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THE LAST TIME

crystal lee

The first time he heard her say his name, it was their sophomore year of college.

When they met, he held out his hand. "Adrien. Nice to meet you."

She shook it, her palm cool on his. "Adrien," she said, committing his name to memory, her smile a polite curve. "Nice to meet you."

He wondered when the last time he heard her say it would be. It wasn't—

When they started to meet during lunch, when he tossed a crumb at her or pinched her cheeks with dirty fingers, and she would shriek, "Adrien!", her mouth pressed into insincere reproach, laughter still shining through at one or two tweaked corners, and his heart would beat a little faster.

It wasn't—

When they were studying together and fell asleep on her bed and she shook him awake, her eyes half-closed, the air around them still in a rare, warm moment of peace, and she said, "Adrien," her voice husky from sleep, and he yearned to pull her back next to him, to let them lie there forever, but he instead rose and returned to his dorm room, cheeks flushed and eyes closed to preserve the soft comfort of her bed and her skin.

It somehow wasn't—

When she found him sneaking back into his room next to hers, his breath heavy with alcohol and his head dizzy with bright lights and dance music, his face and neck stained with smudged makeup, she leaned against her door frame, arms folded, eyes narrowed. "Adrien," she'd said, tongue shaping and spitting out his name, and he remembered that he'd promised to take her to the town that evening, that she had said it would be...special. He flinched as her door slammed against his outreached hand.

It wasn't—

When he broke his arm, ripped the ligaments playing rugby. She was next to his hospital bed, cradling his hand between two of her own. "Adrien," she'd said, her frown small and sad, and it tore at his heart like the fall had torn at his arm, and reminded him of something he'd been trying to ignore for far too long, and he leaned over and kissed her for the first time.

It wasn't—

When she called him on Christmas Eve, her breath shuddering through the phone. "Adrien," she'd said, and then her voice broke, spilling her heavy grief through the phone lines, and that night, time zones and insurmountable distance were almost erased as he listened to the sound of her falling asleep on the other end.

Thank goodness it wasn't—

When, in front of a Ferris wheel, the lights twinkling in the warm night, he knelt down on one knee. "Adrien," she'd said, her mouth trembling, with the fear of losing him, he learned as they lay in bed later, limbs curled around each other. Not a no, but a later, and that was enough for him as their lips touched and their love filled his heart to a wonderful breaking point.

It wouldn't be, couldn't be—

When they were pulled apart, her departure his departure all coming too soon, and she'd said, "Adrien." He memorized the compressed line of her mouth a dam against the river behind her eyes, the promise in her voice, the see-you-hopefully-soon kiss that ached on his lips as she walked away.

Is it?—

When they left each other, standing too far apart in a frozen train station. "Adrien," she'd said, her mouth set and eyes sad—no promise this time.

But it wasn't the last time he heard her voice say his name—he heard it all the time—

When he replayed her voicemails. "Adrien." Her laugh.

When he missed her, her voice indelible in his mind. "Adrien," and the amused quirk of her mouth.

But then, years later, he impossibly, improbably, unbelievably, *finally* saw her, recognized her profile after years of pasting it onto the bodies of strangers, when he crept up behind her, pressing his fingers into her sides; when she spun around, eyebrows raised in indignation, falling silent when she saw.

"Adrien," she said, and she was smiling, and—

It wasn't.