

Hard to Hold

He switches sides without saying a word, placing himself between me and the street like it's instinct. The wind catches the edge of my coat, and his fingers tighten slightly around mine. It's strange how protection can feel so quiet. I grew up thinking love was something you had to dodge or survive. But here, walking beside him, I wonder if I was just looking in the wrong direction.

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When she was little, she watched a man—her stepfather—teach her mother how small she was allowed to be. He didn't need to yell all the time; sometimes silence was sharper. The clink of his keys in the door, the way the air shifted when he entered—it was enough. She learned early that men could make themselves loud without raising their voices. That love came with tension, with conditions, with the need to constantly read the weather of someone else's moods.

Looking back now, she sees a little girl who studied everything. The curve of her mother's back as she made herself smaller. The way footsteps changed tempo depending on his mood. She learned to anticipate catastrophe. She memorized the silences, the patterns, the invisible rules that held their home together like tape over a crack. And somewhere in all that watching, she made a quiet vow: never again. Never let a man be the weather.

It was easy, growing up, to avoid men. Easier still to let every interaction stay shallow—smiles, nods, a little charm if necessary, but never too much. Never deep enough to risk anything real. That part of her, the one that still wanted connection, was easy to silence. She told herself she didn't need affection, didn't crave softness, didn't want to be known. So she learned to need less—or at least to perform needing less.

Her feelings stayed tucked away, carefully managed, like letters she addressed but never sent. Love, if it showed up at all, was greeted with suspicion. Connection felt like standing too close to a ledge: visible in a way that terrified her. So she positioned herself in the space between—independent, unbothered, always fine. That was the armor. It looked like confidence. It sounded like detachment. Most people believed it. She even believed it, for a while.

One person came close—closer than anyone else ever had. A woman with a laugh that filled rooms and a mind that never sat still. She was all brightness and depth, the kind of person who made you want to find better words just to keep up. They met in high school and stayed in each other's orbit for three years. Three years of near-misses and long, winding conversations that felt like they belonged to a different kind of life.

They talked about everything and nothing—books that changed their thinking, the particular color of the sky at dusk, the kind of love they thought they deserved. Sometimes they sat in silence, not because the words had dried up, but because the air between them was thick with something unsaid, something fragile. There was always a reason not to say it, not to reach across that charged space. The timing was wrong. The image of two women together. The moment was too delicate. She told herself she didn't want to ruin what they had. But really, she was afraid that if she stepped forward, everything might give way.

So she lingered at arm's length. They shared coffees on rainy afternoons and walked under streetlamps that flickered the same way her heart did when they were near. There were inside jokes only they understood, and the kind of teasing that made her laugh harder than she had in years. It was a friendship threaded with something heavier, but she kept pulling those threads tight, afraid of what might unravel.

Then, without warning, the woman found someone else—a boyfriend. The news arrived gently enough, but it landed with weight. The dynamic shifted. The space between them didn't disappear—it calcified. It became something with edges. Conversations grew shorter. Laughter came less often. The calls stopped. The messages dried up.

It was the first time she truly understood what it meant to lose someone she had never fully claimed. It wasn't the sharp kind of heartbreak—it was slower, more disorienting. It was like surfacing from a dream and realizing, too late, that the person she'd wanted to hold had been pulling away the whole time. And it hurt in a way that surprised her—not like loss, but like reckoning. Like understanding that in trying to protect herself from pain, she had built a room and locked herself inside it.

That lesson settled somewhere permanent. If she didn't move—if she stayed cautious, distant, waiting—then the people she cared for would go. Not because they wanted to leave, but because she had never let them fully arrive.

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In later years, something shifted. She met him in college, a familiar face in the friend group. At first glance, she read him easily: charming, quick-witted, comfortable in every room. The kind of person who seemed to have already decided how things would go. She wasn't interested. She had seen enough of that type. Besides, she was used to attention—people asked her out often, sometimes relentlessly. Every invitation was met with a quiet but firm no. She didn't want surface-level. She needed something that cost something.

But as the months passed and their paths kept crossing, something unexpected took shape. He was funny, yes—genuinely funny—but not in the way she'd anticipated. His humor didn't perform for the room; it appeared in the middle of conversations, unpredictable and dry,

and caught her off guard. And underneath the ease was something else: a quiet self-possession that didn't announce itself. He didn't bend to the opinions of people who hadn't earned the right to matter to him. She found herself respecting that more than she wanted to admit.

She noticed how he showed up for his coursework, how he brought the same seriousness to basketball practice. She noticed the little things—how he walked her home after nights out, how she insisted it was *just friends* even as the brush of his hand against hers registered somewhere she didn't want to examine. She liked that he never pushed for answers she hadn't offered. And when he talked about his parents, there was a tenderness in his voice that landed in places she hadn't known were still tender.

Slowly, almost without permission, she found herself falling. But falling felt like standing at the edge of a map—no lines, no markings, no guarantee of solid ground. Months passed with quiet gestures—small touches, held looks, favors done without announcement—but to him, they might as well have been invisible. What she didn't know was that he had never been in love before either. Like her, he had learned to keep his vulnerabilities behind glass.

She had never been the one to move first. The fact that he showed no obvious romantic interest puzzled and pulled at her simultaneously. It was as though they were two people who had both decided, separately, to stand still and wait. The more time they spent together, the deeper their conversations went—sometimes late into the night, voices low, saying things that felt confessional. And then one night, their lips met in a kiss that was tentative and real—two people who had spent a long time being careful, finding an unsteady but genuine rhythm.

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In the early days, late at night, when the house finally went quiet, she lay awake. The stillness wasn't peaceful—it had mass, a kind of pressure. From behind the thin walls, she could

hear them. Her mother's voice: low, threaded with exhaustion and something close to fear. His voice: harsh and abrupt, arriving without warning like a sound that didn't belong to the room. Those fights weren't just words—they were the kind of violence that doesn't leave marks you can point to. Her body stiffened. She shivered under her blanket in the dark.

She was eight years old, old enough to feel the weight of things she couldn't name. She would sit outside their locked bedroom door, heart slamming, hands clenched in her lap. The urge to go in, to put her body between her mother and whatever was happening—it was fierce and useless and real. But fear held her back. Fear of what crossed lines looked like. So she stayed in the hallway, a child learning that the people who were supposed to be safe could be the source of the danger.

Then there was the night the anger moved outside. She followed it. She crawled along the side of the house and pressed herself into the bushes near the street, leaves rough against her skin, trying to disappear. And then she heard it—a slap. The sound of it cut through everything else. It was not ambiguous. It confirmed every fear she had been trying to store somewhere she wouldn't have to look at.

Her mother's crying came next—quiet, fractured. It tore through her. She pressed her palm over her own mouth, holding back the sound rising in her chest. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run at him. She wanted to be bigger than she was. Instead, she turned and ran inside, feet hitting the floor, retreating into the silence that felt safer than the alternative.

Those nights carved grooves in her. She never told her mother what she had seen. She buried it where she buried everything—far back, where it couldn't be touched. But it didn't stay buried. It reshaped her. It taught her what closeness could cost.

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When you grow up hearing cruelty where there should be warmth, it rewires something essential. She learned early that the people closest to you were also the most capable of damage. So she built distance into every connection—not as cruelty, but as self-preservation. Men, in particular, carried a specific kind of threat in her mind long before she could articulate why. She kept relationships manageable, the way you keep a window open just enough for air but not wide enough for anything to come through.

This distance followed her into adulthood. When people showed interest, she withdrew. Even when she met someone gentle, consistent, unhurried—some part of her stayed braced. She questioned the calm. She distrusted the steadiness. She had grown up waiting for warmth to reverse itself without warning.

But then, slowly, things started to move differently. He was patient in a way that didn't feel strategic. He didn't demand entry when she went quiet. He just stayed—close enough to be felt, far enough not to press. His quiet strength, the way he respected what she hadn't even had to ask for, began to work on her like water on stone: not dramatic, just persistent.

The memories of her mother's pain were always there, living in the margins. But with him, those margins began to shrink. It was slow. There were setbacks. There were days when his kindness felt like a trap she hadn't found the mechanism of yet. But for the first time, she allowed herself to imagine a future where love didn't announce itself with damage.

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He tells her she's beautiful.

Not the way men say it when they want something—tossed out like loose change. He says it quietly, like he's naming something he's been observing for a long time. She laughs it off,

deflects, puts up her hand as if the words are too much to hold. It isn't modesty. It's reflex. Her body learned long ago not to trust free affection—to look for the cost underneath it.

She smiles when people compliment her, but the smile doesn't go anywhere deep. She was raised on praise that arrived with a condition attached. She learned that love was something you earned through sacrifice and silence, not something that simply arrived and stayed. So when he says *I'm lucky to have you*, something in her contracts: *Why? What have I done wrong that you haven't noticed yet?*

She wants to believe him. She does. But belief requires a kind of trust she was never shown how to hold. So she deflects. Changes the subject. Makes a joke. Looks away.

Because if she lets his words actually land—really land—they'll press against every old bruise. The voices that told her she was too much, not enough, too difficult, too needy, too distant, too broken to be chosen without eventually being put down. And if she believes him—if she allows herself to think she is worth this—what happens when it ends? She has never known a man who stayed without eventually breaking something. She has never known a woman who loved her without eventually making her feel like a weight to be carried.

So love—the kind that asks nothing and still sees everything—feels foreign. Like stepping into warm water after years in the cold: your body doesn't know how to let go. It keeps waiting for the change in temperature.

But still, he stays. He calls her beautiful in the mornings, when her hair is tangled and her eyes are swollen with sleep. He calls her brilliant when she solves something small. He calls her kind when she doesn't feel like she is.

Slowly, painfully, she tries to let him in. Not with declarations, but with smaller things: a text that says *thank you*. A hand held longer than usual. A compliment she stumbles through, face warm.

She is learning—haltingly, imperfectly—that maybe love isn't a mechanism designed to eventually fail. Maybe it's a door left open. And maybe she's allowed to walk through it.

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Their first date as something more than friends didn't start like a film. No grand entrance, no music rising in the background. Just two people in a tucked-away restaurant, a table small enough that their knees touched underneath it, which they both pretended not to notice.

They started talking about parents. He went first, speaking with a lightness that surprised her—his stories held humor and warmth even where they were hard. He didn't perform resilience; it was just how he moved through the telling. And then somehow it was her turn, and something in her shifted.

She didn't say everything. Not about the stepfather. Not about the slammed doors or the sounds that came through walls. But she told him pieces—that her mother had expectations that felt like a narrow corridor, that love was never something she'd felt safe inside. That silence had often been easier than explaining why she had to do everything perfectly just to be tolerated.

He didn't interrupt. Just listened, eyes on her face, brow slightly furrowed—holding her words with something careful. When she finished, heart going fast, unsure if she'd said too much, he didn't pull away. He nodded. Then he offered his own pieces—not to compete, but to meet her somewhere.

Later, they shared a bowl of Korean shaved ice that melted faster than they could eat it. Her spoon kept hitting his. She pretended to be annoyed; she was smiling. He said he liked the

way she smiled. She rolled her eyes. He said he liked her laugh too. Something in her almost gave way.

They talked about what they wanted. What they were afraid of. She heard herself saying things she hadn't fully said to herself before—that she sometimes frightened herself, how quickly she could disappear when things got close.

He looked at her and said, *So—should we make it official?*

She raised her eyebrows. *You have to ask the real question.*

He grinned—half nervous, half easy—and said, *Okay. Will you be my girlfriend?*

She looked at him for a moment. Her heart did that quiet, seismic thing that meant something was shifting. Then she said *yes*, and took another bite of ice cream, trying to look unbothered, even though everything inside her had just tilted toward something real.

For the first time in a long time, she didn't feel like she needed to find the exit.

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Being in a relationship was easier in theory.

In practice, it was waking up some mornings with dread pooled in her chest, certain she would say the wrong thing and watch it all come apart. It was watching him make breakfast in his apartment kitchen—barefoot, humming off-key, completely unself-conscious—and feeling the urge to say something cutting. Not because he deserved it. Because comfort still made her nervous, and she knew how to use sharpness the way other people used distance.

She didn't always know how to be gentle with love. Sometimes it came out sideways—in sarcasm, in silence, in a coldness that arrived without warning and confused them both. But he was patient in a way that didn't feel like waiting her out. When she recoiled at a compliment, he

didn't push. When she went quiet after a hard day, he didn't demand to be let in—he simply stayed near enough that she knew she wasn't alone, far enough that she could breathe.

There were easy days. Laughing in bed until it hurt. Making to-do lists together like they were planning something larger than either of them said out loud. Her feet tucked under his legs on the couch—a kind of ordinary tenderness she had only ever seen from the outside before.

But there were also days when she was something he couldn't reach, when his steadiness landed like suspicion rather than safety. She had grown up knowing warmth could reverse without announcement. Knowing that affection arrived with a bill you'd pay eventually.

And yet he stayed—not loudly, not with speeches, but in the accumulation of small, daily choices. He held her hand without asking. He sent her things that made him think of her. He told her she was beautiful and, slowly, made her believe it was something other than a setup.

She was learning that love didn't have to be loud or cruel to be real. That intimacy wasn't the same as invasion. That letting someone see her wasn't the same as handing them something to use.

And when she looked at him now—really looked—she saw not just the man who asked the real question over a bowl of shaved ice, but someone who had quietly, steadily, been teaching her that she was safe enough to stay.

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School was over, and her mother came to New York to visit. The restaurant was tucked into a quiet corner of the Lower East Side—a narrow door and a paper lantern outside, warm wood and low voices inside. Two small bottles of sake sat between them, slowly emptying. They poured for each other the way tradition asked, and talked in that slow, unhurried register that only arrives when there's no one left to perform for.

Her mother looked good. Better than usual. The move to Colorado had done something for her—there was color in her face, and the edge in her voice had softened. They started with the safe things: classes, semesters, the friend drama that had already resolved itself.

Then came Lambo—the three-legged toy poodle who treated every delivery driver like a personal threat—and her brother, who had studied abroad in Morocco, Nepal, Ecuador. "I can't believe he ate live worms," her mother said, and they both laughed, even though they'd heard it before.

The conversation opened up after that. No old barbs. No careful navigation around the unsaid. Just the two of them, unhurried, taking up space together without it feeling precarious. And then she told her about him.

She talked about how they met through friends, how she had dismissed him at first, how he had surprised her. The way he walked her home. The way he didn't pry. How funny he was. How steady. She spoke carefully, like she was carrying something that mattered. Her mother listened. No jokes. No sideways comments. Just stillness. Then she smiled and said, *He's a real romantic, huh?*

She blinked. *Yeah*, she said. *He really is.*

He sounds like such a good person, her mother continued. *I'm happy for you.*

It landed harder than she expected. Not because she needed the approval—but because she realized she didn't. She simply hadn't expected it to feel like this. Like a version of her mother she could trust in moments like this one.

They refilled their cups. The second bottle was almost gone. They were just warm enough to say things they might have kept to themselves otherwise.

Outside, the wind had picked up. The city doesn't go quiet, but something about this part of the night made it feel like it had tried.

They walked together to the subway, arms brushing occasionally, neither one pushing toward goodbye. At the top of the steps, her mother turned to her.

I'm proud of you, she said.

She paused. Not because she didn't believe it. But because she did.

Thanks, Mom, she said.

And meant it.