

Lover's Control

by Stuart Finegan

For five years, Siobhan had believed she knew Ann inside and out. They had survived bad jobs, shared the rent in damp flats, endured numerous family arguments and weathered the insecurities of their early twenties.

When they finally signed the tenancy agreement for a small third-floor flat overlooking a row of orange streetlights, it felt like the beginning of something permanent. At first, it was. Ann cooked dinner. Ann left notes on the fridge. Ann called during lunch breaks just to ask how Siobhan's day was going. It was young love. Then, slowly, it became something else.

The change came so gradually that Siobhan barely noticed it. Ann would ask where she was going. Then who she was meeting. Then why she hadn't answered a text for more than twenty minutes.

"Siobhan, I worry about you."

By the time Siobhan realised she was apologising for things that required no apology, they had already been living together for nearly two years.

The evening it all finally came to a head began pleasantly enough. They had been out for dinner with friends from university. Laughter had filled their favourite restaurant—stupid, funny stories and a birthday celebration. Siobhan was still smiling when they climbed the stairs to their flat shortly after midnight.

"That was fun," she said, kicking off her shoes.

Ann nodded.

"Yeah."

Once inside, they switched on a lamp in the living room. Soft yellow light spread across the walls. Ann put on an old record. Music drifted through the flat while rain tapped gently against the windows.

They poured another drink. One became two. A joint appeared. The room filled with sweet smoke that drifted lazily through the orange light.

For a while, everything felt normal.

Siobhan curled herself into the corner of the sofa.

"You should have seen Emma's face when James told that story."

Ann stared into her glass.

"I don't like Emma."

Siobhan frowned.

"Since when?"

"I just don't."

Suddenly, Ann's voice was different. Cold. Hard. The music seemed louder, the room smaller.

"Ann, she's my friend—a dear friend, you know that."

Ann took a long drink.

"They're all bad for you."

"What?"

"Your friends."

Siobhan laughed nervously.

"Don't be ridiculous, Ann."

"I'm serious."

The smile disappeared from Ann's face. The atmosphere changed. Suddenly, it was as if the flat wasn't their home anymore. Outside, the rain beat harder against the windows. Inside, a strange silence settled between them.

"Anyway, you spend too much time with them."

"They're my friends, Ann. Friends from—"

"They just fill your head with rubbish."

Siobhan sat forward.

"What's going on?"

Ann stood—not in an aggressive way. Not yet, anyway. But something about her sudden movement made Siobhan uncomfortable.

"They don't care about you the way I do."

Ann's words came faster now.

"I've always looked after you."

"Ann—"

"No, Siobhan."

Ann's voice rose.

"I protect you."

"You don't protect me."

Siobhan spoke before she could stop herself.

Ann froze. For several seconds, neither of them moved. The record played on. Rain continued to fall.

Then Ann's face changed—not into anger, but something stranger.

She was hurt.

“What did you say?”

Siobhan swallowed.

“You heard me.”

The shouting started.

It was loud and violent without being physical. Every accusation that Ann had apparently been storing for months spilled out. She talked about loyalty and sacrifice, about everything she had done for Siobhan. How nobody understood their relationship. How their friends only wanted to pull them apart. Siobhan sat stunned.

The woman standing in front of her sounded unfamiliar. Five years together, yet somehow Siobhan had never met this version of Ann.

“You’re trying to leave me,” Ann shouted.

“I’m not!”

“You are.”

“No, Ann.”

“You’re lying.”

Siobhan stood.

“Ann, I think you need to calm down.”

Her words made everything worse. Ann stepped forward. Their argument had crossed an invisible line.

Later, neither of them would remember exactly what happened next. Only minor details. A hand grabbing an arm. A struggle. A crash. The sound of something breaking. Fear exploding through the room. For a few terrible minutes, Ann lost control completely. Years of possessiveness, insecurity and obsession erupted into physical violence. By the time it stopped, the flat was silent except for their heavy breathing.

Ann stood motionless. Her chest rose and fell. Her thin hands shook violently. Beneath the shock came something darker. A feeling of dominance. Power. The sensation lasted only a few seconds, but she felt it, and that frightened her more than anything.

Across the room, Siobhan lay on the floor. Blood streaked one side of her face and mixed with her tears. She was crying quietly. The reality of life with the woman she loved had suddenly shattered. She looked at Ann as though she were a stranger.

“What have I done?” Ann whispered.

Her power had vanished.

The music still played softly in the background—a cheerful song that now sounded horribly out of place.

“Siobhan...”

No response. Ann took a step forward. Siobhan flinched. Ann's knees buckled. She sank to the floor. For the first time that night, she saw herself for who she really was. Not a protector. Not a lover. Not somebody holding their relationship together. She was an abuser. Suddenly, there was a sound. A small electronic beep. Both women looked towards the bookshelf. A green light flashed. Then another. Ann frowned.

"What is that?"

Siobhan wiped blood from her cheek. When she spoke, her voice trembled.

"That's why I never left."

Ann stared at her.

"What?"

The light continued to blink. Siobhan swallowed a mouthful of blood.

"The landlord installed new smoke detectors when we moved in."

Ann looked bewildered.

"So?"

"They contain audio-recording systems."

The colour vanished from Ann's face.

"For insurance disputes. They start recording when they detect raised voices, impacts or disturbances."

Ann's mouth opened, but no words came. Siobhan pointed towards the hallway. Another green light blinked there. Then another. The silence became unbearable. Everything had been recorded—the shouting, the threats, the violence, Ann's confession of control. She wouldn't be able to deny it now. Outside, distant sirens drifted through the rain. They were getting closer. For the first time that evening, it was not Siobhan who looked frightened.

It was Ann.