'll be your server for this evening," pronounced our blonde-haired waiter. "Have you decided on what you'll be having?"

"Surprise me," I said without glancing at the menu; it looked like it had about fifty pages.

"You're just saying that because you don't want to read the menu," Olivia laughed, picking up the menu next to her.

"We'll get back to you in a bit," I sighed and picked up the menu, as the waiter dismissed himself.

"Come on. What do you want to eat?" she asked.

"The only thing I want to eat is you, and you're not on the menu," I replied. I then stared directly at her making sure my gaze communicated my desire as much as it could.

“Last time I checked ...” she said as her fingers tiptoed along my arm, the lust shining in her eyes “Cannibalism is illegal in this part of the world.”

Her touch set my skin ablaze, creating a hunger that I didn't know existed. I now yearned for her like she was oxygen.

I watched as she bit her lips and swirled the drink in her glass before taking another sip. Her blonde hair cascaded in waves down her back. It took all the strength I had to not lean over the table and kiss her.

“I don't think I've told you how gorgeous you looked this evening,” I said. I was completely smitten. I wanted to run my hands over her gown, explore every curve with my hands.

“Thank you. I think you look stunning as well,” she murmured. She licked her lips—something I noticed she did often—and I couldn't help but wonder what her reaction would be if I kissed her.

We chatted as we ate, nothing personal, it was like we were both purposely avoiding the subject, by making small talk about our mutual interests. For the first time since arriving back from L.A, I was actually happy to engage in a conversation with someone else. There was no one to bring up anything concerning my brother and it was absolutely refreshing.

She didn't stumble on her words; they were precise as if they were arrows flying from their bowstrings and their target was my heart. My brain devoured every insignificant bit of information that left her rose-colored lips. I was certain she had no idea how much she affected me by doing mundane things. How could she look so stunning so effortlessly?

“Want to take a walk?” I asked when we finished our meals. “I know a really cool spot.”

Chapter 5

OLIVIA

“It's not going to start. Just leave it,” I said and facepalmed when I saw Nicholas continue to tinker with the car engine.

“It will, stop being so negative.”

“You're sure you don't want to come in? It looks like the storm is going to start soon.” I said gesturing at the darkened clouds. As if in agreement with me, lightning flashed in the clouds followed by a rumble of thunder in the same second. Goosebumps shivered up my arm. I hated the sound of thunder.

“Don't worry, it'll start soon,” Nicholas said as he tried the ignition again. It sputtered for a few seconds before dying as it had been doing for the last fifteen minutes.

“I'm going to feel bad if you get stuck in a storm because of me,” I said.

Our date went nicely, Nicholas was so easy to talk to and I spent the entire night resisting the urge to kiss him. I stood in front of my porch watching him struggle to start the car, my feelings of guilt increasing with each bead of sweat that he wiped from his handsome face.

“It could have happened to anyone,” Nicholas replied. “Now, for the last time, go inside, I'll be gone in a few seconds,”

“Nicholas—”

“Trust me, okay?”

I sighed. It wasn't like I was any help just standing there and distracting him with talk.

“Fine. Take care of yourself,” I said and went indoors.

It was cold inside. There was just me. My parents were seeing a doctor out of town about my dad’s condition and both of my brothers were residents at college.

A part of me sort of wished Nicholas had left the car and come in with me. Not just because I was scared for his safety, but because I didn't want him to leave.

Another rumble of thunder sent chills down my spine I dashed up the staircase to grab Mr. Snuggles, my stuffed giraffe, who always soothes me whenever I am nervous.

I didn't hear Nicholas's engine start and the storm sounded like it was getting worse. A sharp knock on the door brought me out of my room.

I ran down the staircase while hugging my stuffed giraffe. A soaked and tired Nicholas was already waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I must have forgotten to lock my door because of the thunder scare.

“Please don't say I told you so,” Nicholas laughed.

“I told you so,” I replied with a deadpan expression and he chuckled.

“So where can I crash?” He asked. Surveying the living room.

“You can crash on the sofa and then leave in the morning. I’ll get you one of my brother’s shirts. It’ll be a tight fit but you can change out of your wet suit into that.” I said.

“Oh, wow. Thanks,” he said, removing his cufflinks.

“Wait. You want it now?” I asked and blushed furiously when I realized he was now shirtless. I quickly went back up the stairs, gripping my pillow tightly while trying to erase the mental picture of a shirtless Nicholas from my mind.

“Don't think filthy thoughts. Don't think filthy thoughts,” I chanted in my head.

I barged into Charles' room and picked up the first clean shirt I saw. Thankfully, most of Charles' clothes were clean because of Charles' obsessive-compulsive disorder. I rushed downstairs to hand over the shirt, hoping that he would quickly cover his sexy chest muscles up.

“I'm going to go lay down for a bit,” I said as I watched him slip on the shirt. I was right, it was a tight fit. “Thank you for today, I had fun,” I said with a soft smile.

“Me too.”

I went to my room and hid under my sheets with Mr. Snuggles pressed tightly against my chest. I stared at the ceiling with wide eyes. Images of Nicholas kept floating in my head, making my stomach flutter.

A boom of thunder rocked the house. I screamed in fright.

Nicholas dashed up the stairs and burst into my room.

“Olivia! Are you okay?” he yelled.

I sat up in bed and held my hands against my chest. I bowed my head to try to calm myself. I didn't want to meet his eyes. God, I must have sounded like such a weirdo.

“I-I'm fine, just got a little startled by the thunder.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to barge in, I thought you were hurt,”

I raised my head and gasped. He was right there, in front of me, shirtless.

“I-I-It’s fine,” I managed to sputter. Then in my head ‘Stay strong, Olivia. Don't be weird, it's not the first time you’re seeing his eight-pack and ripped chest.’”

I took a deep breath before I spoke, not trusting that my words would be that convincing.

“You can go now, I'll be fine. Sorry that I disturbed you,” I said. I smiled at him. His muscles flexed as he turned the doorknob, his biceps throbbed. The chill I felt before was slowly dissipating, replaced by a bubbling warmth that was slowly pulling between my legs.

Thunder boomed outside again and I couldn't help but whimper. He heard my quiet sob and gave me a concerned stare.

“Hey...” He sat at the edge of the bed and took my hand in his. “There's nothing to be scared of, okay?”

“You’re not going to make fun of me?” I asked, hiding behind the curtain of my blonde hair. His beautiful eyes expressed intense desire.

‘Please, don't look at me like that,’ I wanted to say, ‘Don’t look at me like I’m the most beautiful thing in the world.’

Nicholas made me feel awkward. I was constantly unsure of what to say... what to do.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he whispered to me.

“I'm scared of needles,” he whispered dramatically as if it was some sort of secret meant for my ears only.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a doctor? How can you fear needles?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m not scared of using a needle on a patient,” he chuckled “But when I know it’s meant for me, I get scared. I think I even passed out one time.”

“That’s dumb,” I chuckled. I didn’t know if he was making up a story to make me feel better or if it was true, but it was working so there was no need to question it. His words were like a soothing balm to my soul.

“So, you're scared of thunder. I'm scared of needles. We're just two scaredy-cats. There's nothing wrong with that.”

I pushed the hair out of my face, I knew I shouldn't be asking for what I was about to ask and that I was probably going to regret it in the morning, but I asked it anyway.

“Can you stay with me till the storm stops? Or maybe until I fall asleep, whichever comes first?”

“Uh...” Nicholas trailed off.

“Yeah. I know. It's stupid. Forget I asked, I laid down and pulled my sheets over my head my face burning with embarrassment.

I kept my eyes closed with my back turned to him, he didn't move for a bit. When he did, my mattress dipped without warning, and I felt the heat of another body radiating from behind me.

There was a little space between us, but it was not enough to make me ignore the fact that there was a shirtless man was lying next to me.

Thunder rumbled again and before I could whimper Nicholas scooped me up in his arms. Warmth flooded my body instantly as his hot skin pressed against my clothes and I turned red.

“Why are you shirtless?” I asked quietly.

“Your brother’s shirt was too small.”

“Oh,” I replied and I remained like that, listening to the sound of his heartbeat and his breath. When the next thunder sounded, Nicholas held me tight, his warm skin pressed against the flimsy linen of my clothes.

“Nicholas—” I rolled over to tell him that he could let go of me. Our faces were centimeters away from each other,

“Don’t do it!” A voice screamed in my head. ‘What are you doing?’

I quickly locked the voice away in the dark recesses of my mind. We both crossed the distance and when our lips touched, I knew that I would do it all over again.

His hands worked their way into my hair as he kissed me, his lips leaving a trail of electricity on my skin. He pulled me closer as if he was hoping to merge our bodies into one. I was lost in the passion that this first kiss held.

I climbed on top of his ripped body and straddled him. We kept kissing as I undid the first few buttons of my night dress. Firm hands clasped my slim waist as the kiss deepened. I let my hands roam down his firm chest till they found his erect nipples. My hands rubbed the two nubs that begged for attention and he moaned, his mouth still on mine. His hips undulated slowly and his erect member dug into the light fabric of my dress.

He kissed my neck, sucking on the skin with a feverish devotion that made me moan his name. He growled his approval.

He slipped his hands beneath my skirt and I couldn't help the shaky whispers that escaped me. Nicholas's beautiful face came into my line of vision as he flipped me on my back with one smooth move and I felt my body melt into the bed. How could one man hold so much power over me?

His soft hands slipped underneath my shirt as he leaned down to kiss me again. His nimble fingers teased the nub, pinching, tugging, and rubbing alternatively,

each action sent a ripple of electricity tearing through my body making me arch my back towards him.

“Olivia,” he moaned into the kiss. My name rolled off his tongue like there was nothing else in the world that mattered. His other hand cupped the back of my neck, pulling me closer into the kiss.

Chapter 6

NICHOLAS

I could have sworn that I pulled the blinds over the windows to stop sunlight from creeping in, yet the warm rays of the sun woke me with a caress. I groaned and buried myself under my blanket. I knew the peace was temporary but I wasn't ready to leave the warm embrace of my bed yet.

Who knew planning events was so exhausting? The only thing that had made the last few days bearable was the fact that Olivia now lived in the mansion as well. We were inseparable, making out in every secret corner that we could find. It was exhilarating.

Five minutes after almost falling asleep again, I heard the creaking sound of my door opening and I knew the illusion of peace I had crafted for myself was shattered.

A brief silence followed the opening of the door, as if the intruder was struggling with the idea of waking me. However before long after I heard the soft tapping of shoes on the floor as the person crept towards my bed

“Sir?” I heard a maid whisper. “Your father needs you, I think it's quite urgent.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and pretended to be fast asleep. I needed a few more minutes to mentally prepare myself for the day and all the people I was going to politely smile and wave at. Even though I hadn't seen them in years, the thought of being the center of attention was overwhelming. I prayed for something, anything that would distract the maid enough to forget my existence for a few

more minutes. She paused for a moment, and instead of leaving like I thought she would, I felt her shake my shoulders.

“I’m up,” I groaned and shot her a glare. Thirty minutes later, I had taken my bath, attended to my dad, and was on my way back to my room when I collided with something, or rather someone in the hallway.

It was Olivia who teetered as if lost her footing. Since she started her new job as my niece’s nanny, she was often in a hurry to get somewhere in the mansion. I caught her before she could fall.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I said with a sly smile as if the thought of her in my hands did not make my heart beat faster. She blushed and recoiled, as if my touch burned her.

“You should look where you’re going next time,” she said and shot me a glare. She kept her gaze on me as she paced angrily back and before I could warn her that the door, she was leaning was cracked open, she stumbled backward.

“Great,” I heard her mutter dryly to herself. “How smooth,” she said.

“I see you found my brother’s studio,” I remarked, stepping in after her. Surveying the room I could see my brother’s kiln at the very end of it. A curtain shrouded the only window. I flicked on the light and soft glow bathed the pottery wheel in the center of the room, his workbench and numerous metal tables topped with numerous pots and plates.

“I’m so sorry,” she muttered as she watched me walk around.

It had been how long? Seven years? Maybe even longer since I stepped foot into this room. Everything looked exactly as I remembered.

“You look like you need a minute,” she whispered softly, her voice drifting over to me, like a glass of water after a walk through the desert, calming the shadows that threatened to darken my psyche.

“I’m fine,” I managed to say as I pulled open the curtain. I sat on the workbench and marveled at the clear view of the afternoon sun setting over the scenery below.

“Were you guys close?” Olivia asked. I heard her cautiously approach me, hesitant about whether her presence was wanted... It was needed.

“We were best friends,” I said softly. The memory made me smile to myself. “We were teenagers when we lost our mum. We bonded over the pain and were practically inseparable. He was amazing,” I paused and looked around the room, eyeing his unfinished projects. “He was talented too,” I breathed out. “He created some of the art pieces in the living room.”

Olivia stood behind me and petted my shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it? I’m really good at listening if you want to pour your heart out, and maybe have a little breakdown... I won’t judge.”

“I don’t have that luxury,” I chuckled. It was a harsh, bitter sound that didn’t sound like me, but I spoke the truth. “After he died, it felt like everyone just expected me to become another version of him.” I paused and balled my hands into fists.

“It felt like everyone is constantly looking for a reason to call me incompetent or tell me that I could never be the man he was.”

She sat down beside me and with a small smile, offered her hand. I cradled her lovely fingers in mine. I welcomed the warmth of her palm, aware of erotic tingling shooting down my spine. Her touch dispersed the gloomy thoughts clouding my mind, and anchored me back in reality.

“All this money, it means nothing,” I whispered to her. Her beautiful eyes sucked me into their infinite depths.

“You realize that’s something only rich people have the luxury of saying right?” She whispered back.

“That’s fair,” I said with a slight chuckle, and she laughed as well.

“Don’t allow people’s expectations of you to build you into a person you’re not. You are perfect just the way you are,” she said, and this time she covered my palm with her other palm, trapping my hand with both of hers. “Your brother would want what’s best for you, forget everything they’re saying around you. Focus on yourself. You’re the only one that matters.”

“Did you get a degree in psychology while you were studying your accounting?” I queried politely. Her words made me feel light, and I knew she was right.

“Growing up as the eldest child of three siblings to middle-class parents required me to toughen up and accept reality as it is. I guess you could say I developed a stone heart of some sort,” she said.

“I think you’re softer than you think, I mean, here you are trying to help through my issues. I don’t think anyone with a stone heart would do that,” I said, with a teasing smile. She made me feel warm like I was sitting beside a ray of sunshine.

“Fine, you win this round,” She laughed and I was surprised about how beautiful and free in the few seconds that the laugh graced her face. A warm fuzzy feeling bubbling up in my gut till it made me smile.

“The point is, there’s no point stressing or obsessing over something out of your control.”

“I have always been interested in pottery but I was scared everyone would only compare me to him,” I explained.

“Ignore them, I’ll teach you. As long as you enjoy it and you’re happy then nothing else matters.”

I reached out to her, pulling her closer. “I think you look really beautiful.”

“You shouldn’t go around saying stuff like that,” she whispered with her head turned away.

I placed a finger on her chin and tilted it to face myself.

“I’m not going around saying stuff like that,” I whispered, and leaned in to kiss her. When our lips touched, it was slow, hesitant like we both were unsure of what we were doing, but that feeling didn’t last long and I pulled her into my arms. Her fingers weaved their way through my hair, and the slight tug at the ends only made me deepen the kiss. There was a raw passion between us that I had never felt with anyone else. I was so happy she was in my life.

“Come on, knead it well,” She whispered in my ear. “I feel like you’re not even trying!” She pointed at the mass of clay in front of me “Come on, knead it!” I could feel her hot breath on my ear lobe.

“It’s pretty hard to concentrate when you’re distracting me by whispering in my ear every two seconds,” I retorted.

She gasped theatrically as she walked around the workbench to face me, “That is no way to talk to your Sensei!”

“Sorry, Sensei,” I muttered dryly. I couldn’t hide the smile that played at the edge of my lips. I couldn’t remember the last time I had so much fun. “Perhaps you should help me out instead of whispering though.”

“Fine!” She laughed and returned to her previous position behind me. Here, this is how you do it,” she said pressing her chest against my back and pressing me easily into the clay. The softness on my back was an even bigger distraction than her whispers in my ears.

“I don’t know how this is helping but I’m open to more ideas.” I wondered if she could detect the devilish intentions behind my words.

“Focus,” Her breath tickled my earlobes and it sent electricity coursing through my body. “Now continue to bend it, knead it ‘til’ it feels like you’re about to discover a new shape.”

Her hands danced over my palm and I could feel my heart beating erratically in my chest.

“Now what are you going to do?” She whispered as she stroked my hands and mashed them into the clay.

“Wash my hands and tell you this is absolutely ridiculous.” My gruff tone only made her giggle.

“Focus, Nicholas,” she said.

Deep breaths were required to clear all the sexual tension that was building up in my body before I continued.

“Now, split the clay into two—”

“I know what I want... to split, your legs!” I whispered back to her.

“Focus!” She giggled. I knew she was enjoying herself as well.

I did as she said.

“Roll it into a ball,” She whispered, this time she guided my hands again, guiding them softly but not applying too much pressure. The sexual tension in

the air returned with even more force and I knew one of us would cave soon. I would cave soon.

“Now pinch the middle of the clay with your thumb and finger,” I did as I was told. “Yes, just like that,” she whispered her voice brimming with pride at the idea that I was finally following her instructions properly. It took all of my self-control not to twist around and kiss her right there.

“Yes, that’s it. You’re perfect,” She purred the last words as her hands slowly trailed up my biceps. Tingles danced along my skin and I leaned into her touch just a little more than I should.

“Focus,” she whispered into my ear again.

Chapter 7

OLIVIA

Later that day, I heard a knock on my door and rushed to answer it. A part of me hoped it was Nicholas but I knew he left the mansion hours ago and that he wouldn't return till evening. We had made plans to meet later that night and I was excited to spend time with him. I opened the door, and was roughly shoved aside by a dark-haired woman who pushed her way into the room.

"Excuse me?" I yelled after I regained my balance. I glared at her with all the fury I could muster.

"Who are you and why did you push me like that?"

"I'm Emily King. Nicky's sister. Her expression was venomous.

"Oh," I replied. That still didn't give her a right to walk into my room like that.

"What do you want? The irritation expressed by the tone of my voice was as clear as day. She just looked around the room with disdain, glancing at me briefly before eyeing the room all over again. I hated the wait and I knew she could tell.

"What do you want from me?" I asked again watching her while she walked back and forth, her eyes regarded every piece of furniture with contempt. "If you don't answer me, I will have to ask you to leave."

"Temper, temper," Emily chuckled. Somehow she found the whole situation amusing. "You probably shouldn't be raising your voice at me right now, dear. The last thing you want to do is make me angry."

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was supposed to welcome you after you barged into my room and invaded my privacy.”

“You know you have a whole lot of nerve coming here after all you’ve done,” she said. Her voice was veiled with barely concealed contempt as if my very presence disgusted her soul. Her eyes didn't leave mine for a minute and it made me want to scream.

“What are you going on about?” I asked.

“Murderer,” She hissed at me. My blood grew cold and panic slammed into me like a truck. Her eyes were cold and her expression bitter. “You killed my brother and you have the nerve to walk around freely in his home.”

“I-I—” My words failed me and all I could do was stutter. When Nicholas told me about his brother earlier today, a part of me knew he was the same person that I had collided with his car three years ago. But Nicholas had mentioned that he hadn’t been back home in seven years so a part of me held on to the possibility that the burial was seven years ago. But the truth stood clear as day in front of me.

I killed Nicholas’s brother.

“You should be rotting in jail,” she said. Tears blurred my vision, as my conversation with Nicholas in the studio came back into my head. All the pain he was feeling, all the hardship he had to endure because of his brother’s death - I was responsible for everything.

“It was an accident,” I whispered as tears rolled down my cheeks.

“You ruined our lives!” she screamed.

“It was an accident,” I repeated as more tears rolled down my cheeks, each one came as a sob wracked my body. “It was an accident. It was an accident, I swear.”

“How can you live without yourself? How can you look my brother in his face after you killed his identical twin? Debbie’s father!”

“I’m sorry.” I repeated the words over and over till I felt like my lungs would collapse.

“Do you plan to kill Nicholas too? What kind of sadist are you?”

I kept mouthing my apology until I ran out of breath. Every sob ravaged my body.

“I did a little research on you. I know you're a pathetic little graduate that can no longer get a job. I know your father is jobless and your family is on the verge of penury.” She sneered. “I bet he set you up to do all this so you can steal money from us.”

Just like that something snapped inside me. It felt like someone lit my insides on fire. Rage clawed at my lungs and made it difficult for me to breathe. I could feel the fire coursing through my veins and it made me visibly agitated. How could she talk about my father like that?

“You have no right.” Even though my voice was barely above a whisper, rage bled into it and made it as hard as a sharp steel blade. “You have no right to talk about my family like that. You can throw insults at me all you want, but keep my family’s name out of your mouth.”

“I didn't come looking for a fight,” she said. “I just want you to leave my family alone.”

Chapter 8

NICHOLAS

It had been almost a week since Olivia left without a word. A part of me almost couldn't believe what Emily told me about her, but when she brought the police report to me the truth was undeniable. I wanted her to explain what happened that night. I couldn't judge her until I found out the details of what happened that night.

The grave situation of the patient I worked on in the E.R offered me an escape from my obsessive thoughts, in the same way that Olivia herself once functioned as a welcome distraction from my condemning family.

After the emergency procedure was complete I was informed that the only family member that was with him was his daughter. I asked the nurses to send for her while I settled in my office.

My office is an extension of my sedate personality. Four walls are the only things that I consider necessary. Simple yet sophisticated dark brown shelves line the entire left-hand wall. Beside the door is a leather sofa with a fur thrown over the back and an Indian blanket draped over the arm. A TV set that I never used was positioned on the shelf to the right and finally, my desk was at the far end of the room from where I could see clear skies and the trees outside.

The door creaked open and when I heard footsteps, I stopped poring over the files I was reading and looked up.

It was Olivia.

She gasped when we made eye contact and then bolted out of my office. I followed. I planned on getting to the bottom of this whole thing.

“How long are we going to play this game for?” I shouted from behind her as she walked quickly through the hospital corridor. She then made a sharp turn into a room. I followed and shut the door behind us.

“Why didn’t you wait to talk to me before you left? “I demanded.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she replied, looking at everything in the empty hospital room but me.

“Will you just calm down and listen to what I have to say to you?”

“There's nothing to talk about.” She looked like she was on the verge of breaking down. I was about to take a step in her direction but I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the tears in her eyes.

“Olivia...”

“Why are you doing this? I'm trying to make it easy for the both of us!” Her eyes were pleading with me to understand.

“You’re being a coward, Olivia! You’re doing what’s easy for you, not for the both of us,” I said. My breaths came out as gasps. She shut her eyes and shook her head as if it would change my mind.

“We need to talk about everything, Olivia.”

“I can’t,” She whispered with tears rolling down her cheeks. “I don’t want you to hate me.”

“I just want closure,” I replied, I could feel tears pooling beneath my eyes as well.

She shook her head again. “I can’t.”

I heaved a sigh. “The fundraiser event my dad has been planning is happening tomorrow. I’m traveling back to L.A after the party. If you want us to talk then you know where to find me.”

I took steady steps towards the building. I had been at parties before but I had never felt this nervous, maybe it was because I didn't know what was waiting for me behind the giant doors.

I dreaded encounters with people that I hadn't seen in years. I loathed the idea of participating in chit-chats when I just wanted to pack my bags and leave town.

There was nothing here for me anymore. I was a bundle of nerves, but nobody was ever going to know. I steeled my spine, forced a brilliant smile, and braced myself for a chaotic night.

The guards at the entrance saw me and signaled each other to let me in. Once the doors parted, I knew immediately that I didn't belong here. I thought that I was going to attend a simple event, I made most of the arrangements after all, but it seemed like there had been some last-minute changes by someone else.

Everyone was dressed for a red carpet event. This wasn't just some simple fundraiser party. I didn't expect any less from my father but it didn't mean I wasn't surprised.

A giant chandelier hung in the middle of the room, casting its warm glow on the walls that are adorned with expensive paintings of world-renowned artists. My father was no doubt showing off his collections.

As I allowed myself to step into the party, I was overwhelmed by the scent of perfume in the air, it wasn't an unpleasant smell, no. It was a blend of different designer smells that filled the air so richly that I felt I could hold it in my arms and wrap it around myself like a blanket.

A waiter walked up to me, "Champagne?"

It was too early for me to start drinking, plus I couldn't drink all alone, I would make a fool of myself before the night even began. Nevertheless, I let him pour me a fluted glass of bubbly.

I walked around the party for a bit, interacting with the few people that came my way but mostly keeping to myself. I waited for Olivia to show up but she didn't. The event would soon be ending and a private plane would come for Debbie and I.

I sighed as I downed the last few drops of champagne. The drink had loosened the tension in my body and I was a lot more relaxed than when I first came into the party.

One last time I scanned the room briefly again, and that was when I saw her.

Chapter 9

OLIVIA

Soft chatter and the clinking of glasses filled the air. Classical music emanated from the stage where a live band was playing. The crowd had parted, leaving a space in the center of the dance floor, no doubt waiting for a couple to summon up the courage to have the first dance of the night.

I wanted to leave, I was severely underdressed for the occasion and disliked crowds but I knew I had to see Nicholas before he left.

“Hey, stranger,” a voice said from behind me.

“You,” I breathed when I turned to see who it was. Unlike the other men in the room, dressed in tuxedos with elaborate frills, he wore a simple black suit. The last two buttons of the shirt were unbuttoned giving a clear view of his Adam’s apple and collar bones.

“Me,” He replied with a smile.

I tried to gather my thoughts together to say something more intelligent so I wouldn't stand there staring at him like a fool.

“Do you want to dance?” He asked. I glanced at the champagne flute in his hands then back at him.

“You’re drunk. You don’t mean that. Everyone’s going to stare.”

“Forget what everyone is saying around you, focus on what you want. Those were your words to me, right?”

I nodded. They were.

He held out his hands and I consented this time as he led me to the dance floor.

I made eye contact with Nicholas's Dad who was glaring at me from the back of the room. We took our position in the middle of the dance floor and I avoided meeting his eyes. I forced myself to focus on the dance steps, instead of all the people staring at us.

I had not danced a waltz since I was at a wedding when I was ten years old. I struggled to keep up with him; I stepped on his toe with every move I made. He only smiled and continued to guide me.

"Calm down," he whispered. "Just listen to the music."

I looked into his beautiful brown eyes; they held no malicious thoughts. I thought he would hate me like Emily but he didn't. The more my eyes met his, the more relaxed I felt. I no longer held myself back, and surrendered all control to him and the music.

Our bodies moved in sync with the song and with the beating of my heart. I could feel everything starting to move in perfect tandem - from our feet to our breathing, the experience was surreal.

He effortlessly swept me across the polished floor. Our bodies moved unhindered as we glided as one through space. He shut his eyes for a few seconds, as he swayed to the music. His guard was down, revealing a certain vulnerability, the playful boy inside that I cherished.

When he opened his eyes and caught me staring at him he smiled down at me, it wasn't a sly smile, it didn't have any hidden meaning. It was just a genuine happy grin that made me grin back.

"Want to get out of here?" he asked. I nodded. We walked around the building for a bit till we found a place to sit and enjoy the moonlit scenic view of the mansion's gardens and the rising moon beyond.

After a long silence, that threatened to last an eternity if not broken, I spoke.

“That night, three years ago, I was with my dad when he suffered heart attack, and that is when everything in our lives fell apart.” I could not look at him as I relived this story, so I gazed into the distance. I was really gazing into the abyss of the past.

“We were rehearsing for his big presentation that was supposed to be the next day, when he got the call that he was fired. He slumped over and I called for my mother.” I blinked back my brimming tears.

“Instead of calling an ambulance, she asked me to drive to the pharmacy and pick up a prescription. Apparently, fainting was a common occurrence for him, but these drugs kept it at bay. My parents kept his condition secret, because they did not want my brother or I to worry” I laughed sardonically. “It was a bit hypocritical because I was going to worry about him either way.”

“On the way to the pharmacy, my mother called, I will never forget the panic in her voice. My father’s condition was worse, and she asked me to turn the car around, come back and drive him to the hospital.” I cleared my throat. I was choking back the sobs.

“I was a total wreck. Tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision as I drove as fast as I could to get back home to my dad. I screeched around a corner, and rammed into another car” I placed my hand on my chest as I recalled the moment of impact: my heart felt like it was cracking in half.

“My chest slammed against the steering wheel and shards of glass rained down on my skin, tearing through my flesh. My mind couldn’t comprehend what was happening. I crawled out of my vehicle and I saw him, Richard, crawling out from the wreck of his car too, but he was bleeding from almost every part of his body. I reached him and cradled him in my arms. I screamed for help, for

myself, for him, for my father. I screamed till my voice became hoarse while he bled out in my arms.”

All I heard was the sound of Nicholas breathing. He didn't say anything.

“It was an accident,” I whispered. “Everything happened so quickly. I still don't know how he wasn't able to avoid my car.”

“He was on the phone with me the night of the crash,” Nicholas stated. I stared at him, confused.

“He told me several times that he needed to get off the cell phone, because he didn't want to talk and drive. I insisted he finish the conversation. That's probably why he couldn't avoid the accident. He was distracted.” He stared at me hard, like a convicted man learning of a life sentence. “I have lived with the guilt ever since. It was why I couldn't bring myself to come to his burial. I didn't have any right to mourn the brother I had bullied into staying on the phone. So, you're not the murderer, I am.”

“That is a terrible wicked thing to say to yourself!” I gasped and clasped his face. “Don't ever say that again. It was an accident, okay? We both must come to terms with it.”

We were like that for a moment, our eyes locked in each other's gaze.

“I'm glad you came back,” he whispered to me. I could feel him slowly leaning in.

“I'm glad you haven't left,” I whispered back to him.

Our lips slowly melted into each other as the light from the moon shone in our eyes.

EPILOGUE

OLIVIA

Butterflies fluttered in my tummy as Nicholas closed the physical gap between us. Our lips locked for precious moments that felt like eternity. Nicholas's passion increased in ferocity as he planted more kisses on my neck, shoulders, and forehead, setting off firecrackers of pleasure beneath my skin.

Nicholas's breath burned against my cheeks as he planted another kiss in the valley of my clavicle, "Making love to you is all I've been able to think about," he groaned.

A month has passed since the fundraiser event. A month since Nicholas flew me and my parents to his hospital in L.A where he gave my father the best treatment for free. When he asked me to stay behind with him, I didn't think twice. Of course, I said yes.

His dad and Emily were now more accepting of me after Nicholas insisted that I explain just what happened that night to them. So I did. Things still aren't perfect, but at least I can be in the same room as them without feeling awkward. I was able to get a job when I got to L.A and Nicholas pulled strings to grant me a flexible work schedule. It gave me more time to hang out with Debbie, and I loved her as if she was my own daughter.

"I want you so badly," Nicholas mumbled, as he continued to kiss me.

His words warmed me from the inside out. I felt my body yearning for him more with every passing second, with each brush of his lip against my skin. He planted his kisses lower and lower, to places below my belly, before lifting me up on the table and sliding my underwear off me.

Nicholas collapsed on the bed and the smell of his masculine sweat made my body throb from head to toe, making me want to orgasm yet again.

"I love you, Olivia," I heard him whisper. The words had never sounded so honest coming from anyone else.

"I love you too, Nicholas," I replied and placed a chaste kiss on his forehead, making him giggle.

I did, I really did.

The End.

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Book 1 Teaser...

Chapter One

Groggy with sleep, Lily peered at the screen of her alarm. It was 6:48am. As if shocked with an electric impulse, she jumped out of bed to run a bath. Even though it was barely seven in the morning she knew she was late for work already, and she didn't like it. Mr Marshall, her boss would twist that pretty mouth of his and tell her he was disappointed in her without uttering a word. It was a super power that only he possessed.

It wasn't the first time she was going to be late this week. In fact but for the exception of Monday, she'd been late throughout the week and it was due to her sleepless nights going over manuscripts. She knew it was her cue to ask for her well deserved sabbatical.

Writing had always been a place of solace for her, it was her little bubble where she could make up stories about knights in shining armor coming to rescue their distressed damsels but over the years she'd learnt life was red not white. A battleground filled with struggle and not always peace. That didn't dissipate her love for writing though, she still wrote bits and pieces of stories on paper waiting to be shredded.

As if it were yesterday, she remembered when she first got the job with her publication company. Fresh out from NYU with a literary degree, she'd carried her manuscript to every publisher she knew begging for her book to be given a chance. People had laughed at her and called her book a mere Cinderella story, something to be read to put the kids to sleep. At the time she was squatting with Linda and Brenda, her two best friends from college who never failed to encourage her. When it seemed like all hope was lost, Duncan waltzed in. Just like from one of the pages from her novel, he offered her a job and supported her till she was able to get an apartment of her own and pay the mortgage on it.

Too bad their story refused to have a happily ever after because Duncan's surname happened to be Marshall who was her gay boss and who would give her that ugly look as she discreetly tried to sneak into the office late.

She really hated the face he made. One day she was going to knock his lips off his face.

She tucked her unruly hair into a tight chignon and applied a slight dab of brown powder across her face completing the look with a navy blue suit and nice flats.

There was no use rushing her dressing if she was already late.

Turning left on Isle street about twenty minutes from her workplace, she received a call from her friend, Brenda.

"Hi, Lily. I see you're up so early today. Trying to escape the wrath of Babyface?"

Babyface was the clique's nickname for Duncan. It came to be as a result of Duncan's inability to have proper beards. He was in his late thirties but his face still resembled that of a teenager that had not hit puberty. He sometimes used a fake mustache to cover up for it.

"Come on." Lily grumbled. "You know I'm definitely late for work already."

"Hahaha." Brenda laughed. "Serves you right for snoozing your alarm severally. I lived with you for many years and I know you did just that."

"You're right. So how're you doing anyways?" Lily asked.

"Fine. How's work?"

"Stressful as always. I'm not a morning person, I wish I could get an afternoon shift."

She was at a traffic light now, and she looked across, seeing children walk by as the light turned red.

"How's Anderson?" Lily asked. "Are you guys still on the honeymoon?"

"Of course. We're in the Maldives right now but we should be back in a week. He got me this really beautiful jewelry piece that... "

Lily rolled her eyes, knowing well that she wasn't ready for the gist but she listened halfheartedly, praying Brenda would notice her disinterest and stop talking at some point. But she didn't.

The traffic light turned yellow, and the passers-by began racing to the other side of the road. "Yeah that's so nice." She said, putting the right 'oohs' and 'aahs' where necessary.

"Yes yes. Oh there's more..."

She banged her head against her wheel in frustration and mistakenly honked, scaring the passers-by in the front.

"Are you alright?" Brenda quickly inquired, her Mother Hen attributes pushing through her voice. Brenda could be a sweetheart when she wasn't animated about any new piece of gossip.

"There's more!" Lily faked a gasp, ignoring Brenda's earlier inquiry about her health. "Tell me, I'm so interested."

"No need to get smart with me, young lady," Brenda bristled. "I know your hand is hovering over the red button itching to cut this call at the slightest notice."

"You know me too well," Lily conceded. "But, what's happening? You've got me hooked now."

"Claire's getting married... in three weeks." Brenda shouted, filled with joy.

"Claire? I thought they didn't plan on getting married soon." Lily asked, surprised.

"Yeah I thought so too, but it turned out they were planning to elope and do a quick one in Vegas. God forbid that such happens in my vicinity. What's a wedding without white lace gowns and a tower of cake and ribbons?"

"Umm. It's a union between two people that have promised to love each other forever?" Lily volunteered.

"Well, and that too." Brenda agreed.

The light switched to green, and cars zoomed off beside hers. She eased the car down the street and continued with the call.

"Have you gotten an invitation?" Brenda asked.

"I would check my mail, surely I've got one and thank you for watching out for Claire. It means a lot to me."

"Anytime, she's my sister too. We would talk later. Okay? Drive safely."

"Haha. Sure, I will. Bye." The call ended.

Claire was the last of the four friends to join the clique. Linda, Brenda and Lily already had a solid history in college, attending fraternity parties together, getting drunk and sweeping through boyfriends like fine wine. She was formerly Lily's colleague at work before quitting and establishing her own magazine firm. It was a small company that provided details on celebrities scandals and love stories. The rest of them always teased her for being a celebrity tattletale.

Linda was the most notorious one, popularly known for the daunting dares she took on back in college. It therefore came as a surprise when she finally settled down and relocated to California with her husband and her daughter.

Brenda was more of a protective figure, looking after anyone that was sick and making sure everyone had eaten. She was currently on her honeymoon with Anderson, her childhood sweetheart.

And then there was Lily Everton, beautiful self made Lily. She was once in a serious relationship but their relationship didn't last, especially because he seemed to have a more animalistic form of love which she hated. Then there was another guy that came along but seemed to only love her for her body, which was an issue she'd battled with right from her heydays in college considering her physique. But no, she didn't want that. And since she'd refused to lower her standards, she was starting to give up on love and focus more on her career. Luckily, she had a job that she loved to keep her busy, enough to keep her from reflecting on her loneliness.

It wasn't often that one had a career that was both fun and paid the bills.

Arriving at work three minutes late, she didn't miss the twist of Duncan's lips from the glass office where he was seated.

His lips seemed to be saying, 'you could've done better than this Lily. Do you know what you could've achieved in those three minutes?'

She ignored his negative vibes and switched quickly to her Gmail on her laptop. She spotted a 'You are cordially invited to...' and confirmed what she'd been expecting. The invitation was sent to her mail.

A slow exhale escaped her lips as she remembered her own love life. The single Pringle amongst the four. The dark horse amongst the white stallions.

Sometimes, when she was drunk and the alcohol had her feeling sleepy and low on defense, she allowed herself to miss the butterflies that came with a loving touch and the countless calls that kept her feeling like a queen. Those outings

that once left her breathless and yearning for more. The gifts and surprises. The kisses and most importantly, the tumble in the sheets.

Glasses were filled up and clinked severally, the red wine seemed to be overflowing. The three-men group was out today, invited by one of their own, to celebrate something they knew nothing about yet. They were all busy during the week, either with one business project or on a trip.

"Yo Ryan, what have you been up to this week?" Matthew asked, placing his wine glass on the table.

"Yeah, my schedule was really tight this week. I was at a waterfall a few days ago trying to capture the beauty of the ecosystem there." Ryan answered.

"Oh cool, tell me, have you gotten any sponsorship yet? Anything from the Wayne brothers?" Camden chipped in.

"Nah not yet, they seem to be recruiting but I don't think they've checked my application yet."

"Shit! Let's hope they do so. They would be the one missing out on a talent if they don't."

"So, Camden, you phoned yesterday? What's up, why are we drinking?" Ryan asked.

Camden rose up from his seat with his glass of wine. "Gentlemen, we are here today to celebrate..." He paused a little for dramatic effect. "I'm getting married in three weeks," he shouted.

"Dudeee!" screamed the other guys.

"Congrats Man, you've gotta get the cradle ready then." Matthew said with a laugh, hugging the groom-to-be after they made a toast.

"You better forget those crushes you've had bro, you're gonna get hitched," Ryan added.

"Thanks a lot guys, I would really love your support." Camden said.

"Sure, we got you, right guys?" Ryan asked.

His question was supported with a loud "yess" from the seemingly drunk Matthew, but it was only red wine.

"Personally, I can't wait to destroy your cake," he added.

"So, how are you preparing? Have you chosen a venue already?" Ryan, always the planner, asked.

"Yes I've," he replied. "I would have sent you an email, but I preferred to make it an open announcement. I will send the mail to you tonight."

"So who is it? Claire or Jane?" Matthew asked, being the naughtiest in the group.

"Shut up man, you know I never dated Jane. Of course it's Claire."

"Oh wow, that's nice," Ryan said as he poured himself a glassful of red wine.

"Have you gotten the ring yet? A Diamond or a Ruby?"

"It's a diamond ring. Spent a fortune on it. It's worth about fifty grand."

"That's a lot!" Ryan exclaimed.

At this time, their glasses were empty but there were still a couple of beers in the cooler, and Matthew had reached in to get one.

"You always wanted to do your honeymoon in Africa, are you still going with that option?" He asked, a bottle of beer already in his hands.

"I'm not sure of Claire's take on that choice. Let's get the wedding done first."

"Cool cool."

"So Ryan, got any dates yet? " Matthew asked.

"Uhh, nah, not yet." Ryan replied, his tone sad.

"Cheer up man, you will get someone, you will," he patted him on his back.

Ryan Paige, the socially awkward of the three men, was in his mid-thirties and the youngest of all three. He was a passionate photographer, adventurous at it also, and had been to more places than anyone. He had met so many people- Indians, Australians, Portuguese and yet he couldn't boast of having anyone that appealed to his heart. Sometimes, he wondered if he traveled so many times because of his love for the aesthetic pictures he took at these places or because he was searching for something.

Someone to share his heart with.

Chapter 2

God! I hate weddings," Lily moaned as she tried to squeeze herself into her four inch suede heels. It had been a long time since she attended a party, so wearing six inches was out of the question, she would meet herself on the floor if she tried it. Her stomach fat was a little bit excess and she had to make use of a corset to push it in.

At thirty-one years of age, Lily tried not to dwell on the fact that her entire relationship life was non-existent. The only thing she could boast of was an amazing career and a cat that loved her but these days, she wasn't even sure of her cat's love again. It was becoming quite spiteful and it scratched her more than it played with her.

Why have a cat that refused to play with her?

Her writing career was putting food on the table and also managed to pay for some traveling expenses and vacation treats. She loved the fact that she was now working in the same position that was used to taunt her many years ago during her job hunt.

Choosing manuscripts to be published. It gave her the chance to bring to life many mind blowing novels.

She was positive that mean Mr. Babyface intentionally placed her there. He thought he'd given her the worst job in the office but it turned out to be a source of joy for her.

In a few months, she would be thirty-one which was the age she thought she would be settled with her millionaire husband and two kids, checking through social media and appreciating her fan's comments on her bestseller book. Instead, she was in a publishing company that served lunch that tastes like weed. She could swear she'd seen the cook smuggling some into the food before.

Life really had a way of throwing curve balls and changing one's direction. Was she having second thoughts about her life?

No.

She loved it just the way it was. She could go for an all nighter at the club without the need to tell anyone about her whereabouts. She didn't have kids in diapers staining her expensive Arabian rug with poop or whatnot.

Earlier, Linda had called to complain that her daughter 'cleaned' her personal computer with detergent and bleaching agent. Now, the computer has refused to boot.

No, Lily concluded. She could do without all that stress in her life.

Dragged from her trail of thoughts by a phone call, Lily hurriedly grabbed her purse and put her phone on speaker.

"Lilyyyy!" Linda's voice boomed through the speaker. "You dumb cow, when are you planning on dragging your ass here? We're taking pictures already."

Lily didn't bother to hide her eye roll even though Linda couldn't see it. She was so sure the wedding had barely started, it was so typical of Linda to exaggerate things.

"Make sure you come with your eyelash curler, another voice- Brenda sounded through the phone. "I forgot to bring mine and my lashes are going haywire."

Just Lily's luck, the whole squad was around. The whole married squad was here to remind her of her unmarried state and childless life. Not that they would be doing it intentionally but they would be saying it in the various pitiful stares they threw her way, the way they would stop cuddling with their husbands once she got there.

She really wished they didn't do it because of her. She'd tried many times to tell them she wasn't bothered and she loved her life the way it was but they refused to listen and kept on arranging several blind dates for her.

"Good of you to finally join us," Linda said as Lily walked through the doors of Claire's family house.

Claire was the star of today's show, the second to the last single lady of the clique. But all that would change today once she said 'I do' at the altar. Lily felt really sorry for her, abandoning all that freedom to be shackled to the bondage of marriage but that wasn't wedding material so she shut up instead and plastered a smile on.

"Did you bring the curler Brenda asked you for?" Linda queried.

"I thought you said that you were taking pictures already," Lily said, her eyes throwing accusing glances at Linda. "Why are we still in the family house?"

"It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding so we told the guys to use the hall while the ladies stay here." Linda explained. "This gown is better than it looked on the phone, where did you get it?"

"Ordered it. Where's Claire by the way? I need to bribe her to throw her flowers to a friend of mine. She believes in all these false marriage practices."

"Oh please," Linda scoffed. "That's just baseless superstition. I think Claire's avoiding you. She's still very sorry about not including you in her bridesmaid train. Don't tell her you heard this from me but she's in the garden behind the orange tree. The make-up artist is putting finishing touches to her face."

"Thanks a lot, I'll go see her." Lily said.

"Hello there. How's it going? Any wedding jitters yet?" Lily greeted.

Claire's contour was being adjusted so she doesn't glance up but gave a thumbs up sign and continued staying still. After a while she stood up and stretched.

"There's no going back now, not that I want to." Claire answered. "I'm really sorry about the bridesmaid situation. I couldn't say no to my sister. I wanted to..."

"Look," Lily interjected. "It's not that serious. Ok? If I was in your shoes, I would've looked out for my sister also. I guess it turned out well, I hadn't even bought the cloth yet."

"Is there anything I can do to be of help here?"

"We're done here already. No need to bother yourself."

The splendour of the wedding hall was nothing Lily could've conjured even in her wildest imaginations. To her left, a giant eight tier cake stood with a caricature of the bride and groom on it. The ceilings of the hall was a paneled wood painted glossy black with a plethora of blush peonies.

Lily was half expecting all the peonies to land on her head anytime soon.

The staircase for the groom and bride only, was covered in a deep-burgundy carpet runner instead of the usual red carpet. The long curving flight of stairs was covered in petals of red roses. The hall itself was a mix of Victorian and contemporary without coming off as ugly.

It was indeed a romantic vision and it was stirring feelings Lily had once buried deep within her.

Best to get away from all this and check out the appetisers on display.

Lily made her way up the flight of stairs reserved for the special guests. That was where several tables filled with so many mouth watering dishes were kept. And the key to eating to your fill and still managing to look cool in a wedding

was eating early. At that time, everyone was still trying to make connections and barely any attention was paid to the food.

She spotted the array of appetisers on the tables. Chicken skewers, crab cakes, stuffed mushrooms, shrimp cocktail. Dang! It was just to her taste. Now, all that she needed was to find a way to chase the two women talking animatedly to each other near the table. They only needed to shift a little bit to the front and they would be providing a perfect cover for her gauche activities.

Carefully, she made her way to the table focused on the escargot that seemed to beckon on only her name which was why she didn't notice the perfect gentleman in her path until she crashed into him.

Her nose on his hard, solid chest.

Shit!

Strong wiry hands kept her stable. Her science teacher would have loved his hands, it would've been useful in teaching the various veins he kept trying to drum into their heads.

"Are you okay?" A male's voice interrupted her.

Right! She was still entangled in another guy's arms. Sniffing his cologne and fantasising about his wiry arms.

If only she didn't have to look up and relieve this embarrassing moment. His shoes were rather entertaining with their pointy ends and shining outlook and

she would rather spend eternity looking at them than looking at the guy whose butt she almost landed on the floor.

"Are you alright?" The guy repeated.

Typical of the universe to refuse to listen to her earnest pleas.

Awkwardly, she lifted up her eyes to face the pointy shoe guy. "I'm fine, thank you."

There was a beat of silence as the both of them made a show of checking themselves out. Mr Pointy was impeccably dressed in a brown tuxedo and wire rimmed glasses.

Nerdy and well dressed. A nice match.

He was probably a kindergarten teacher who flossed twice daily and had pajamas for every day of the week.

His brown tuxedo made his brown eyes pop and look more like honey. With all the tuxedos flying, she would bet twenty dollars he was French.

"I'm not French."

"What?"

"I'm British actually," Mr pointy shoes laughed. "I guess you owe me twenty dollars then."

She blushed furiously and lowered her eyes, she really must've lost her marbles if she was going around voicing her inner thoughts.

"Not to worry, I won't charge you," he continued. "Who're you here for? The bride or the groom?"

"The bride. I'm a friend of the bride," she replied.

"Ohh."

This was the problem Lily had with nerds. They never quite knew what to say and Lily wasn't exactly eloquent either so now the universe had two blubbering fools on its hands.

"My name's Ryan," Mr Pointy shoes said.

Right! His name was Ryan, not pointy shoes.

"I'm Lily, Lily Everton," she volunteered, suddenly remembering her sole reason for climbing up the stairs. A quick glance to the left confirmed her fears, the crab and snail sauce was gone and it was all Ryan's fault.

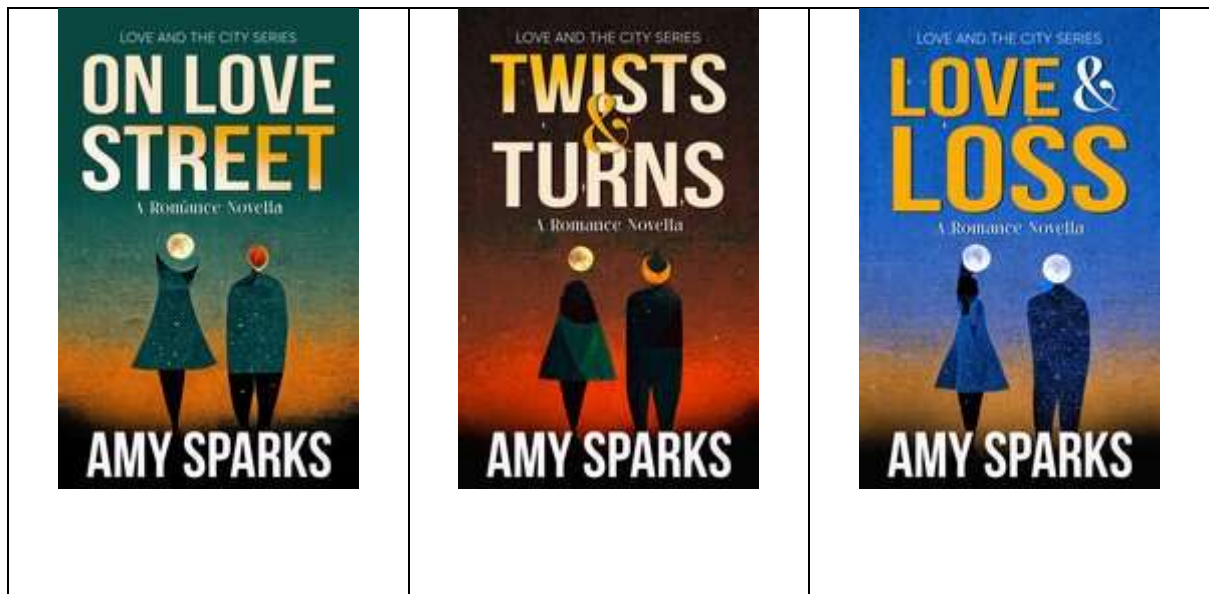
Regretting the words even before they came out of her mouth, she raised her pointy nose which was now bruised by the way. "I'm fine. If you're done interrogating me, can I take my leave?"

It really wasn't her fault. A well cooked crab was hard to come by and Ryan just made her lose her chance to have one.

"I didn- didn't. I wasn't tryin..." Ryan stuttered.

The bewildered look on Ryan's face followed her throughout the wedding and if she was being honest with herself, it followed to the dry steamed sheets in her room.

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Amy writes fast-paced short clean and wholesome romance novels from her home in Canada. Amy lives with her husband and two sons. When she is not writing, she's reading, enjoying life and seeking out new adventures.

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