

LOVE,
INTERRUPTED

CHAPTER ONE

FOR SERENITY

Heat shimmered across the bridge, holding the weight of the low, mid-afternoon sun. He stood at its center. Legs apart, both hands gripped the paint-chipped, green steel rails. His matte-black Harley sat thirty feet to his right, beside a park bench, and under a thin strip of shade that offered nothing.

Below, the river was murky, and higher than usual from the past week of rain. It swirled uncertainly, as if unsure where to go. But it looked cold enough, maybe, to soothe his aching chest. And deep enough, perhaps, to swallow his guilt. And maybe enough to quiet the crashing of metal that still pounded in his head.

A truck sped past in the vehicle lanes. A whiff of diesel. The tension cables trembled and then went still again.

His eyes closed until the vibration left his hands.

A siren wailed in the distance. A flock of geese cackled from below. A woman's voice called for her dog.

And it was quiet again.

Her face came then. Fresh, unfinished, the way it always did when the air got this heavy.

A long while passed.

"Lolo!"

He glanced over. A woman about his age pulled a Boxer pup back on its leash.

"Sit," she said. The dog obeyed, reluctant.

She smiled, wiped her brow. "He's in training. Won't bite."

"I'm not scared of dogs."

She studied him a second longer than was polite.

He turned back to the water without another word.

Hers were the first words spoken to him all day. Maybe longer. He nodded once, then walked to the Harley.

The leather seat was scorching under his jeans, but he didn't flinch. He strapped back his helmet, and then started the engine without checking the mirrors. Moments later the river and the woman disappeared behind him as the engine settled into a low, steady throb.

As he throttled the engine, a thin stream of cool air slipped under his helmet and the city passed in hard white light and reflections off glass. Horns and air-brakes rose and were swallowed again by the Harley's pulse.

A few times, the unfinished face would flicker behind his eyes again, and he would unconsciously grimace as the crashing of metal throbbed at his temples. But he continued to drive.

A green finally emerged out of the chaos of the inner-city concrete and traffic. At first, it was a low horizontal line, then a long patch of grass wrapped in wrought iron gates.

He slowed and eventually stopped at a winding gravel driveway.

A small unassuming sign in green and blue read:

Thyme Wellness Center—Opening Soon!

Below this was a handwritten, laminated sign hanging from chicken wire, its paper yellowed from the years of telling:

No. This property is not for sale. Kindly turn around.

His trained eyes took in the grounds.

It was a huge piece of property that went on forever. Close to the city's downtown core, skyscrapers loomed north in the near distance. He could feel the metal and concrete. Heavy on his back, but he didn't look north. Instead, he looked south.

He was surprised that a place like this still stood in the middle of the metropolitan city. He imagined the proposals—glass towers, underground parking, every square foot monetized—but the property still lay intact.

His eyes drifted to the dozens of drooping oak trees that carved the driveway, moss wrapped around their gnarled trunks.

Decades of stories to tell.

Then farther up to a sandstone manor with darkened arches and glazed window panes.

A shadow from a window on the second floor.

Someone was watching.

He stared for a moment. Then he thought of turning back.

Not because of the shadow, but because of the ghosts from his past.

He took in a shaky breath and pulled off his helmet. Then he shut off the engine. The pt-pt-pt of the Harley subsided, replaced with wind chimes from somewhere in the distance, but there was no wind. Robins chirped from somewhere in the oak trees ahead, but he couldn't see them. A dog barked, an engine throttled, and then there was quiet. Again.

Then his eyes fell on a tiny speck of bright yellow.

Someone else was watching him from the veranda.

"Just walk," he told himself. "Go forward, not back."

The figure in yellow lifted a hand before he'd taken a single step, so he walked.

She was smaller than he had imagined.

Straight, shoulder-length gray hair and vivid blueish-purple eyes. She was wearing a sunflower-yellow yoga top and teal blue pants, a splash of color against the darkness he'd grown to know.

She smiled as she stood, and reached for his hand.

"Ben Van Gorman, I'm Joy Brooks."

He nodded. He forced a grin. He said hello.

Then he followed her into the foyer. Classical music danced from the soaring ceilings. A crystal chandelier glittered like sunlight flirting in a prism. Then the long hallway: arched sandstone doorways and worn wooden floors covered with soft Persian runners.

The library invited him in: high-paned windows, floor-to-ceiling bookcases, and a seating area with an orange velvet sofa and fawn leather chairs.

It was a stark contrast to where he'd been hiding.

Something welcoming tugged at him as he took in the space.

"She's a beauty. How old is she?" he asked as he settled in.

"Built in 1894. My grandfather bought her for cents on the dollar after the war. She's certainly old!"

"I bet she has secrets."

"Oh, and then some!" she grinned.

She was unguarded and genuine—nothing ornamental. This settled him a bit.

"Tchaikovsky," he murmured as the classical chords played from above.

Joy looked impressed. "You know your composers."

He hesitated. "Only a few," he admitted. "I'm intrigued with the lines hidden in classical music."

"It's grounding for the soul." Her eyes softened as she spoke.

"Of course..." Then, "I noticed your sign at the gates. Realtors and developers must be circling."

Joy grimaced. "For years, they have rolled up in fancy cars, wearing too much cologne and a sales pitch I could have written better myself! My mother—she's ill upstairs," she added quickly, "had a great deal more patience than I. That sign is my concierge."

"Does it work?"

"Hardly!" Joy exclaimed in a throaty chuckle. "But pointing the vultures back to the gates is more productive than small talk!"

There it was. A resilience. A quip of humor threaded through hard truth.

"I'm sorry about your mother," he offered then. He had caught vulnerability within her words.

She hesitated for a second. "Thank you. One of the challenges of getting older." Her eyes lingered on his for a moment. "She has round-the-clock nurses," she smiled—but it was quick, as if bracing. "The only way for her to stay at home."

The room suddenly stilled.

His eyes fell to the large black-and-white photographs on the wall.

"Is that your family?" he asked, changing the subject.

Joy glanced across the room. "The first is me with Celine, our Mediterranean chef and cooking teacher, and Marguerite, our curator of our wellness classes. The other is the four generations of us Brooks women. Admittedly, a bit of a complicated bunch."

Ben stood to get a closer look.

"Nice," he said, and then his eyes fixated on the youngest, a teenage girl with long, black hair and wide, dark eyes.

"The young one? Your granddaughter?"

"Yes. That's Zoey. Our half-grown wonder. And the woman beside her is my fire-tongued daughter, Zig. And of course, the older beauty is Olivia, my mother."

His gaze had locked on Zoey and that sudden void filled his chest. He stepped away, cleared his throat, then sank back into his chair.

"Does everyone live here?"

“No. Zig is married to Mo. They live about ten minutes from here on the other side of the river with Zoey and her younger brother Cole. But the rest of us manage. Actually, it's working like clockwork. The manor is big enough to give everyone their privacy, if they need it.”

Then her eyes turned brazen. “Thanks for meeting me, Ben. I woke up on my sixtieth birthday without purpose. I was exploring mind and body exercises and decided to convert this old manor into a place to help women grow stronger as they age. And as you know, I am in desperate need of a skilled operations manager. But you are clearly overqualified for this position.”

He had expected this. Even during their video calls, Joy had seemed unconvinced that someone with his background would choose a position like this.

Now, face-to-face, she studied him with the same quiet patience. She wasn't asking for credentials. She was asking for the truth.

He held her gaze. For a fleeting moment, something tightened behind his eyes.

“Joy, it sounds like the energetic quiet I need at this stage in my life,” he said slowly, as though trying the words on himself before offering them to her. “If that makes logical sense.”

Joy nodded slowly. “I think it does. So, are you still interested?”

“I am.”

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed softly, her wise eyes on his. “I am certain that this is a great fit for everyone. And it’s calm here.”

He lit up for a second as she dangled a thread of relief.

“Calm is a gift,” he said. He heard his voice almost crack.

“It is, isn't it?” she replied warmly. And then she stood. “Let's tour the property before we meet the others?”

They walked from the great room to the dining room, from the reborn ballroom and sitting rooms to a gleaming kitchen and cooking studio. Then from the attached Victorian-style greenhouse to the stables—his future home.

“Needs a good renovation,” Joy said, “but this would be your private space.”

His lips curled. “The horse and buggy stables,” he said as his eyes spanned the room. “Brick’s in good shape. High ceilings. Immense potential,” he said quietly, as if to himself.

“Come,” she gently prodded after a bit. Then she led him across the east side of the estate to the natural forest. It was dense with firs and poplars, and wildflowers popped up sporadically in the dirt. The sun snuck through the treetops in a warm light as she led him down a worn path to a river that moved slowly—as if in no hurry at all.

“I thought I’d show this oasis. It’s owned by the city, but it’s a quiet escape from the noise that sometimes fills our heads.”

He glanced at her sideways with her last words, then crouched on the low embankment. “A beauty,” he said.

She sat beside him amidst stones smoothed by decades of current. “I come here when I need a quiet break,” she said quietly.

The distant call of an owl drifted through the trees.

“Over there,” Joy pointed north, “is a parliament of barred owls. Sometimes, we hear them at night.”

“Owls. Majestic birds.”

Joy did a double take. “You won’t be thinking that when they wake you at night! And a warning. They will!”

"I'm not too worried about a couple of birds," Ben felt the grin easily fall to his lips, and then he pulled himself up. "I'll make you a deal," he said as he reached for her hand.

Something pulled at his fingers as he wrapped hers with surprising strength. Her thumb brushed against his knuckle—and he tightened his grip ever so slightly, to give her a rare steadiness in a world that had often let him down.

"What kind of deal?" she asked as she stood.

"I have one small request."

"And what is that?"

His eyes held hers, steady and unblinking. "I have some practical ideas to renovate the stables, which I think you will like. But I don't want my architectural work made public. That was my past life. Not looking back."

The depth in her eyes was intense. He'd let down his armor, he thought.

"Of course," she agreed.

As they turned to go back, Ben bent and pressed a smooth, dark stone into her palm.

"Pocket stone. For serenity."

"Thank you," she grinned.

"It's just a rock."

Her fingers curled around it, their eyes locked. And, ever so briefly, something flickered—grounding and awakened in one.

"Ready to meet the others?" she asked.

His eyes lit up. "Let's do it."

As they walked back toward the manor, he caught the shadow in the window, and Joy chuckled low.

“That’s Olivia. My mother. Don’t worry about her. That is her window to another world, I sometimes think.”

Ben nodded. The shadow didn’t move. For the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel the urge to turn back.

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