

## The proposal

(Derek)

The following morning came, and since it was Sunday, I didn't have to worry about going to work. I was up before Olivia and took the opportunity to get ready and prepare breakfast. I made my way downstairs, trying to focus on the conversation I was planning to have with her.

I hoped it would be something she'd want to consider, but I was unsure how she'd react.

As I worked in the kitchen, the smell of bacon and eggs started to fill the house. I tried to clear my mind and think about the best way to start.

When Olivia finally came downstairs, she looked more relaxed and had a hint of a smile on her face. I set the table, and we sat down to eat. The conversation started casually, but I could tell it was time to address what had been on my mind.

"Olivia," I began, trying to sound as calm and sincere as possible.

"There's something I want to discuss with you. I know you've been through a lot, and I've been thinking about how I can help you." Her eyes met mine, and I saw that she was curious.

"What is it?" she asked, leaning in slightly.

"I know it's probably too soon, and you might find this a bit out of the blue," I said.

"But I've been considering a way to offer you more than just support. I want to propose something that could change everything for you." Her brows furrowed slightly as she took a sip of her coffee.

"Go on," she encouraged.

"What if," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"We could turn this situation around in a way that not only helps you heal but also serves as a form of retribution against Aaron and your family. I'm thinking of offering you a chance to start over with everything you could ever want or need. I'm talking about marrying you and ensuring you're set for life, financially and emotionally." Olivia's eyes widened in surprise, and I could see her processing my offer. I held my breath, waiting for her reaction.

"Marry me," I continued,

"And I'll make sure that Aaron and your family pay for what they've done to you. You'd have all the resources to live comfortably, beyond your wildest dreams. It's a way to not only get back at them but to rebuild your life on your terms." She was silent for a moment, clearly torn. Her gaze dropped to her plate, her fingers nervously playing with the edge of her napkin.

"I—" she started, but her voice trailed off. I could see the conflict in her eyes and the hesitation that came with such a significant decision.

I reached out and took her hand in mine, squeezing it gently.

"You don't have to decide right now," I said softly.

"Take your time. But know that I'm here, ready to support you in any way I can."

Olivia looked up at me, her eyes filled with uncertainty. The silence stretched between us as she considered what I had proposed.

"Can I think about it? I just got divorced I don't want to rush into another marriage so soon. It's only been a day." I nodded my head, expecting that much.

I could see the uncertainty in her eyes, and I didn't blame her. My proposal was a lot to take in, especially considering everything she had just been through.

Olivia had just left one marriage behind, and here I was, suggesting another. But I meant every word, and I wanted her to know that. She deserved better than the pain she'd been dealt, and I could give that to her if she let me.

"I don't want you to feel rushed," I added softly, still holding her hand. Her fingers were cool against mine, and I gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"I know it's only been a day, and this is a lot to think about. But I wanted to put it out there because... I care about you, Olivia. More than you realize." Her gaze lifted to meet mine again, and I could see the conflict in her eyes, the way she was thinking about everything.

There was something about Olivia that made me want to shield her from all the pain, to take on her burdens and make sure she never had to deal with another sleepless night or tear-stained pillow. But I also knew I couldn't force this. I wouldn't. It had to be her choice.

"I appreciate you saying that, Derek," she said quietly, pulling her hand back.

"But... I don't know if I'm ready. I mean, I know I'm not. My divorce papers were thrown in my face yesterday. How can I even think about marriage again?" She was right, of course. It wasn't fair of me to ask so soon.

But the idea of her slipping away, of her letting the pain win, nagged me. I wanted her to see what I could offer, how we could move forward together, and not let Aaron's betrayal define her.

"I get it," I said, leaning back in my chair.

"I'm not trying to push you into anything you're not ready for. Just... know that the offer is there. You deserve to be with someone who cares about you, Olivia. Someone who'll stand by you, no matter what." She took a deep breath, her eyes drifting to the window.

There was so much strength in her, so much that she had endured. She'd been knocked down, but she wasn't broken. Not by a long shot.

"I've been so used to people making decisions for me," she said after a long silence.

"Aaron, my family... It's hard to even imagine starting over on my terms. And marrying you, Derek, as much as I appreciate the offer, it feels like I'd be jumping into something before I've even had the chance to catch my breath."

"I understand," I said quietly. And I did. Olivia had every right to be cautious and to take her time.

"But just know that whatever you decide, I'm here for you. Even if you just need someone to talk to. No strings attached." She gave me a small, grateful smile, and for a moment, I felt like I'd said the right thing.

Maybe that was enough for now. Maybe being here, giving her the space and support she needed, was all I could do.

We finished breakfast in comfortable silence, but I kept thinking about the conversation we had.

I didn't want to push her too hard, but I also didn't want to sit back and watch her struggle.

There was something about Olivia that drew me in, something more than just her beauty or the situation she was in. It was her spirit, her determination to get through the mess she'd been left with. And damn it, I wanted to be the one to help her do that.

Later, after we cleaned up and the dishes were put away, Olivia wandered into the living room, curling up on the couch with a book.

I stood in the kitchen for a moment, just watching her. I knew it was going to take time, and I was willing to give her that. But I couldn't stop the feeling that this was the start of something. Something better for the two of us.

And as I leaned against the counter, thinking about everything that had been said, I knew one thing for sure: I wasn't going anywhere.

Whether she wanted me as her husband or just as her friend, I was going to be in her corner. No matter what.