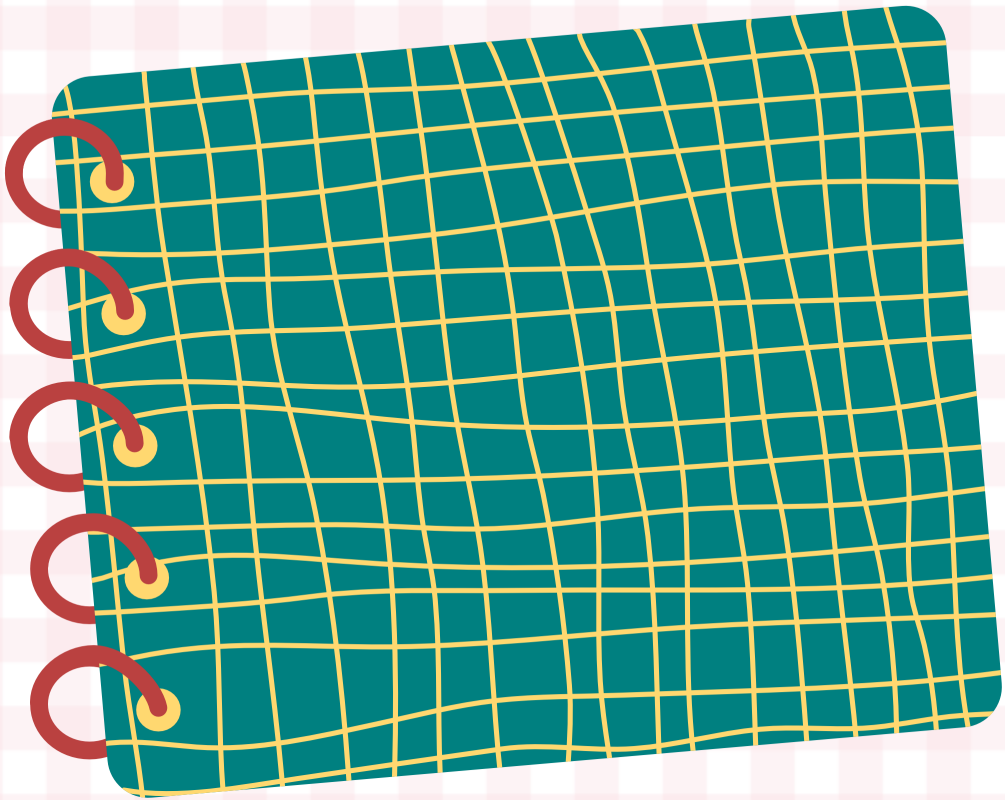


Little Gift



Ellie Owen

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The tip of his fingers are tainted black with ink, yet the creamy page of the scrapbook he'd been working on for Thea remains immaculately clean for the exception of the reviews Adrian copied, for the magazine cutouts that spoke of Thea's debut and cutouts from all of the bestseller lists Thea had hit within a week of her book being released.

It had been almost two months since her book was out into the world, and Adrian had been collecting those small trophies for Thea, wanting the memory of her growing success when she was too busy doing interviews on national (and international) television.

Adrian could hear Thea's voice echoing down the hallway, where she was recording her second podcast of the day, laughing and getting excited to talk with people about her book even when their questions are often similar and lacked the depth of what her story is about.

It had been in those moments that Adrian worked on her gift when he physically couldn't be in the room with her despite his yearning to catch every moment of her happiness, every moment of Thea basking in her dream coming true.

Yet, Adrian couldn't deny it would've been quicker to finish the scrapbook if Adrian didn't trail after Thea like a lost puppy, often with his arms around her body, keeping her close and warm against the cold winter.

Neither cared that the heating in the penthouse was state of the art, or that Adrian would bundle Thea up whenever they left the apartment as if she had never lived through a New York winter and didn't know how to dress for the occasion.

Can we talk about your personal life for a bit? The interviewer asks and Adrian stops rubbing glue against the back of a cutout.

Adrian preens a little, preparing himself to hear all sorts of compliments, to have Thea claiming him as her boyfriend for the world to hear—or at least the seven thousand monthly listeners the podcast has.

“Do we have to?” Thea asks with a nervous laugh. “I’m not sure the people in my life want me to speak about them publicly.”

My goodness, no, we don’t have to talk about anything you aren’t comfortable with. I’m just curious about who you’re as a person, if you have your happily ever after, or are still looking for the one.

“Well, I don’t know if publishing my book is my happily ever after, if the success it had so far is my happily ever after, or if I had my happily ever after when I was still working as a waitress.”

Is that when you met someone special?

“It is.”

Has he inspired a lot of the romance in your debut novel?

“No, I met him after the book was written, but he rekindle dreams that were withering. I wouldn’t be here without him.”

You say that with a smile, the woman says and Adrian giggles to himself, happy to be someone Thea speaks about with a smile. You have lots to be happy about, don’t you?

“It’s a new experience to have, but I do.”

Well, Thea, I’m so glad you agreed to sit down for a chat, your book was amazing and I’m glad it’s getting the recognition it deserved.

Adrian stops paying attention to their farewell as he begins to hide his scrapbooking material—tossing under the couch

all of his pens in an array of colors, washi tape, glue stick, and the border of the papers he cut out.

He can hear Thea exchanging pleasantries, expressing her gratitude for being asked to be a guest on the podcast, and for how enjoyable the conversation was, yet all Adrian can focus on is hiding his mess and placing the scrapbook in the velvety box he bought for his gift.

Wanting the packing to have the elegance an art project often lacked, especially when it was his first time doing such a thing, and Cove's guidance could only take Adrian so far.

Tying the green bow around the box, Adrian strains to hear footsteps, pleading with God that Thea won't come out into the living room before he can do its finishing touches.

"Adrian?" Thea calls out for him, chair gliding against the floor as she stands up, stretching herself while lingering in front of her desk. "Adrian? I'm kinda hungry, do you want to go out for lunch, should we order, or do we cook something for ourselves?"

In lieu of an answer, Adrian ventures down the hallway, keeping his hands behind his back to hide the gift from Thea. His heart beats a little too fast for something so small, for a gift that he didn't spend more than \$100.

Maybe Thea Tea will hate it, Adrian muses, wondering if maybe he should buy her something instead of a gift that is imbued with Zoe's annoyance since his desk at work had been consumed by scrapbooking, most of his duties relinquished to Margo so he could work on putting all of those medals in a single place for Thea to look back on.

“Adrian?” Thea calls once more, the soft pitter-patter of her barefoot echoing gently against the walls adorned by art pieces.

Some of which had been swamped to fit Thea’s taste or because she’d been too nervous with living in a place with such important art pieces that held so much monetary value, but also value to human history as a whole.

Thea feared she’d somehow destroy those pieces, maybe trip and make an ancient vase shatter, that she’d soil something by coming too close to it, fearing his parents wouldn’t like her if something happened to their art.

“Adri—hi,” Thea greets him when she steps out into the hallway only to smack her face against his chest. “Why weren’t you answering me?”

“I have lots to be happy about, and hearing you call my name is top of the list.” Thea rolls her eyes at Adrian as she mimics his stance, placing her hands behind her back. “Did you have fun?”

Sustaining his gaze with a meek smile on her lips, Thea nods slowly, inching closer to Adrian until her chin is resting against his chest.

“My heart is so happy when I get to talk to people about my book, it makes all the tears I shed to have been worth, it makes all the suffering worth it. I’m so happy, Adrian.”

“I’m happy for you, Thea Tea.”

“I know you’re, but what are you hiding?” Her smile blossoms as Thea lifts a hand toward his cheek, caressing the line between his smooth skin and his unshaven face.

“Just a little gift.”

Thea pulls away, stretching her hands forward as she opens and closes her fingers in a movement that silently asks for her gift to be handed over.

Weaving his fingers through hers, Adrian leads Thea back into the office that she only used to record interviews—preferring to write her stories in the comfort of their couch where he could place his feet on his lap and steal glances at Adrian when he was busy editing.

Adrian lifts Thea onto the vintage pedestal desk, her fingers brushing against the soft leather inserted in the inlaid top where the gold emphasizing the decorative indented pattern has long faded from the ruby leather.

“What did you get me this time?” Thea probes, legs swaying back and forth. “It’s not expensive, is it?”

“No, it’s not. It’s probably the least expensive gift, at least if we aren’t counting the cookies I buy you on my way home from work.”

“I do love my cookies. Gift?”

Chuckling Adrian places the dark and slender box against the palm of her hands. Grey eyes linger on her face, peeling back the momentary wonder that flits over her face as Thea enjoys the velvety texture.

“Hum, what could it be?” Thea murmurs, bringing the box to her ear as she shakes it lightly, but the tissue paper keeps the scrapbook from moving too much. “Am I torturing you?”

“A little.”

“Good.”

Adrian moves his hand toward Thea’s knee, it’s an innocent touch but one that pleads for her to just open the gift so he knows if he has finally dethroned Aaron as being the one who

has given Thea the most meaningful gift she had ever received.

Not that Adrian only thought of a scrapbook with her achievements as a way to dethrone Aaron—that was simply a bonus to giving Thea an anchor to hold on to if things ever got hard again.

Adrian didn't ever want Thea to venture into the darkness, didn't want her to lose herself in her sorrow when she had always been light.

She'll move from the dark side of the moon toward something lighter, a medium had told Adrian all those months ago.

Now, Adrian realizes that Thea had always been the moon herself; glowing and illuminating the world through its darkness, but for Thea to be able to do that, she needed someone or something to cast its light over her.

Thea pulls on the green ribbon, biting on her lips as she always did when his gifts revolved around the color green, carrying the silent message that she looked beautiful in the color, that she'd been verdant in his eyes, reminding Adrian of early spring days with her beauty.

“Oh, a book?” She mutters, placing the lid of the box beside herself. “Is this a baby book you want us to fill one day?”

“No, but that will come one day too.”

Thea laughs lazily, unaware of how Adrian took notice of how her smiles and laughter grew more frequent since the moment she sent her final manuscript proof to her editor.

Despair had grown into hope, and hope had blossomed into happiness, Adrian muses, enthralled by Thea as she takes the wide book from its box.

Fingers trace around the teal hardcover that has accents in yellow—their favorite color and a reminder that Adrian always remembered those small details about her.

The beautiful smile falters when Thea opens the book, eyes seeking every detail in the reviews Adrian had written in different handwriting as if they were etched into those pages by the reviewers themselves; seeking the photos glued down with the beautiful and aesthetically pleasing posts he'd found on social media as people were excited for her book, loving Thea's characters as soon as they began reading their story.

Her beautiful brown eyes notice everything until silvery tears line them, making it impossible for her to see anything through the happiness she cannot contain within her body.

“Adrian...” Thea breathes his name, lips quivering as she raises her gaze to meet his.

“I know it's not much, but I wanted you to have these moments that show how much people enjoyed your writing, that shows people connected with your characters and that they loved it. All of the reviews I chose are by people who didn't receive an ARC, I know you'd have in the back of your mind that maybe they only liked your book because it was free, but no, they loved your book because it was great, but I know you so—”

“I love it,” Thea speaks over him, sliding to the edge of the desk as she wraps her arms around his waist with the scrapbook pressed between their chests. “Thank you.”

“You don't have to thank me, I just put together what others have said. You did the hard work and they were the ones who gave meaning to your efforts.”