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Ghostwritten Hearts

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Introduction

New York City, to most, is the beating heart of possibility—endless, buzzing, relentlessly alive. But tonight, Olivia Marks feels like a ghost flickering at the edge of the city’s neon glow. Her literary debut once knocked the world off its axis and launched her into the stratosphere of up-and-coming authors. That victory, however, feels distant now—swallowed up by years of doubt, creative drought, and blank pages. Outside, the city dreams in yellow taxicabs and cafe lights. Inside Olivia’s cramped apartment, her dreams have grown quieter, thinned by deadlines she can’t meet and expectations she can’t escape.

She once wrote stories that leaped off the page—love affairs ignited in midnight rainstorms or wry heroines who made their readers feel seen. Now, Olivia sits before the mocking blink of her cursor, haunted by a simple, terrifying question: What if she’s only got one good story in her? The publishing world, with its promises and perils, has grown sharper in her absence. Editors’ praise now arrives edged with concern, event invitations go cold, and Olivia feels the pressure of being a once-celebrated voice drowned out by the relentless stampede of the next big thing.

Survival in this city means being clever, connected, and always one rewrite ahead. Olivia is none of those at the moment—at least, not in the ways that count. In the offices overlooking Madison Avenue, the whispered deals and bestsellers are won and lost over champagne toasts and cutting remarks, but Olivia is just scraping by. Each passing year since her debut chips away at her confidence, leaving a little less hope for the comeback she desperately needs.

When the opportunity comes to secretly ghostwrite for J.T. Carmichael—a name synonymous with runaway romance hits and publishing intrigue—Olivia is faced with a dilemma. Ghostwriting means anonymity, trading her voice for someone else’s. But it also means a second chance: a ticket back into the world she loves, a way to prove she can write her way out of the darkness. The catch? No one knows J.T. Carmichael’s true identity, and the pressure of stepping into another’s shadow comes with risks she can’t yet imagine.

As Olivia steps into this secretive role, she is propelled into a whirlwind of clandestine meetings, glimmering galas, and high-stakes deadlines. But what she cannot foresee is the collision course with her own past—the rediscovery of a love story she thought was long over, and the possibility that the real second chance is not just for her career, but for her heart. Within the glitzy, cutthroat labyrinth of publishing, Olivia must summon the courage to confront the chapters she never finished, gamble her heart on a story that is hers, and discover whether love—like a well-written novel—can

survive the rewrite.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Ghostwriter's Block

The blinking cursor on Olivia's screen was less a beacon of inspiration and more a judgmental eye, unblinking, unwavering. It had been like this for months, possibly years, the digital equivalent of a Roman statue sneering at her lack of progress. Her apartment, usually a cozy haven filled with the scent of old books and brewing tea, felt like a cage. Dust motes danced in the lone shaft of sunlight piercing through the blinds, each one a tiny, mocking reminder of the life that continued outside her self-imposed exile.

She had tried everything: the Pomodoro Technique, switching from coffee to green tea, writing in a café where the chatter was supposed to be ambient white noise but instead became a symphony of her failures. She'd even tried writing a chapter in longhand, just to feel the satisfying scratch of pen on paper, only to find her hand cramping and her thoughts still stubbornly refusing to coalesce into anything resembling a coherent narrative. The blank page wasn't just blank; it was a vast, unforgiving desert.

Her debut novel, *Whispers in the Starlight*, had been a meteor shower - brilliant, dazzling, unforgettable. For a brief, glorious period, Olivia had been the literary darling, gracing magazine covers and signing copies for lines that snaked around city blocks. Publishers had practically thrown money at her for the next big thing, for *anything* she wrote. But the follow-up, provisionally titled *Echoes of Yesterday*, remained stubbornly stuck at chapter three, a ghost of a story refusing to materialize.

Her agent, Brenda Maxwell, a woman whose pearls were as sharp as her wit, had called again that morning. "Liv, darling, the advance is looking less like an advance and more like a very generous donation to your... creative process," Brenda had said, her voice a silk-gloved hand wrapped around a very firm hammer. Olivia had winced. She knew Brenda was right. The publishing world, for all its glitz and glamour, was ultimately a business. And Olivia wasn't delivering.

She scrolled through her emails, a desperate ritual she performed daily, hoping for a miracle. There were the usual newsletters, a few PR pitches for books she'd never read, and then, nestled between an urgent notice from her bank and an offer for 20% off artisanal candles, was an email from Brenda with the subject line: "READ THIS. NOW."

Olivia's stomach did a nervous flip. This was either very good or very, very bad. Knowing Brenda, it was probably both. She clicked it open.

The email was short, cryptic, and laced with Brenda's typical no-nonsense flair. "Liv, I've had an... interesting proposition cross my desk. Highly confidential. Highly lucrative. But also, highly unconventional. It involves a certain bestselling author who prefers to remain shrouded in mystery. Intrigued? Call me."

Intrigued? Olivia was beyond intrigued. She was desperate. "Unconventional" usually meant something ethically dubious in the publishing world – like agreeing to write a sequel to a classic and then changing the protagonist into a vampire. But "highly lucrative" was a siren song she couldn't ignore. Her savings account was looking as barren as her manuscript.

She stared at the email, a dozen questions already forming in her mind. Who was this mysterious author? Why did they need a ghostwriter? And what, exactly, was the catch that made it "highly unconventional"? A tremor of excitement, an unfamiliar sensation, ran through her. It wasn't the pure, exhilarating joy of creating her own story, but it was something. It was a lifeline.

Swallowing her lingering pride, Olivia picked up her phone. Brenda answered on the first ring, a testament to her always being on the pulse of the industry. "Brenda? It's Olivia. I got your email. You said 'mysterious bestselling author' and 'lucrative' in the same sentence. My interest is officially piqued. Tell me everything."

There was a pause on Brenda's end, long enough for Olivia to imagine her agent taking a sip of some impossibly expensive organic juice. "Liv, before I say another word, I need you to understand something. This is a ghostwriting gig. Top secret. No credit, no recognition. Your name will never be associated with this project. Ever. Are you okay with that?"

Olivia hesitated. Her name, her voice, her unique storytelling had always been the core of her identity as a writer. The thought of pouring her creativity into something that would bear another's name was... unsettling. It felt like a betrayal of the very essence of what she did. But then she looked at the blinking cursor on her screen, the one that had mocked her for so long. Her own name wasn't doing much for her career lately anyway.

"Okay," Olivia said, the word feeling a little foreign on her tongue. "I'm okay with that. What's the project?"

"It's for J.T. Carmichael," Brenda said, her voice dropping slightly, as if the name itself was a secret. "You know J.T. Carmichael, right? The *Heartstrings* series? The one that's sold, oh, about fifty million copies worldwide?"

Olivia's jaw nearly hit the floor. J.T. Carmichael. The reclusive, wildly successful

romance author whose books were ubiquitous, adorning every airport bookstore and grocery store checkout line. Their identity was one of publishing's greatest mysteries. Some speculated it was a man, some a woman, some even a collective of writers. The *Heartstrings* series was known for its steamy scenes, complex emotional arcs, and impossibly charming protagonists. It was a juggernaut.

"J.T. Carmichael?" Olivia repeated, almost a whisper. "But... why me? Why anyone? Don't they write their own books?"

Brenda chuckled, a dry, knowing sound. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Apparently, 'Carmichael' has a bit of a deadline crunch. A major one. And they need a fresh voice, someone who can capture the... Carmichael essence, shall we say. They want a proven talent, someone with emotional depth, but who also understands the demands of commercial romance. Your debut fit the bill perfectly."

A strange mix of flattery and unease washed over Olivia. She was being headhunted by a publishing titan, but only to disappear into their shadow. It was a bizarre kind of validation. "So, I'd be writing the next *Heartstrings* novel?"

"Precisely," Brenda confirmed. "And the terms are... beyond generous. Enough to not only clear your existing advance but set you up comfortably for a long time. No more scrambling. You'd have the freedom to focus on *your* book, whenever that creative spark decides to grace you again."

The thought of financial security, of being able to write without the constant pressure of impending destitution, was incredibly appealing. It was a golden parachute, even if it meant temporarily sacrificing her artistic integrity. "What are the logistics?" Olivia asked, trying to sound calm, professional, and not like a drowning woman reaching for a life raft.

"Highly discreet," Brenda reiterated. "All communication will be through me. There will be a secure portal for manuscript submissions. And the initial 'meeting'—if you can even call it that—will be... unique. You'll be sent a preliminary brief, and if you agree, we move forward with the contract. And trust me, Liv, the contract is ironclad. Non-disclosure agreements that would make a spy blush."

It was all so cloak-and-dagger, so utterly unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Her previous publishing life had been about book tours and literary festivals, about connecting with readers. This was about disappearance. But the tantalizing prospect of getting paid to write, even if anonymously, was a powerful motivator. It would buy her time, and perhaps, more importantly, it would buy her back her sanity.

"Okay, Brenda," Olivia said, a newfound resolve hardening her voice. "Send me the brief. I'll read it. And then... let's talk contracts." She hung up, a strange blend of fear

and excitement buzzing through her veins. This wasn't the comeback she'd imagined, but it was a path forward. A very, very secret path forward. And the first step was to understand the mind of the mysterious J.T. Carmichael.

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