



BAD BOY

BILLIONAIRE

and the
Single Mom

BLAKELY ROSE

Bad Boy Billionaire and the Single Mom

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Prologue

Blake

The music is pounding, the bass reverberating through the house as bodies sway to the rhythm. The atmosphere is alive with laughter and chatter, a vibrant energy that fills every corner of our home. Olivia and I are hosting a party tonight, taking advantage of the fact that our mom is away on a business trip. It's a rare opportunity for us to let loose and have a little fun before we leave for college. Our house is packed full of partying teenagers.

As I navigate through the crowd, a red plastic cup in my hand, I catch a glimpse of one of my best friends: Lily Johnson. She looks stunning, dressed up in a way I've never seen before. Her normally casual attire has been replaced by something more elegant and alluring. The sight of her takes my breath away, and for a moment, everything around me fades into the background. I've liked Lily for a long time, but I haven't wanted to complicate things with her. She's best friends with my twin sister too, and I don't want to risk ruining our friendship. But I realize this will be my last shot with her. I'm leaving in less than a month. I don't want to have any regrets.

I make my way toward her, my heart pounding in my chest. I can't help but be drawn to her, like a magnet pulling me closer.

"Blake," she says, her face lighting up as she sees me.

"Hey," I say, grinning at her. "You look pretty tonight."

The compliment feels like an understatement. She's wearing a staggering, form-fitting black dress that hugs her curves in all the right places, accentuating her slender figure. The dress is adorned with delicate lace details that add a touch of elegance to her ensemble. The transformation is striking. Lily exudes a newfound confidence, her eyes shining with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. Her makeup is subtly done, emphasizing her natural beauty without overpowering it. A touch of crimson on her lips draws attention to her radiant smile, which lights up the room.

I watch a blush creep onto her face.

"Thanks," she replies.

"What to dance?" I ask, grinning at her.

We exchange smiles as she nods, and before I know it, our bodies are pressed together, moving to the music as if we're the only two people in the room.

It happens among the noise and the dim lights, our lips meet in a kiss that sets my senses on fire. It's electric, a spark that ignites a torrent of emotions within me. The world around us disappears, and all that exists in this moment is the connection between us.

We both pull away at the same time, looking at each other in surprise. The alcohol has lowered our inhibitions. I know I should stop. I should tell her thank you for the dance and then go and sober up, but she looks up at me with her pretty eyes and I'm lost.

“We shouldn’t do this,” she says, looking around her. “People will see us.” I look around and everyone is oblivious, lost in their own experiences and the drunken mischief that comes with graduating and no adult supervision. No one has noticed a thing.

Lily doesn’t look like she wants to stop, and neither do I.

“Or you can come to my room,” I suggest, desire seeping from my voice.

She looks scandalized for a moment but then nods, making up her mind. I grab her hand and we run up the stairs laughing together as I lead her into my bedroom. The door slams behind us, and I crowd her against the wood, kissing her as I pin her in place.

“Damn, I’ve thought about doing this so many times,” I moan against her lips.

“Yeah, me too,” she agrees between hot kisses.

We grind against each other, hot and heavy, our hands all over each other. Lily’s hands are under my shirt touching my stomach. I grab it and pull it over my head for her, throwing it to the floor. I kiss down her neck, groping her chest through the thin material of her dress. I’ve fantasized about this so many times and I’ve finally got her alone.

It’s wrong. I’m aware but even knowing this, I lead her to my bed, and we kick off our shoes. I pull her into my lap and she settles across my hips. We rock together eagerly, gasping against each other. All logic flies out the window as I feel the

scorching heat of her pressing me. It's hot and heavy and like nothing I've ever experienced before.

Lost in the intensity of our kisses and tipsy fumbling, I'm oblivious to everything else until I hear a loud knock on my bedroom door.

"Hey, put your bits away!" a voice calls through the door.

Panic courses through me as I realize it's Olivia. She barges in, completely unaware of what's transpiring inside. Lily swiftly dives off my bed and hides at the side, her presence concealed from my sister's view. I grab a pillow and press it against my groin to cover myself.

"You know you're supposed to wait until I invite you in," I quip at her, a hint of playful annoyance in my voice as I try to regain my composure.

Olivia smirks mischievously, her eyes sparkling with amusement, and rolls her eyes.

"I feel sorry for whoever's fallen for your charm," she teases, oblivious to the fact that it's our best friend hiding just inches away. "So, do we have any more beer?"

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. "Yeah, it's in the garage," I reply, my voice betraying a hint of unease. I point at my door, gesturing for her to leave me alone.

She gives me a playful wink before leaving, the door closing behind her.

Turning my attention back to the room, I see Lily emerging sheepishly from her hiding spot, her dress pulled down her

thighs to cover her underwear. Our eyes meet, and in that silent exchange, a myriad of emotions pass between us—regret, longing, and the weight of an unspoken agreement.

“This was a mistake,” she says softly, her voice tinged with regret. “We should stop and...uh, forget about this.”

Disappointment washes over me like a crashing wave, but deep down, I know she’s right. The impending reality of college looms before us. Our paths will diverge, and starting something we can’t continue would be unfair to both of us. I nod, a mix of sadness and acceptance swirling within me.

“You’re right,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “We should probably let it go.”

“It can be our little secret,” she suggests, her voice holding a touch of hope. We make an unspoken agreement, a mutual understanding that this connection, intense and electrifying as it may be, will remain nothing more than a fleeting memory. It’s the right decision, even as my heart protests. She takes a seat on the bed beside me, the silence filled with unspoken words and unfulfilled desires.

“Thanks for the kiss,” she says softly, vulnerability shining through her eyes. “No one’s ever kissed me before.”

Her admission sends a jolt through me, my heart fluttering with a mix of joy and longing.

“I’m sure you’ll kiss *lots* of boys,” I say, my voice laced with bittersweet sincerity. “But remember, you’re really special, Lily.”

She chuckles, a hint of sarcasm in her reply, masking the complexity of her emotions. “Sure.”

To change the atmosphere, I offer a distraction. “You want to play a game instead?” I suggest, gesturing toward the television, hoping to ease the tension that lingers between us.

She nods, accepting the invitation, and together we grab the remotes, feeling a bit less sad. The console springs to life, and the sounds of the game pull us in. Distracted as I am by the immersive game, I still feel a sense of loss. Unspoken desires linger in the room but we can push it aside. We could have had something beautiful, something more than friendship but sometimes, the right choice is also the hardest one to make.

With a bittersweet smile on my face, I take a deep breath, pushing aside my own desires and embracing the night for what it is. At least we’ll always be friends.

Chapter 1

Lily

In the hustle and bustle of my small apartment, I watch as my daughter, Emma, twirls around with excitement. Her pink dress flares, and her short curly brown hair bounces around her as she squeals in delight.

“Are you excited to see Auntie Olivia?” I ask as I fill a bag full of essentials that I might need for my hyperactive four-year-old.

“Livy!” she yells.

I smile at her fondly.

It’s officially summer vacation and Emma is thrilled to be out of preschool and to have more time to play with me before she starts kindergarten in the fall. We’ve made plans to meet Olivia at the local park. The sun is shining, casting a warm glow that mirrors the joy in my heart. I’m excited to spend the next few weeks with my daughter, making new memories together. I want nothing but the best for her after everything she’s been through in her short life.

As we make our way to the park, I can’t help but feel a tinge of excitement. Olivia mentioned earlier that she had a surprise for Emma. She’s always making grand gestures, taking her on days out and buying her extravagant gifts. She’s been good to Emma, and I appreciate all the time and the effort. Olivia’s not even her real auntie, but my best friend. We’ve known each other since we were kids, so it’s all the same to us.

I haven't seen Olivia in a couple of weeks. I'm unemployed right now, so she's offered to meet with me and schedule what days she can watch Emma. I can't wait to see her. Olivia has always had a way of infusing even the simplest moments with laughter and magic. I'm sure that today will be no different and she'll find a way to cheer me up about my current situation.

It's truly a beautiful day at the park, and we've caught the sunshine. Excitement fills the air. Children's laughter dances on the breeze, mingling with the melodies of birdsong. As we get closer, I can see Olivia has someone with her. It's a face I've never seen before but holds a striking resemblance to my dearest friend.

"Oh, my goodness!" I say enthusiastically, excitement bubbling up inside of me as I process what I'm seeing. "Hello, sweetie. I'm Lily and this is Emma."

The little boy—who can only be Olivia's nephew—hides shyly behind her legs.

Olivia grins at me with a nod.

"Emma, this is Ethan," she introduces.

Emma looks thrilled and is bouncing on the balls of her feet with excitement.

"Hi, hi!" she greets him with a wave.

"He's a little shy," Olivia adds when he doesn't say anything. "He doesn't talk."

My brow furrows as I glance toward Olivia. I'm not sure if she means that he can't talk, or if he prefers not to. Either way, now isn't the time for asking questions.

"That's okay," I tell Ethan, bending slightly so I'm closer to his height. I don't want to intimidate the shy boy. He's only a couple of inches taller than my daughter, so he can't be much older than her. "You don't have to talk. You can just play. Emma will go with you."

Emma's eyes light up, and she gently reaches for Ethan's arm, eager to explore the wonders of the playground. He turns his gaze toward his auntie, who nods in encouragement. He lets Emma tug him.

"Come on, Ethan! Swings! They're the best part!" Emma's voice is filled with infectious enthusiasm.

Ethan hesitates, his reserved nature wrestling with the urge to join in the adventure. With a nod and a hint of bravery, he follows Emma's lead, his small hand clasping hers as they embark on their first escapade together.

I turn to Olivia in surprise. "He's just wonderful. He looks so much like you!" I can't believe it. It's uncanny.

"I know." She laughs and nods. "Perks of having a twin: his kid looks just like me."

We both walk over to a picnic bench so we can watch the kids together. Olivia is carrying a picnic basket so we'll be here for a few hours at least. It will be good for Emma who is full of boundless energy. It might tire her out.

“So, is he back?” I ask curiously.

Olivia’s twin brother, Blake, had seemingly disappeared from our uneventful town. I can’t blame him. Why would anyone willingly return to such a place when they had the means to explore the world? He had ventured off after college, chasing his ambitions and amassing a fortune along the way. The occasional glimpse of him at family gatherings was my only reminder of his existence, but even those encounters became scarce after their mother’s passing. It had been years since I last laid eyes on Blake, but our connection remained intact in my memory. We have always shared a genuine camaraderie, easily finding common ground and laughing through life’s ups and downs. However, as time passed, the distance between us grew, and the details of his personal life became a mystery to me. I vaguely know he’s married, but the specifics of his wife and child remain shrouded in ambiguity.

“Yeah, and this time it might be for good,” she says softly. Olivia’s eyes sparkle mischievously as she reveals a secret: “He’s staying at mine for a few months.”

The news crashes over me like a wave, leaving me slightly breathless. My curiosity piques, and a sense of intrigue dances in my veins. Suddenly I feel seventeen years old again, crushing on my best friend’s brother in secret and knowing that he’d never look twice at me. I quickly squash it down. It’s been years. That was just a silly crush and we’ve both moved on, taking different directions in life.

“Oh. That’s...good,” I reply, not sure what else to say about it.

I have a lot of questions about why some hotshot would move here, but I know Blake is a private person and Olivia isn’t the kind of person to spill someone else’s drama.

“Yeah, it means I get to be a real auntie to Ethan,” she responds. “And if I’m honest, I miss my brother. We don’t see each other very often.”

I’m happy for her. Family is important. I know how much she misses her mom. I miss her all the time so I can’t imagine how she feels. Having Blake and Ethan back here must be a dream come true. We never thought Blake would come home.

“Good, that’s what you always wanted,” I respond.

I’m happy for her.

As the children play together, their laughter intertwines like the branches of a blooming tree, I find myself observing them with a mixture of warmth and longing. Emma’s eyes light up with every interaction, cherishing the companionship that comes from having a playmate by her side. A pang of yearning stirs within me, a desire for a sibling for Emma, something I have always dreamed of. I would love to have someone for Emma to play with. I never wanted just one child. Unfortunately, my ex-partner didn’t feel the same and dropped the bomb that he didn’t want children *after* I’d given birth.

“So, what happened at the store?” she asks.

Olivia’s inquisitive gaze meets mine.

An exasperated sigh escapes my lips, my voice tinged with bitterness as I admit, “I got fired.”

The weight of disappointment hangs heavily in the air. Olivia’s frown deepens as she absorbs the news.

“What for?” Concern colors her voice as she responds, frustration is evident on my behalf. “It seems like you have the worst luck,” she laments, her words filled with a mixture of sympathy and annoyance.

“Tell me about it,” I say. A tinge of resignation seeps into my tone as I recount the reason for my dismissal. “They said I took too many sick days in my probationary period but it was because I had to take some time off when Emma got scarlet fever from preschool.”

The injustice of it all lingers in the air and Olivia shakes her head in disbelief.

“That’s so wrong,” she asserts, her expression mirroring her disapproval. “You said you had some things lined up?”

With a nod, I retrieve my phone from my pocket, my fingers deftly navigating through the screen to access the list I have meticulously compiled.

“Yeah, I’ve applied to a few retail positions in town. I’ve noted down the interview dates,” I reply, a glimmer of hope flickering in my eyes. Yet, despite my preparations, uncertainty clouds my mind. Seeking reassurance, I inquire hesitantly, “Are you sure it’s not too much trouble for you to have Emma?”

Olivia's gaze sharpens, her reaction making it abundantly clear that my question is stupid. A hint of amusement tugs at the corners of her lips as she shoots me a pointed look.

"I love spending time with Emma. It will be fun," she reassures me, her confidence unwavering. "Besides, the kids can play together. Blake is busy checking in on his businesses. He's local now. He's been house-hunting like crazy. You know, all those boring, mundane adult things. Ethan will be with me while he's gone. I'm sure I can keep them both entertained in the day." Her words carry an underlying sense of excitement, emphasizing the joy and camaraderie that awaits our children during their time together. It gives me the assurance that I need.

"Thanks," I reply.

As Olivia's words sink in, I find solace in the unwavering support of my best friend and the prospect of a playdate that will bring happiness and companionship to both Emma and Ethan. With a renewed sense of optimism, I breathe a sigh of gratitude, grateful for the bonds of friendship that endure through life's ups and downs.

Chapter 2

Blake

This isn't as easy as I expected, but I can't give up already. I try to focus on the positives. First, I have found a great school for Ethan that knows about his circumstances and can give him the support that he needs. Second, Olivia is happy to let us stay with her for as long as we need. Ideally, I will find us the perfect home before the school year starts.

The decision to return to my hometown is a practical one. It's also an emotional one because it's a place that holds bittersweet memories and a profound sense of loss. But being closer to my sister, Olivia, offers a glimmer of hope amidst the shared struggles that haunt me and my son. I'm already looking at the sixth property despite only being back a few days and it's wearing me down. The only problem with moving back here is that it means compromising. The pools are small and the gardens even smaller. Ethan is used to having a huge private rooftop garden with lots of space to run around and play. Even after looking at the best properties on the market and with no limit on my budget, there's nothing close to Olivia's house and the school that's currently on the market. What I need is something close to her so that I don't have to hire a nanny. Though I can afford it, I'd prefer family watching Ethan instead of a stranger. I know I'm being stubborn, but I feel strongly about it. I'm not going to compromise.

“As you can see, it’s a remarkable home,” the realtor, Elise, tells me as we step inside a large and spacious three-bed, three-bath. “Let me show you one of its notable features: the grand living room. Then through here is the dining room.”

I follow her, looking around the large hallways and rooms. It feels very cold inside. It’s got marble floors. All I can think about is Ethan falling and bruising himself. The high ceilings and large windows let in a lot of natural light which I like, but I can see into next door’s garden which means that they can see into here. It’s crowded too close to the other houses on the street. It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Elise must see that I’m unhappy because she smiles at me awkwardly.

“It’s worth noting that the fireplace adds warmth to the space, and the custom-built bookshelves provide an opportunity for personalization,” she continues, hoping to reel me in.

I look around. It’s a nice enough room, but I’m not sure about the design. It feels a bit too grand and formal for my taste. I can’t imagine Ethan being comfortable here. It needs to be kid friendly. His well-being is my top priority, and the thought of him starting a new school in an unfamiliar environment without a comfortable home leaves me on edge. I need to provide him with a nurturing and secure space, a sanctuary where he can thrive and grow.

“The view is nice,” I admit. “But the place lacks the cozy atmosphere that I’m looking for. I don’t think this is going to

work,” I reply honestly. There’s no point continuing the viewing.

I can’t help but be disappointed. I’ve asked to see the best properties in the area and all of them need work. I would have to hire contractors and builders and designers to make the place work but I want to be able to move in with no stress. Ethan has had enough upheaval lately.

Elise nods. “I’m sorry, Mr. Harrington, but this is the last one in this area. We’re going to have to look further out. There are some lovely properties in the Hillside Estates, but it’s an hour’s drive from here.”

I know of Hillside Estates. It’s full of magnificent mansions with sprawling lawns and meticulously maintained gardens. The properties are situated on large plots of land, providing residents with ample privacy. All of this would be wonderful if it wasn’t so far from Ethan’s new school. I don’t think it’s fair for him to be expected to travel for several hours a day when he’s already struggling.

I sigh. “Thanks for trying, Elise.”

“It’s okay, we can go back to the drawing board. I know you’ll find something that suits you. Let me make some calls and see what I can do,” she tells me. Elise accompanies me back to her office with plans for another arduous house-hunting expedition. Despite her efforts and the numerous real estate listings she’s emailed me, each promising a glimmer of hope, none of the properties feel like the right fit.

“No luck?” my sister asks as I arrive home several hours later. Her voice carries a hint of sympathy as I wearily enter her cozy kitchen, the soft glow of warm lighting enveloping the room.

Olivia lives in our mother’s house. It was where we grew up and it’s exactly the kind of place I’m looking for in a family home. But it’s Livy’s house now. I would never expect her to leave despite it being too big for her alone—I feel like she needs the connection to our mother more than I do. I’m happy to have my sister and my son. It’s enough for me. I don’t need the house. I want somewhere new that I can call my own. Plus, who knows, she might meet someone one day and settle down and fill it with children. God knows that she loves kids.

“No.” I shake my head in reply to her; my fatigue is clear in every movement. The weight of the day’s disappointment settles heavily on my shoulders. I can’t help but let out a heavy sigh, my eyes reflecting a mixture of exhaustion and frustration.

Ethan sits at the kitchen island, his small fingers carefully navigating the intricate lines of his coloring book. Bending down, I press a tender kiss on his tousled hair, hoping to infuse him with a sense of comfort and love.

“You have a good day, buddy?” I inquire, my voice filled with both concern and a glimmer of hope.

Taking the seat beside him, I watch him intently, marveling at how effortlessly he colors within the lines. His silence—the persistent veil of selective mutism that has enveloped him since the trauma—weighs heavily on my heart. I yearn to hear his voice, to witness his uninhibited laughter and playful banter with other children. But for now, I hold on to the small victories, cherishing the progress he’s made and the moments of connection we share.

“How’s he been?” I ask.

I turn to Olivia seeking reassurance in her warm presence. Her eyes shimmer with understanding, a silent acknowledgment of the challenges we face.

“He had a really good day,” she replies, her voice laced with a mix of pride and encouragement. “We met up with Lily and little Emma as planned, and he played on the swing.” Her words hang in the air, punctuated by an unspoken understanding of the significance of this seemingly ordinary accomplishment.

A swell of emotions washes over me—surprise, relief, and an overwhelming surge of pride. Ethan’s journey through his mutism has been a rollercoaster ride, leaving us navigating uncharted territory. The professionals we’ve consulted assure me that time, patience, and a nurturing environment will be the catalysts for his healing, but it’s a process that demands unwavering devotion and a delicate balance of support. It’s why I’m doing this. All of this is for him.

“That’s wonderful,” I respond. “Seems like a playdate with Emma was a great idea.” I offer my sister a grateful smile. I trust Olivia’s judgment.

My memories of Lily are filled with warmth and kindness. It’s been far too long since we last spoke, but I have a good feeling about her and the support she can offer. I’ve been meaning to message her since I decided to move back home, but with everything going on with Ethan, I’ve just not had time.

I return my gaze to my son. He’s amazing. I find myself impressed with his resilience and the strength he has, even in his silent battles.

“I’m proud of you, Ethan,” I whisper, my voice laced with heartfelt admiration. “Well done for joining in at the playground today.”

For normal parents, such a small thing is nothing. But to me, him just playing at the park is the first time in months means everything to me. It’s the first real sign that moving from our New York penthouse and back to White Plains was the right decision. In that fleeting moment, I catch a glimpse of the vibrant future that lies ahead—a future where Ethan’s voice will once again fill the space around us, where his laughter will intertwine with the sounds of childhood play. I hope that things will get better.

Chapter 3

Lily

It's late and cold when I finally walk up to Olivia's house to pick up Emma. I try to put on a brave face. My bus had been late and I stood around in the cold for ages. I also had to walk twenty minutes to and from the closest bus stop. The commuting paired with the constant rejections from the interviews I've attended this week is starting to take a toll. I can't help but feel the weight of my financial struggles pressing down on me. My savings are dwindling and even though Olivia would let me borrow money to cover my bills I would never ask.

Today was a total disaster and it was only for a merchandising position at a clothes store. The problem I'm having is that I need a part-time position, but employers are wanting full availability from me, which I don't have as a single mom. I need to be able to pick Emma up from kindergarten when the school year starts. Not being able to drive makes this even more difficult. Even with Olivia helping me out, I can't rely on her constantly. It's not fair to expect that from her even though she assures me that it's fine. She is a saint and I'm lucky to have her. I wish I could stay home with Emma all the time, but it's just not possible. I need to put food on the table. So, until I can find something that works, I'm just going to have to power through.

I let myself into Olivia's house using my key. As I enter, I can hear Emma's voice echoing through a microphone, singing at the top of her voice down the corridor. I grin to myself. She

sounds terrible but I love her confidence and it cheers me up a little. I follow the sound until I reach the playroom. It used to be a second sitting room when we were growing up, but Olivia has filled it with toys and now it's Emma's favorite room. As expected, my daughter is performing a song into a toy microphone, while dressed as a princess, crown on her head. Ethan accompanies her with a little keyboard on the floor.

“Oh, well done, guys. It sounds like you are pop stars!” I tell them enthusiastically as I step inside the room.

The kids look up, pleased at my praises.

“Mommy!” Emma sings in greeting, before returning to her song.

“Oh, hi Lily!” Olivia pipes up. She is sitting on one of the plush sofas, cheering them on.

It's then that I notice a familiar face sitting in the corner. It takes me a moment to register that it's Blake, Olivia's twin brother. He's grown up. He's more handsome than I remember, and a flutter of butterflies takes flight in my stomach. I quickly gather my composure.

“Hi, Blake,” I say, my voice betraying me with a hint of nervousness. “It's been a while.”

He looks up from his conversation with Olivia, his eyes meeting mine, and a small smile tugs at the corner of his lips.

“Hey, Lily,” he replies.

His deep voice sends a shiver down my spine.

“Um, it’s good to see you again. You look...different.” I stumble over my words, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. Smooth, Lily, real smooth. I mentally kick myself for the awkwardness of my words.

The two of us stare at each other and I lose my words. It’s been a long time since I last saw him, and the years seem to have etched lines of weariness on his face. He appears guarded, his demeanor a stark contrast to the vibrant memories I have of him from our younger days. But I guess things have changed. We’re not children anymore. We’ve all had to grow up. I’m not sure what to say to him. I have so many questions. What made him move back here? And why now? But I keep quiet. It’s not my business.

Olivia looks between the two of us, her eyes flitting from side to side suspiciously.

“Isn’t Emma quite the performer?” she says with a laugh, gesturing toward my daughter and trying to diffuse the awkwardness.

I nod, grateful for the distraction. “She certainly loves to sing,” I reply, my words falling flat as I struggle with what to say.

Blake’s eyes follow Emma’s energetic performance, a hint of amusement dancing in his gaze. “She’s got quite the voice,” he comments, his words making me feel both self-conscious and proud.

As the awkwardness lingers in the air, I search for a way to gracefully exit the conversation. “Well, I should probably go

and wrangle Emma. It's a long way home," I say, my words rushed and clumsy. "It was nice seeing you again, Blake."

Olivia frowns.

"No, no. What happened today? How did it go?"

She looks up at me curiously and shuffles to the edge of her seat, ready to stand and stop me from leaving if I don't fill her in on my disastrous day. I feel my face burn in embarrassment. Blake is right there, looking completely perfect, and I know how well-off he is. I'm not sure what he does for work, but I know his company owns *a lot* of businesses. I see his company logo all the time. I see commercials on the TV. He's so successful and I can't even snag a part-time retail position.

"Oh, it wasn't any good," I reply and then I sit down next to her hesitantly. "They were looking for someone more flexible."

I try to push down my feelings of inadequacy.

"How many is that now?" she asks. "Surely someone will hire you. You're a good worker."

Olivia is so supportive, but she doesn't live in the real world. Her family comes from wealth. She inherited the mansion that she lives in now, and she doesn't work. Instead, she focuses on her hobbies of painting and drawing. She does it for fun and if she makes money then that's great, but she doesn't *need* to. So, when it comes to job searching, she doesn't understand how difficult it can be.

“I know,” I say with a sigh. “It’s frustrating. Ideally, I need something in town that’s between nine o’clock and three.”

Thankfully, Blake doesn’t seem to be judging me too hard. He’s focused on Ethan, watching the boy repeat the same sequence on the keyboard over and over. He’s trying to play a simple nursery rhyme.

“Oh, I know,” Olivia pipes up, looking pleased with herself.

“What?” I ask.

She’s got a mischievous look on her face as she looks between me and Blake. I figure out what she has planned before her words are even out. I don’t know how to handle what’s about to happen. Should I laugh it off? Should I wait and see how Blake reacts?

“Aren’t you looking for new staff? You told me that you fired some girls from the jewelry store,” Olivia says to her brother.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment at the thought of needing Blake’s help, but I can’t deny the appeal of a well-paying job. It could be the lifeline I desperately need to stabilize my financial situation.

“Yes, actually,” he responds. “I had some issues with thefts in the store. I had to get rid of some of the part-timers and the manager quit. I’m probably going to have to do some more in-house training and put more security in place. I’m not even sure I’ve caught the right culprit.” He sounds frustrated as he

speaks, though I think theft must be a big problem. It must be hard to trust the staff with such expensive jewels.

“Well, it’s settled then,” Olivia says. “You know you can trust Lily. It will be like having a little spy. She’ll tell you if she sees anything suspicious. I’ll have Emma and Ethan while you two are at work.”

She makes it sound so simple and I’m not sure what to say. Of course, I would keep an eye out on the staff if Blake needed me to. I’m not sure how he runs so many businesses all at once. It must be stressful so I’m happy to help if he’s struggling. It would be a win-win situation.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” I say, not meaning it for even a second.

I hope he insists. I’m praying that he’ll give me a chance but I’m too proud to beg out loud. I don’t want him to know how desperate I am.

“I’m sure I can find...something,” he agrees reluctantly. He shifts uncomfortably in the chair, and I cringe worried he’s being forced into giving me a job.

The room falls into silence as we both grapple with the implications of this arrangement. There’s a mixture of pride and shame swirling inside me, but I know I can’t let my ego get in the way of securing a stable income for Emma and me. Of course, Olivia is oblivious and thinks it’s a great idea.

“Fantastic! So, Lily, you can come here in the morning with Emma and I’ll watch her. Then, Blake, you can drive her in

with you. There's no point in her getting the bus if you're both going to the same place."

I want the floor to swallow me up, but at the same time, I feel a huge weight lift off my shoulders. If Blake drives me then I'll have an extra hour in the morning. I won't have to take the bus. One part of me hates that I'm using him like this, but another part of me knows that Olivia and Blake wouldn't do all of this for me if they didn't want to. Blake knows how to say no. He's always been very straight to the point.

"Sounds fine," he mutters and then gives me a small smile.

I try to shake off the unexpected attraction that sparks within me. It's a dangerous path to tread, and I quickly remind myself that I'm better off alone. I can't afford to get tangled in complicated emotions, especially with someone from my past. And Blake wouldn't be interested in me anyway. He had to offer me a job because I'm so useless I can't get one for myself. He probably thinks I'm an idiot. Plus, I'm pretty sure he's married, though I've heard no mention of his wife from Olivia in a long time. I've mentioned her before but my friend always changes the subject. I have quickly learned to stop asking.

After a moment, I gather my courage and meet Blake's gaze.

"Thank you," I say, my voice portraying a hint of vulnerability. "I appreciate the offer. It could make a real difference for us."

He nods, his guarded expression softening slightly.

“I’ll discuss the details with you tomorrow,” he replies curtly, his words carrying a mix of obligation and a glimmer of something I can’t quite decipher. “Do you want me to give you a lift home?”

I’m startled at the gesture. I want to accept but I already feel that he’s done more than enough. Olivia has bullied him into helping me and I don’t want to take advantage.

“It’s fine,” I assure him. “Emma loves the bus.”

“Bus!” she squeals into the microphone, and it breaks the awkwardness between us. We all laugh.

As I leave Olivia’s house, a whirlwind of emotions engulfs me. It’s a strange mix of gratitude and apprehension. I never imagined I would cross paths with Blake like this, and I can’t help but wonder what lies ahead. With a renewed sense of determination, I know I must embrace this opportunity, setting aside my reservations and focusing on securing a stable future for my daughter and myself.

Chapter 4

Blake

I'm shocked awake as I hear Ethan's scream. I scramble from my bed before I can even figure out what's happening. I run to his room across the hallway, tripping over my own feet in my haste to get to him.

"Hey, hey," I say as I heavily drop to my knees at the side of his bed. "What's happened?" I look around him for clues of what might have caused such upset but there's nothing.

He doesn't answer my question as huge tears splash down his cheeks and he lets out a wail. His little hands are trembling, and his cheeks are flushed in his distress. I shake him softly, wondering if maybe he's still asleep and dreaming but he doesn't respond. He continues to cry.

"Ethan, Daddy's here," I comfort him, trying to make him look at me. He resists. "You're safe here. We're at Auntie Livy's, remember?"

Behind me, as if summoned, Olivia appears, still putting her housecoat on over her nightgown. She comes to sit at the foot of his bed. She looks confused and worried. "Ethan, it's okay," she says in a soft and comforting manner. "We're both here for you."

But Ethan can't listen. He's lost in a hurricane of emotions and his only response is to cry harder and scream. I'm not sure if he's been plagued by a vivid nightmare or if he's just remembering something traumatic. It's going to be a long night.

“I’ve got this. Go get some sleep,” I tell my sister. She needs to be up in the morning to look after the kids.

“Are you sure?” she asks me.

I nod and climb onto my son’s too-small, single bed, curling myself around him. His tearful sobs echo in my ears, his small frame shaking with fear. I try to soothe him, to offer comfort, but his mutism keeps him from expressing what’s troubling him. He cries and cries, but the words remain locked inside him, inaccessible to both of us.

The door clicks closed behind us as Olivia reluctantly leaves. Ethan’s nightlight projects soft blue and red patterns across the ceiling and the walls. The light usually brings him comfort and I watch the shapes, wishing I knew how to help him. With a heavy heart, I know that my attempts to console him are falling short. I feel helpless, unable to ease his pain or chase away the shadows that haunt his dreams. In desperation, I bring him closer. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tightly as if my embrace alone can shield him from the terrors that lurk within his mind.

“It’s okay, Daddy loves you,” I tell him, over and over. “You’re safe.”

Ethan’s cries gradually quiet down, replaced by soft sniffles and hiccups. I press my cheek against his head, whispering soothing words into the darkness, hoping that my voice can provide some solace. I breathe in the gentle scent of his shampoo, his soft hair tickling my nose as I hold him. I can

feel the weight of his vulnerability. The depth of his suffering breaks my heart.

“Tell me how to help you,” I beg him in a whisper, but he still cries softly, gasping for air.

Time stretches on, minutes blending into hours, and eventually, his tears taper off. Exhaustion takes hold, and his small body relaxes against mine. I continue to hold him, unwilling to let go, my love for him pouring out in every gentle squeeze and comforting stroke.

“I’m sorry, Ethan. Daddy’s so sorry.” But as Ethan finally drifts into a fitful sleep, tears well up in my own eyes. I feel the weight of my inadequacy, the pain of being unable to penetrate the walls that confine his voice. I quietly weep in the solitude of the night, my tears mingling with the darkness.

In this moment of vulnerability, I struggle with my own emotions. The pain. The desperation. The hopelessness. I yearn to be the protector, the one who can banish his fears and bring him peace. Yet, the reality is that I am only human, and there are some battles that even a parent cannot fight on behalf of their child.

I drag myself out of bed, my body heavy with the weight of sleepless hours. I shower in record time and then pull on an Armani suit, dressing meticulously. The restless night has left me tired and irritable and it’s not a good start to the day. When I walk downstairs, Lily is already there, looking bright and

cheery. With her, Emma is already running around, and I almost go flying over the top of her. I scowl as I right myself.

“Good morning,” Lily greets me, quickly grabbing Emma from under my feet. “Thanks again for doing this.”

I nod and make my way to the coffee machine. I grab a pod and find my travel cup, shoving it under the machine as I hit the start button. There’s no way that I’m going to get through the day without caffeine. Ethan cried non-stop for two hours last night and then he stayed awake until about five a.m. If I could guess, I think I got a few hours of broken sleep.

“You want coffee?” I ask without looking at her.

“Um, no thanks,” she replies awkwardly.

The coffee finishes and I grab it, leaning back against the counter. I glance toward the clock. I’ve got fifteen minutes until we need to leave.

“Are you ready for today?” I ask her as I look her up and down. I can already feel the grumpiness settling in as I look at her. This is going to be a disaster. I don’t mind helping Lily, but she needs to at least meet me halfway.

“If you want to take this position seriously you’ll have to put in more effort. The job pays well, and your appearance needs to reflect that,” I remark, inadvertently implying that what she is wearing is not up to my standards.

She’s dressed in scuffed shoes and her skirt is too long. The store is for high-end jewelry. Our customers are all middle and upper class—people with money. Lily looks like she’s just

thrown her clothes on. I sent her a link to the store's website last night to get a feel of the place, but clearly, she hasn't even looked at it.

I watch as my comment stings her pride, and it adds fuel to the already simmering tension between us, but I don't see the point in going easy on her. The women who work at the store will eat her alive if she goes in looking like that. She stares at me silently and I can see that she's biting her tongue. My lack of sleep is taking its toll, and I struggle to keep my frustration in check.

"Go see if Livy has something better," I suggest. My words were a little hard, so now I try to talk softer. I still sound harsh; my sentence comes out short and clipped.

Lily's eyes flicker with a mix of hurt and defiance.

"Fine," she snaps back in response, her words tinged with her frustration.

The room becomes heavy with the weight of our exchange, the awkward silence filling the space between us. Then she leaves, storming away.

"You're mean," Emma says, looking up at me with a frown.

I look down at her, feeling her words heavily but amused at her bluntness.

"I was a bit mean, wasn't I?" I agree.

"My mommy is really pretty."

I smile at her.

“I think so too,” I say quietly to the girl. That’s when I sigh. Regret washes over me as I realize the impact of my words. I hadn’t meant to hurt her or make her feel inadequate. It’s the exhaustion and the strain of everything that set me off, clouding my judgment. I’ll try to be softer on her because I need her help. Somehow, I’m going to have to train her because I can’t trust my staff. It’s just more on my plate that I don’t need right now.

Chapter 5

Lily

The car ride is awkward and quiet. I feel uncomfortable dressed in Olivia's fancy Gucci dress and her too-high Louboutins, but the moment I step into the store I'm glad for Blake's tough love. I would have been out of place. The air is tinged with the scent of luxury, and the soft glow of crystal chandeliers casts an ethereal light on the exquisite displays. The atmosphere is charged with a sense of sophistication and glamor that is captivating and intimidating. I realize that he was right to make me change.

My eyes scan the store, taking in the impeccably dressed women who gracefully navigate the space. They exude confidence and elegance, their designer dresses hugging their figures flawlessly. Immaculate makeup enhances their features, and their perfectly styled hair adds to their allure. I can't help but feel a pang of self-consciousness, acutely aware of the contrast between their refined appearances and my more modest attire. The only thing that gives me confidence is Blake's hand on the bottom of my back, guiding me forwards and toward them.

"Good morning, ladies," he greets them. "This is Lily Johnson. She's going to be assisting me out back this week. I'm going to be training her to be Mina's replacement. Please make her feel welcome." Blake talks with a commanding tone, and I can tell that each woman there hangs on to every word he says. I can't blame them. He's attractive and despite being a bit prickly, he radiates charm.

“Hi,” I say, feeling a little silly. They look at me but don’t say anything.

“Any questions?” he asks. And without giving them a chance to respond, he says, “Great. Don’t bother us.”

I look at them sheepishly, hoping they can’t see how hard I’m blushing right now.

“Come on, Lily,” he says and then walks off without even waiting for me.

I hurriedly follow him, trying to focus on putting one foot in front of the other without falling flat on my face and humiliating myself. My footsteps echo on the polished marble floor, a reminder of my presence amidst this world of luxury. I can feel the weight of my insecurities, the nagging self-doubt that whispers in the back of my mind.

We walk into the offices out the back and down a long corridor to a door that Blake opens with a key. It looks like an empty manager’s office.

“Are you always so rude?” I ask once the door has closed behind us.

Blake gives me a stern look. “You need to toughen up, Lily. Those women are all spiteful and shallow.”

My mouth drops open.

“You don’t know that. Maybe you misunderstand them.” I like to try and see the best in people which I will do with the women. Right now, Blake is making it hard for me to see any good in him when he’s so dismissive and rude.

“They seemed...nice.”

“No,” he disagrees, looking at me like he knows better. “They’re gossiping, backstabbing, lazy workers who will throw you under the bus if they get the chance. If you want this job you’ll need to learn to navigate this kind of environment. You need to grow a backbone and it’s not something I can teach you.”

His words only build more frustration and annoyance. It reminds me of why I’ve sworn off men and have decided to stay single. Still, I know better than to argue with my new boss. He’s doing me such a big favor because of his love for his twin sister. Way more than he has to.

“I just...I think there’s a better way to deal with that than speaking to them like that,” I say, the words pouring from me before I can stop them. Oh, God, why can’t I stop talking?

“Oh, you do?” he asks, taking a step toward me. “And how many businesses do you own? How many staff do you manage?”

He peers down at me, frowning at me with that annoyingly handsome face. I gulp and look up at him in frustration. My mind has gone blank. He folds his arms across his chest, his jaw muscle twitching in his annoyance.

“Because I own a conglomerate that encompasses high-end retail stores spread over *twenty* locations. As well as the prestigious jewelry shop where I employ *you*,” he continues. “As well as three hotels, and two very successful, major online stores.”

I gulp thickly, completely floored by his words as he looks down at me.

“I have curated a portfolio of businesses that cater to those with refined tastes. Each store embodies a distinct sense of luxury and quality, offering a range of exquisite products that appeal to those who appreciate the finer things in life. That requires a team of staff who know their stuff, Lily. I’m willing to train you. So be grateful for the opportunity. Working here part-time will make you double of minimum wage and if you step up and work hard, I’ll be happy to provide you with a company car. I know independence is important to you.”

I gulp as I process his words. He’s right. I’m used to working for tacky fashion stores, grocery stores, and small businesses that cater to the working class. Here, I am completely out of my depth. I’m lucky to even be standing here in the office, having the CEO personally walk in me, chauffeur me to work, and on top of that, be willing to train me. He could have dropped me here this morning and left me to drown, but instead, he’s standing with me face-to-face and trying to get me to understand what it will take to be successful. The offer of a company car makes me feel desperate to have this work. My ex took my car when we broke up and at the time, I was too heartbroken to fight it. I haven’t been able to buy a new one since. I just can’t afford the initial expense.

“Fine,” I agree.

I'm just going to have to be out of my comfort zone for a while. I'm determined to make this opportunity work, I'm willing to put in the effort and go the extra mile. I eagerly sign the contract Blake prints for me, grateful for the Monday to Friday schedule from nine until two-thirty. The wage is more than I could have hoped for, and the hours perfectly accommodate my responsibilities as a single mother. Blake also hands me a cheque for work clothes with instructions to ask Olivia what to buy.

"It should be enough for a couple of items," he says. When I see the amount, I have to resist rolling my eyes. It's so much money for just a couple of items. I take it with unsteady hands, feeling out of my depth. He's right about needing Olivia. I wouldn't know where to start buying expensive clothes and shoes. I usually buy whatever is on sale.

I try to be friendly and approachable to my new colleagues, introducing myself to them as they pass by the back office or when I'm in the front of the store. Their responses are lukewarm. I can't shake the feeling that they're giving me the cold shoulder. It's disheartening and I remind myself not to take it personally. Perhaps they're just used to their routines and are not quick to warm up to newcomers. I think about Blake's words, and I wonder if he's right. Maybe I shouldn't focus on making friends but on doing my job well.

Throughout the day, I immerse myself in reading the store's policies, absorbing the intricacies of the business. Blake provides me with some basic training on the different types of jewelry, their features, and how to assist customers effectively

within this kind of environment. He's thorough and patient, and I appreciate his guidance. His mood seems to improve. He's not half as grumpy by the time we leave for lunch. He takes me to a little bistro around the corner and we try to find common ground, mostly talking about Olivia and the kids.

Before I know it, the day comes to an end.

"Come on, Lily. Home time," Blake says, appearing in the front of the store.

I've been tasked with polishing the glass and I hesitate. There's so much that I only got halfway through. I tried to do it properly, making sure it was gleaming and not a single fingerprint remained.

"Leave that. Tiffany can finish it."

To the side of me, Tiffany scoffs, looking less than pleased.

He gestures for me to leave, and it doesn't go unnoticed by the girls. I watch them exchange a look of disbelief as I stand and then follow him. I feel relief. It's not been a long day, or particularly hard, but wearing those high heels has my feet aching. I'm tired and clueless about navigating the social complexities of gossiping girls. I can't help but wonder what might have caused their animosity toward me. But I brush it off, reminding myself that I'm here to learn and grow in this new environment, and I won't let any negativity deter me from doing my best. I have Blake on my side and that's all I need.

By the time we pull into Olivia's driveway, it's almost three-thirty. I've saved so much time. I'd only be halfway here by

now. It means that I get to spend more precious minutes with my daughter.

As we step out of the car, I hear laughing children and we walk around to the back garden. Olivia is nothing but a fabulously rich auntie and has built an entire playground there. I collapse onto the swing bench and kick Olivia's shoes off. I think I have blisters on my blisters. My feet are going to have to toughen up.

"Mommy!" Emma squeals, popping her head out from inside the little playhouse, which is connected to the swing and slide. "Me and Ethan made a sandcastle!"

"That's nice, honey!" I call back.

Meanwhile, Blake makes a beeline for his son. I'm surprised when he climbs into the messy sandpit, still wearing his fancy, stuffy suit, and shoes. After the big deal he made about appearance and clothes, this shocks me. I watch curiously as he seems to relax for the first time today. That grumpy look on his face is finally gone and he looks relaxed as Ethan stands and cuddles into him. He might be difficult to work with, but I can't deny that he's an excellent father to that little boy.

"How was work?" Olivia asks me, making me jump out of my seat. I was so entranced watching Blake and Ethan that I didn't hear her approach.

"It was...interesting," I settle on. I don't want to badmouth the staff in front of Blake after I'd stood up for them.

Especially because he'd been right. I gratefully accept the glass of red wine that Olivia passes to me.

“Were they all rude?” she asks as she sits next to me on the swing. “Blake told me that the last manager left without notice because they forced her out.”

Well, he hadn't told me that, I thought to myself. He only told me that I was replacing Mina. I'm not sure who Mina is and I don't want to ask.

“They were awful,” Blake answers for me. “I wish I could fire them all.”

Olivia bursts out laughing.

I'm not sure if he's joking or not, but he's grinning for the first time that day, half-sprawled in the sand while Ethan buries his expensive shoes.

“What about Lily? Do you think she'll cope?” Olivia asks her brother.

“She's all right,” he replies with a bit of a shrug.

“That's Blake language for you did fantastically,” she translates.

At this, I perk up.

“I did?” I ask him, looking at him hopefully.

“As I said, you did fine,” he replies, sounding unimpressed and a little nonchalant.

Olivia grins, looking between the two of us, a pleased expression on her face.

“Jesus, guys, don’t stop flirting on my account,” she jokes.

My face flames and I hide my embarrassment by taking a long swig of my wine. I hope that Blake doesn’t notice.

Chapter 6

Blake

The following days, we fall into a routine. Olivia watches the children during the day, and me and Lily go to the shop. She picks up the training easily. I learn that she's clever and polite, and more importantly, she's fantastic with customers. She sells her first engagement ring to a gentleman looking to propose and I can see how proud she is to be a part of something so special. As I predicted, the girls at the store try to swoop in and steal her sales commission, but I've got Lily's back. With a little guidance, she learns to be strong and say no. We go to lunch together every day. By Friday, she takes to the job like a duck to water.

When Lily and Emma stay for dinner that evening, I insist on driving them home. Olivia had mentioned that the bus takes them another half an hour and it was already late. I tell myself that it's because Lily's worked so hard all week and deserves some rest, but deep inside, I know that it's more than that.

As I walk back through the door, I make my way into the sitting room. I can feel Olivia's accusatory gaze boring into me, her brows furrowed in concern. She's always been the perceptive one, able to unravel the complexities of my emotions with a single glance. Maybe it's because we're twins. She sees through me like no one else. I've never been able to hide things from her. I can't help but feel a pang of unease deep within me.

“What’s going on, Blake?” she asks. Her voice is filled with a mixture of curiosity and worry.

“What do you mean?” I ask, feigning ignorance.

She gives me a look of disbelief.

“I’ve noticed the way you look at Lily and the way you act around her. It’s like you have a crush on her or something.”

I try to play it cool. I sit down and grab the TV remote, opening the Netflix menu as I feel her eyes burn a hole in the side of my head. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, my eyes averted, unable to meet her piercing gaze. The truth hangs heavy in the air, and I know that I can no longer hide behind the walls I’ve carefully constructed over the past year. It’s not like it works anyway, Olivia sees straight through them.

“Not anymore,” I say with a shrug. “Doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Anymore?” she repeats. “So, there was something?”

I can hear the cogs turning in her and I sigh. I already know that I’ve lost.

“Fine. I..I did have a crush on her,” I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. “Back when we were teenagers. But that was a long time ago, Olivia. Before I met Sarah.”

I try not to think about what happened before I left for college. I still don’t want Olivia to know what happened that night. Lily and I agreed to keep it a secret so I’m not about to share without her permission. I don’t want to betray her trust.

Olivia's expression softens and a glimmer of understanding flickers in her eyes. She knows the pain I carry but that doesn't stop her from probing deeper, searching for answers. "I understand, Blake," she says gently, her voice filled with empathy. "But do you think that those feelings might have resurfaced?"

Frustration simmers within me, tinged with a hint of guilt. How can I explain the whirlwind of emotions that have consumed me in recent days? The conflicting desires threaten to unravel the carefully constructed life I've built for myself.

"It's complicated, Olivia," I reply, my voice tinged with a mix of defensiveness and uncertainty. "I can't just act on these feelings. I have responsibilities. I have Ethan to think about. What about Sarah?"

Olivia leans forward, her voice filled with sisterly concern. "I know you've been through so much, Blake. But you can't let fear dictate your every move. Lily is a good person, and you deserve to be happy."

Anger flares within me, frustration boiling over. How can she presume to understand the depths of my pain? The complexities of my heart? I rise from my seat, unable to contain the rising tide of emotions.

"What. About. Sarah?" I repeat louder, turning to look at my sister in shock at her words.

She frowns. "Blake, Sarah is—"

“You think you know everything, don’t you?” I snap, my voice laced with bitterness. “You think you can just waltz into my life and tell me what I deserve? Well, you don’t know the first thing about it, Olivia! You have no idea how I feel, so just stop pretending!”

Her eyes widen, hurt flickering across her face. She never expected such a vehement response, and at this moment, I realize the sharpness of my words. Guilt washes over me, mingling with the frustration that still lingers.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, my voice filled with remorse. I feel overwhelmed with stormy feelings trapped inside of me. “I didn’t mean to lash out like that. It’s just...it’s too soon. I’m not ready.”

Olivia’s gaze softens, forgiveness shining in her eyes. She reaches out and places a hand on mine, a gesture of understanding and support.

“I know it’s difficult, Blake,” she says gently, her voice filled with compassion. “But sometimes, the unexpected can lead to the most beautiful moments in life. Don’t close yourself off to the possibility of happiness.”

We sit in silence for a moment, the weight of our words hanging in the air. Deep down, I know Olivia is right. I can’t let fear hold me back forever. Perhaps it’s time to confront my demons, take a step toward the unknown, and see where this journey with Lily might lead me.

My heart quickens its pace. A mix of fear and anticipation churns in the pit of my stomach as I imagine what could

happen if I let it. But I know I can't do it. Annoyance prickles beneath my skin, my defenses rising instinctively to protect the fragile emotions I hide. It bothers me that Olivia assumes to know what's best for me. I clench my fists, struggling to contain the frustration simmering within me.

"You don't know that."

"I know you're miserable," she bites back at me.

With a sudden surge of energy, I rise from my seat, the tension in the room palpable. Our gazes lock, a silent battle of wills and differing perspectives. Olivia's unwavering determination clashes with my stubborn resistance, threatening to ignite a storm of emotions that I'm not ready to confront.

"I'm sorry, but this is not your business, Olivia," I snap, my voice sharp and biting. "I don't need you interfering in my private life."

"But you live with me, Blake," she argues, the pain seeping into her voice. "How can I not be involved in your personal life? You need help. You admitted it yourself, you're—"

"Stop it. I can't."

"You deserve to be happy," she insists.

"It's too soon to even consider moving on!" I shout, the words are loud and sharp.

"Just drop it!"

Ashamed, I turn on my heel, frustration propelling my strides as I storm upstairs, seeking solace in the confines of my

own space. When I get to the hall, Ethan peers around his bedroom door. Sensing that I'm angry, he runs to me and puts his small hand around mine, gripping tightly. He is my anchor, my reason to keep pushing forward even in the face of inner turmoil. I pick him up and then take him to my room, closing the door behind us. I want to shut the entire world out. I take a deep breath, attempting to calm the storm of emotions swirling within me. I can't let Olivia's words shake me. This is my journey, my heart, and I know what's best for myself.

With Ethan by my side, I sit on the edge of my bed, his innocent presence a soothing balm to my troubled soul. I stroke his hair gently, finding solace in the unconditional love between a father and his son. Ethan's presence serves as a reminder of the responsibilities and joys that come with parenthood.

"I'm okay," I tell him. "I'm not fighting with Livy. Daddy just misses Mommy, okay? I know you understand. I bet you miss her all the time." I sniffle and I realize that I'm crying. I swipe at my face.

I know I'm a mess. My heart begins to crumble. I try to squash down everything that I've felt this week with Lily—the companionship, the affection, attraction, and the pride. Everything feels so out of control, and I can't get a handle on any of it.

Chapter 7

Lily

I step through my front door, my heart still racing from the encounter with Blake. The air feels charged with excitement and confusion, leaving me in a state of emotional turmoil. My mind replays the moments we've spent together, his gaze lingering on me, as we chatted in the car on the way home. Teenage me would be squealing right now, but I know I must hold it together. This man is my boss for goodness sake. I find myself unsure of how to navigate these newfound emotions. I should get a grip on myself.

"Right, bedtime, honey," I say.

At the words, Emma screams and runs in the opposite direction. I sigh, amused. Some things never change. Thankfully, Olivia has already dressed her in her pajamas for me. I run after her and then grab her around the middle, marching upstairs with her as she giggles and wiggles in my grip.

"No teeth!" she says.

"Yes, teeth," I tell her softly. "You've got to keep them nice and shiny!"

Thankfully, she doesn't put up too much of a fight with her bedtime ritual, and eventually, I manage to wrangle Emma into her bedroom. However, my attempts to coax her into the bed are met with playful resistance. She's still bouncing around. She runs to grab her teddies from her toy box, picking whom she wants to sleep with tonight.

“Just pick one,” I tell her.

“No, three,” she insists.

“Come on, sweetheart,” I say gently, trying to hide the exhaustion in my voice.

“It’s time for bed now.”

Emma looks up at me, her big, innocent eyes sparkling with mischief. But Mommy, I don’t want to go to bed yet. I’m not tired!”

A small smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I crouch down to her level.

“I know, sweetheart. You had a great time today with Livy and Ethan, didn’t you?”

“And Ethan’s Daddy,” she says.

As if I could forget. “Yes, and Blake.”

“I love playing with Ethan. I love him, Mommy.”

My heart swells with warmth at her words, grateful that Emma has found a friend in Ethan. “I’m glad, sweetie. He’s a nice boy, isn’t he?”

I’d been worried about leaving her with Olivia all day, I know I have to work but it doesn’t stop me from feeling guilty about it. I want to be with her all the time but it’s not realistic. To hear that she’s getting on so well with Ethan is just wonderful. It eases the worry that gnaws inside of me and makes me feel better about the situation.

“He is!” Emma nods enthusiastically. “And guess what, Mommy?”

“What?” I ask.

“I think you look nice in Livy’s dresses, and Ethan’s Daddy says so too. He said you are pretty!”

A blush creeps up my cheeks, caught off guard by Blake’s comment and the way Emma shares it so innocently. When did he say that? “Well, that’s very kind of him to say, but let’s focus on getting you ready for bed, shall we?” I reply, trying to divert the attention away from myself.

With a sigh of resignation, Emma finally agrees and climbs into her bed. I tuck her in, making sure the blankets are snug and secure. As I settle down beside her, she reaches for her favorite storybook which is a book of fables that she keeps on her bedside cabinet.

“Can you read me a story, Mommy?” she asks, her eyes heavy with sleep but still resisting.

I nod, opening the book to her favorite story. As I begin to read, my voice fills the room with the familiar tale that brings comfort and tranquillity. Emma’s eyelids grow heavier with each word, and soon her breathing becomes steady and even. I wait for a few moments before I gently place the book down quietly. I don’t want to startle her awake and be forced to start the story again. A sense of peace washes over me as I watch my little girl drift off to dreamland. I hope her dreams are filled with laughter and friendship.

“I love you, my sweet Emma,” I whisper, my voice filled with tenderness. With a contented sigh, I rise from the bedside, walking backward slowly until I’m out the door. I leave the door open so I can hear in case she calls for me in the night. The room is bathed in the gentle glow of the nightlight.

Finally, with a moment to myself, I shower and get ready for bed, climbing under my sheets around nine. Lying there, I keep thinking about the day and the bittersweet mix of emotions Blake has stirred within me.

I reach for my phone and press Olivia’s name. As the line connects, I feel a mix of nervousness and anticipation. Olivia has always been my confidante, the one I turn to when my heart feels heavy with uncertainty or desires. I’m not sure why I’m calling her when the object of my confusion is her brother, but I need to talk to someone about it.

“Hey, Lily,” Olivia answers, her voice sounds a little wary. “Are you okay?” For a moment it throws me. She sounds a bit sad.

“Are you okay?” I ask, pushing the question back at her with worry.

“Yeah, just...” she sighs. “I’m tired. Might head up to bed early tonight.”

I laugh softly.

“We’re a right pair. I’m already in bed.”

“Living the dream, aren’t we?” she jokes, seemingly perking up. “What’s on your mind?”

“Yeah. Um...I wanted to talk to you about something,” I admit.

“Sure,” she replies.

I take a deep breath, attempting to gather my thoughts before plunging into the confession and the whirlpool of my emotions.

“Olivia, something strange is happening. It’s about Blake. I...I think I have feelings for him.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end of the line, and I can almost hear Olivia’s mind working to process the confession. Finally, her voice comes through, tinged with a mix of understanding and caution.

“Lily, I had a feeling this might happen,” she says gently.

“You did?” I ask, surprised. I almost expected her to be grossed out about it, but she sounds understanding. “I know it’s stupid. He’s married. You need to tell me to stop.” I sigh. “Why am I like this with men? I only seem to be interested in ones that aren’t interested in me.”

Olivia hesitates, humming and hawing for a second.

“I...I don’t think that this is one of those situations,” she says carefully.

Immediately, my traitorous heart skips in my chest. “What do you mean?” I ask. This conversation is not going where I thought it would.

“No,” she says. “But please understand that he’s working through something right now. Give him time and space and see what happens. That’s all I can say about it.”

Curiosity piques within me and I can’t help but probe further. “What do you mean he’s working through something? What’s going on with him, Olivia? Is it about why he’s moved back? Is he having problems with his wife?”

It has not escaped my notice that he isn’t wearing a wedding ring.

A sigh escapes Olivia, a hint of frustration underlying her words. “Lily, it’s not my place to share his secrets. All I can say is that he has his journey to navigate—his demons to face. Give him the space he needs, and maybe he’ll open up to you in time.”

I find myself torn between respecting Blake’s privacy and my burning curiosity. The need to understand him on a deeper level gnaws at me, urging me to seek answers beyond what he has revealed.

“Okay, I won’t say anything. I’ll give him some space,” I agree. I was right. I always want what I can’t have.

“Thank you,” she says, sounding grateful.

“No, thank you for not thinking it’s weird,” I reply.

She laughs. “It’s not weird. Do you think I’m stupid? I know you had a crush on him when we were teenagers.” Thankfully, she sounds amused.

I laugh. Inside, I hope that she hasn't figured out what happened at the graduation party—that it was me half-naked with her brother in his bedroom. I'm not sure I can cope with that level of embarrassment.

“Yeah, you caught that?” I can feel myself blushing.

“You're not exactly subtle.” We both laugh at that.

The two of us chatter for a bit longer and by the time we say goodbye, I feel so much better about it all. I'm still left with a lingering sense of curiosity. Unable to resist the temptation, I grab my laptop and type Blake's name into the search engine. As expected, there are pages of results and his own Wikipedia page. It still lists him as married and with a child, but there are no further details about his family.

I frown and scroll down the search page. Then I find the jackpot: tabloids talking about flings and a trail of heartbreak. I can feel my pulse quicken as I delve deeper down the rabbit hole. The headlines paint a picture of a charismatic playboy, with rumors and scandals following him like a shadow. My heart sinks as I come across stories of his past conquests, his reputation as a womanizer, and the dark secrets that seem to lurk beneath his charming facade. So...not bothered about his wife at all. It looks like he cheated. Maybe they're divorced. She must have gotten sick of the affairs and left. I can hardly blame her.

This changes things. After knowing this I'm not sure if I can even like him at all. Uncertainty washes over me, mingling with a newfound wariness. How can I trust my feelings for

someone with such a checkered past? The clash between the tender moments we shared this week and the unsavory details I've uncovered leaves me grappling with a sense of unease. Surely this can only end in heartbreak. But a part of me hangs onto what Olivia said, to give him time and space and to see what happens. Perhaps there is more to Blake than meets the eye, a complex tapestry of experiences and growth that I have yet to discover. With an open mind and a cautious heart, I'm determined to unravel the enigma that is Blake, even if it means confronting the skeletons in his closet.

Chapter 8

Blake

I sit on the couch, my mind preoccupied with a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. The room feels oddly quiet, the absence of Emma's laughter and playful chatter leaving an emptiness that I can't quite shake. It's the weekend, and I have alone time to spend with Ethan which I've been excited for after a busy week, but something feels off. Olivia has gone to a yoga class this morning.

We're in the playroom and I watch as Ethan moves aimlessly around, his enthusiasm replaced with a somber expression. He seems withdrawn as if lost in his thoughts. A pang of concern tugs at my chest, and I can't help but wonder what could be troubling him. Deep down, I know the answer. Ethan misses Emma. Their bond has formed quickly, a friendship that has brought out a different side of him. It felt like I had him back for a little while. The old Ethan was starting to return to me. With Emma not being here this weekend, he must be feeling the void, the absence of that connection.

As I observe Ethan, memories of their laughter and playtime together flood my mind. I think about him playing the keyboard as she sings, of them running around the garden together and soaking each other with water pistols, of them, building sandcastles in the garden. The joy that lit up his face when they were together was undeniable. It was a side of him I hadn't seen in a long time, a side that makes my heart swell with happiness.

I realize that I've been so consumed by my feelings for Lily, of trying to avoid her this weekend, that I've overlooked the impact it would have on Ethan. In my pursuit of finding a balance between my mixed emotions and the responsibilities of fatherhood, I've unintentionally neglected the needs of my son. I should have arranged a play date or even warned him that it would just be us again this weekend, but I forgot. It's a rookie mistake. I need to do better.

Guilt washes over me as I see the sadness etched on Ethan's face. I want to reach out to him, to offer comfort and reassurance. But I also understand that it's not just Emma's absence that's affecting him; it's the changes in our lives and the uncertainty that comes with it.

I make my way toward Ethan, crouching down to his eye level.

"Hey, buddy," I say softly, hoping to break through the walls he has built around himself. "Are you doing okay today?"

He looks at me for a moment, his face blank and I know the answer. With a sigh, I settle on the floor and pat my lap, gesturing for him to sit down. I worry for a second that he won't, but he climbs onto me. Ethan looks up at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of longing and sadness. I can sense the hesitation in his gaze as if he's unsure whether he can fully trust my words. It breaks my heart to see him like this, and I'm determined to cheer him up and make him feel better.

“You’re not okay. I understand,” I tell him softly. “You miss Mommy and now you’ve got a friend, and you miss her too. I promise Emma is coming back, okay? She’s not disappeared like Mommy has, okay? Emma is coming back. She’ll be here on Monday, so that’s two sleeps, okay?” I try to make things as simple as possible, so he understands. Ethan nods and I can see the relief on his face.

“That’s how things will be. Okay?” I continue. “Daddy is training Lily and until she can run the shop, I’ll be with her in the week. You’ll have Emma to play with until you go to your new school. Daddy’s working hard to find us a new house close to Livy. That means that Emma will be just around the corner, okay?”

He looks up at me, a lot happier and he nods. I’m happy that I have figured out what he needed to hear. It’s so difficult when I’m met with silence all the time. But this time, I’ve managed to figure it out.

“I know it’s tough without Emma here, but we can still have fun, just the two of us. I’m excited to spend time with you. You’re still my favorite person,” I tell him. “We can do something special together,” I continue, my voice gentle and earnest. “What would you like to do? We can go to the park?” I suggest.

He makes no indication that he’s listening to me, but I know that he’s taking in what I say. “What about a board game?” I ask, but I’m still missing the mark, he merely stares at the floor. “Hey, how about we go and find somewhere we can get

pancakes?” It’s something we used to do together in the city. Saturday mornings were pancake time. I don’t know why I’ve not thought about it before now. I should have tried to keep things familiar for him.

Ethan’s expression slowly softens, a flicker of hope shining in his eyes. For a moment, I expect him to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead, he smiles at me and I’m lucky enough to get a thumbs up. A smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I nod.

“That’s great, buddy. Let’s get ready and have some fun.”

As we prepare to head out, I can’t help but feel a renewed sense of determination. I need to be present for my son, supporting him through his challenges and uncertainties. I can’t let my confusing feelings for Lily get in the way. I’m just going to have to learn how to balance my new life here with Olivia and Lily and most importantly, Emma.

Chapter 9

Lily

As I enter the manager's office, my footsteps are heavy with anticipation and curiosity. I'm a little confused. One of the girls told me Blake wanted to speak to me in private. Before I know it, I'm getting flashbacks of all the times that I've been fired. I pray that I'm misunderstanding and that I'm not about to be let go. I need this job and I wrack my brain thinking of all the things that I've done in the last week, wondering if any of them could have led to a dismissal. I've worked hard, and I'll be devastated if Blake feels like I'm not working out in the position.

"Hi, Lily," Blake greets me with a polite smile. "Can you close the door please and take a seat?"

The formality in his voice sets me on edge. I do as he asks, and I feel like I'm trapped with him in the office, creating an atmosphere of privacy that only adds to my growing unease. I take a seat opposite him.

"Hi," I reply. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course," he responds. "Just something small. The thing is, Lily," he says, his tone measured, "I've noticed that you've been wearing the same shoes consistently. And, well, it doesn't quite align with the image we want to project for the store. I think you need to make a little more effort in how you look."

His words hit me like a cold shower, igniting a fire of annoyance within me. How can he be so concerned about my shoes when there are far more important matters to discuss?

He's been showing me all the issues he's had with the staff here and I've seen the incorrect stock counts and 'misplaced' jewelry. He has a thief on his staff and he's worried about my shoes?

"My shoes?" I ask, unable to hide the bitterness in my tone.

The mounting frustrations and unresolved tensions between us rise to the surface, fueling my irritation. I can't help but feel exasperated by his focus on such trivial matters. Thoughts of the articles I read online surface, shedding light on his past behavior and mistreatment of women. The hypocrisy of it all intensifies my frustration, and I struggle to maintain my composure.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I try to respond calmly, "Blake, I understand the importance of appearance, but shouldn't we be addressing more pressing issues?" I can't hide the slight edge in my voice, a reflection of my growing annoyance.

He raises an eyebrow as if taken aback by my response.

"Lily, I'm just saying that it will be beneficial if you vary your shoe selection. It's all about presenting the right image to our customers."

My annoyance reaches its peak. The weight of my past experiences, coupled with the frustration of being judged for something so trivial, threatens to overwhelm me. All I can hear is my ex telling me how my clothes look awful on me. How terrible I look. How I'll never be pretty enough. Never good enough.

“Oh, like how you presented yourself to all those women?” I snap. The words escape my lips before I can even process them, and I instantly regret the sharpness of my tone. But the damage is done. It’s out. There’s no taking it back and the words that hang in the air between us.

Blake looks at me confused. “What are you talking about?” he asks. I’m not about to let myself be manipulated by him.

“You’ve been flirting with me all week and then you bring me in here and tell me I don’t look good enough. What kind of sick mind games are you playing?” I scoff. “I looked you up. I know about all your affairs. It’s no wonder your wife left you if this is how you treated her.”

To my surprise, Blake doesn’t snap back. Instead, he remains composed for a moment, his face a mask of controlled indifference. I expected him to retaliate, to lash out with equal force. But he doesn’t.

“You know, Lily, the only reason I called you in here is because the other women are laughing at you. I tried to spare you that. I overheard them this morning. I was going to offer to buy you shoes like I did with your clothes when I gave you your contract.”

His response catches me off guard, cutting through my anger like a knife. My heart hammers in my chest. What am I doing? I’m arguing with Blake. My boss. My best friend’s brother. The guy whose been nice enough to give me this job and to taxi me around everywhere. Now I’ve thrown his past mistakes in his face all because he wants to help me buy

another pair of shoes. It's petty and I know I need to apologize. I was only just afraid he was going to fire me and now I realize that it's a real possibility with how I've just spoken to him. I should have just nodded and thanked him. Olivia would have ordered me some fancy shoes and I could carry on with this job which I am starting to enjoy. I would have carried on spending time with Blake. I could have seen what happens between us. Now I've ruined it.

"But you've already jumped to conclusions and you're insinuating I'm a bad husband," Blake continues, his voice breaking with a hint of vulnerability, "and now you've dragged my wife into this."

My wife, he said. Not his ex-wife. I feel like I'm missing something. Everything he's saying to me is true. I don't know why I snapped like that. I don't think he's a bad husband and I shouldn't have mentioned his wife at all. I can get so defensive and lash out when I'm scared.

"Blake," I say uselessly.

The weight of my actions crashes down on me, and I feel the color drain from my face. The shock of my careless words reverberates through every fiber of my being. Why did I say that? What have I done?

Blake's stony demeanor cracks, and the facade he carefully maintains crumbles right before my eyes. The tears well up in his eyes, glistening with unspoken pain and betrayal. The sight shocks me to my core, and I feel a heavy lump forming in my throat. This was not the reaction I expected, and the gravity of

my words becomes painfully clear. I didn't want this. I was just angry. I didn't mean it.

“Oh no,” I curse under my breath, the realization of the damage I've caused hitting me like a ton of bricks. I desperately want to turn back time, to retract the hurtful words that have wounded him so deeply. The room feels suffocating, the air heavy with my regret. I feel helpless to stop him from crying. I want to reach out, to offer some form of comfort, but my hands feel frozen, useless in the face of the hurt I've inflicted.

As Blake's tears fall, my horror deepens. The sight of the usually composed and mysterious Blake, unraveling before me shatters any preconceived notions I had about him. The strength I once attributed to him feels fragile and delicate, and I am left grappling with the knowledge that my words have pushed him to his breaking point.

The silence hangs heavily between us, stifling any semblance of normalcy or ease. It becomes an oppressive presence, a reminder of the pain and tension that now exists between us. I want to speak, to apologize, to find a way to make things right, but my voice fails me. The weight of guilt presses down upon my chest, stealing the words from my tongue. I've never seen a man tearful and upset like this before and I don't know how to fix it. In that excruciating silence, I scramble to find the right words to repair the damage, trying to alleviate the pain etched on Blake's face.

My tongue feels heavy. I allowed my anger to consume me, to cloud my judgment, and now I am left grappling with the consequences of my thoughtless words. I find myself paralyzed. I'm afraid to say anything else for fear of further exacerbating the situation. I take a tentative breath, my voice trembling with sincerity as I finally find the strength to break the suffocating silence.

"Blake, I'm so sorry," I whisper, the words carrying the weight of my remorse. I force the words out, knowing that I need to admit I was immature and in the wrong. "I didn't mean what I said. I was angry and frustrated, and I lashed out without thinking. I deeply regret my words."

The vulnerability in his eyes softens, replaced by a mixture of pain and longing.

His voice quivers slightly as he responds, "Lily, it's not just about the shoes. It's about trust, respect, and understanding between us. I've been trying to find a way to connect with you. I thought we had something good. I thought..." He trails off.

Tears well up in my own eyes, mirroring the pain and regret that I see in his. "I never wanted to push you away, Blake," I confess, my voice laced with genuine remorse. "I've been carrying emotional baggage, and it clouded my judgment. I allowed my past experiences to taint my perception, and it was unfair to you."

"I know," he replies, pushing his palms up and against his face as if embarrassed at his display of emotion. "You didn't

mean it.”

Blake is nothing like my ex and I think I forgot that for just a moment and reacted poorly.

“I just...” My words are lost. I don’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.”

As the weight of our words hangs in the air, a fragile thread of understanding begins to form, weaving its way through the pain and hurt. We both bear scars and in this moment of vulnerability, we start to see the complexities of each other’s lives. It’s a fragile foundation, one that requires compassion, forgiveness, and a willingness to rebuild what has been shattered.

“Lily, I think I have to tell you something.”

Chapter 10

Blake

“What is it?” she asks me softly. “What are you not telling me?” Lily leans in, her gaze never wavering, as if silently encouraging me to continue. The vulnerability in her eyes gives me the courage to push forward.

For a moment, my emotions make me weak, and it takes time to compose myself. But I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I prepare to reveal the painful truth that has haunted me for the past year. I glance toward the door to make sure it's properly shut. I don't want anyone overhearing us.

Sitting across from Lily, I see her eyes are filled with a mixture of curiosity, empathy, and regret. I know that it's time to open up and share the darkest chapter of my life. I know she's sorry. She didn't mean what she said. She felt pushed into a corner and thought I was insulting her.

“I need you to understand,” I begin, my voice trembling slightly, “that my decision to move back home wasn't just about starting over or finding a fresh start because my wife left me. It was driven by something much deeper. I never cheated on my wife. I'm not divorced, Lily. I'm...I'm a widower. I lost my wife, Sarah, to cancer,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

The words hang heavy in the air, the weight of the truth pressing down on me. I look up at Lily and I watch the devastation of my secret hitting her all at once.

“It was unexpected,” I admit. “Devastating. She was my everything.”

As I speak, memories of Sarah flood my mind—her infectious laughter, her warm embrace, and the way she brought light and joy into my life. The pain of her loss resurfaces, raw and unyielding as if it had just happened yesterday. I don’t think I will ever be able to get over losing her. I can’t ever recover. It happened so fast and there was nothing we could have done to stop it. It was already too late. Before we could process what was happening, she was already gone. She was dead within a week.

“The affairs you’ve read about were just flings that all happened afterward,” I explain. “They meant nothing. One-night stands where women wanted to be something more because they liked who I was. They sold their silly stories to the tabloids for money. I never cheated on anyone. I was just lonely. The playboy persona you’ve read about was nothing but a defense mechanism—a way to avoid the pain of losing Sarah. I refused to commit to them because I wanted my wife back, Lily. But she’s gone.”

I gulp thickly, emotion caught in my throat. Even talking about it is too much for me. It feels fresh. Raw. I care about Lily and I feel like she deserves to know. Emma has become so dear to Ethan, and she’s dear to me, too. Somehow, they’ve both become so important in such a small amount of time. I hadn’t realized it was possible, but here I am.

“I was drowning after I lost her,” I try to explain, somehow managing to hold it together. It’s difficult to think back to that time. “Ethan stopped talking. He was having meltdowns all the time. Well, panic attacks. I thought he was being naughty.” I laugh bitterly. I made so many mistakes back then. “He started getting bullied because he wouldn’t talk, and the other kids were awful to him. I had to pull him out of school.”

She looks sad as she listens to me talk, but she doesn’t interrupt me. She gives me time. She waits until I pause before she speaks.

“So, he can’t talk at all?” she asks sadly. “It wasn’t my place to ask, so I didn’t.”

“Selective mutism,” I reply. “He’s going to a child psychologist. They say it’s a form of anxiety. A result of the trauma. He saw the worst of it when she died. She had a seizure,” I explain, “a big one. We didn’t know until after, but it had spread to her brain. That was when...He was there when she died. She left in an ambulance and then...she never came home.”

Lily looks at me, her face full of grief as she begins to understand why Ethan is the way he is and why I’m so protective of him, and why I’m here and doing all of this.

“I didn’t handle it well. Any of it.” I gulp thickly. “So, I decided it would be best if we moved back home to be with Olivia,” I continue, my voice steadier now.

“That sounds sensible. You two were always close,” she replies. “We all were.”

She's right. We were. I've known Lily for a long time. Almost all my life. Being around her feels easy. Maybe that's why the emotions have come back so easily. I was already half in love with her when we were kids. Now this almost feels like a second chance. Just picking back up where we left off.

"She's the only family I have left, the one person who understands the depths of my grief. We've always taken care of each other," I say about Olivia.

Lily's expression softens, her eyes filled with compassion. I can see that she understands the weight of loss and the heaviness that comes with navigating life after a tragedy. I know that she lost her parents when she was young. I was there for the aftermath; I remember the funerals like they were yesterday. At that moment I realize the depth of her pain. She's had to build walls around her heart, too. For the first time, I wonder why it is. I realize I've been selfish. I've been so lost in my own struggle that I haven't stopped to think about where Emma's father is in all of this. I starting to think I know the answer.

Her voice breaks the silence, filled with sincerity and regret. "Blake, I'm so sorry for what I said earlier. I completely misunderstood the situation. I overreacted and I shouldn't have spoken to you like that over some stupid shoes. I had no idea of the pain you've been carrying all this time. I was wrong to judge you. I..." She looks away, embarrassed for a moment. "I made the mistake of searching online. I saw you'd had lots of flings in the past year, so I wrongly assumed you cheated on

your wife, not that she was...Well, I'm sorry. I thought you might have been playing some kind of game with me."

I reach out and hesitantly, I gently place my hand over hers, offering comfort and understanding. "Lily, I appreciate your apology, and I understand where your words came from. I'm annoying sometimes, I push people away, and I'm grumpy and blunt. But to be honest, I'm still heartbroken. I never expected that I would have to bury my wife and the mother of my child. I thought we'd have more time together." My voice cracks and I lose my composure. "I'm sorry," I gasp, bringing my hands to my face to hide my grief.

I shouldn't be crying like this. She must think that I'm so weak. What kind of man acts this way? I should be stronger. I should be able to hold myself together.

"No, don't apologize," she tells me gently. "I can't imagine how difficult that must be for you and Ethan. I can't say that I fully understand that type of grief, I don't remember much about my parents now, but I know pain."

Her eyes meet mine, vulnerability shining through. "Matthew," she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I don't recognize the name, so I assume that she's talking about an ex-boyfriend. Emma's father.

"He hurt me, Blake. He shattered my trust and left me wary of opening up to anyone." She gulps and looks down, breaking our eye contact. I can see the pain there. "He was always awful, but I kept thinking that he would get better. I thought maybe if I tried harder that things would improve. I got

pregnant with Emma and things were okay for a while. So, I thought I'd figured it out. We could create a family together and we would be happy. Then, after she was born, he was worse than ever. He told me that he didn't want children, that he never had." She pauses for a moment. "He said that Emma had ruined my body and that he wasn't attracted to me anymore. And then he left."

I can't believe the words that I'm hearing. Ruined her body? No longer attracted to her? I can't help but glance down, looking her over. Lily is, and always has been, an attractive girl. She has silky chestnut brown hair and warm hazel eyes which reflect her kindness and determination. She has a slender yet curvaceous figure. I can't see a single thing wrong with her.

I remember how worried Sarah was after she had Ethan, how her body changed from having our son. I only loved her more for that. It's a man's job to love their woman unconditionally. After having a baby, Lily must have felt so awful being told such a terrible thing. She was hormonal and struggling with motherhood and all the highs and lows. The last thing she needed was her partner uttering such disgusting words to her. I can see how it's stuck with her.

"He was an asshole." She scoffs and I can see the tears in her eyes. "Being away from him has made me realize that it was never me. It was always him that was the problem."

I nod, agreeing with her wholeheartedly. We must both look a mess, sitting there and sniffing together, crying over the

things that we haven't been able to move past.

"I'm sorry," I say.

I understand Lily more and I feel heavy guilt about the remarks I've made about her appearance. To me, they were offhanded. But to her, they were triggering—a harsh reminder of Matthew and what she's been through. I've been awful to her, and I know I need to make it up to her.

"He comes back every once in a while," she continues, "demanding to see her." She rolls her eyes. "But he's bored within a few days and then she ends up confused. Then it's me that picks up the pieces."

I nod, my heart aching for her. The pain she carries, and the walls she's erected, resonate deeply with my struggles. We share a bond, forged through loss and heartbreak. It connects us in ways I never imagined. It's the same, but different.

"We've both been through hell," I say softly, my voice filled with empathy. "But maybe, just maybe, we can help each other heal. We can...take it one step at a time?"

I want that chance with her. I want things between us to be better.

"I'd like that," she tells me tearfully.

As our eyes lock, a newfound understanding passes between us. Our shared pain has the power to bind us together, to create a space where healing can take place. I feel a glimmer of hope, a flicker of light amidst the darkness that has overshadowed my life.

I stand and she does too. We lean forward at the same time, stepping into each other's space. For the first time since we were teenagers, we embrace. I feel lighter. We stay like that for a few moments and then we pull away and compose ourselves.

"I'm sorry for the thoughtless things that I've said to you. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about yourself," I tell her. My hands grip her arms softly for a moment. "I think you're beautiful and if I ever comment about how you look it's because I'm worried about what the girls in the store will say about you, not because it's what I think."

She smiles, her eyes still tearful.

"Okay," she says, looking much more secure with that knowledge.

The road ahead won't be easy, but with Lily by my side, I feel a newfound strength and resilience. We stand there together, vulnerable and open. I realize that perhaps there's a chance for us to find solace in each other's arms. Our shared pain becomes the foundation upon which something beautiful can grow. I hope that love can bloom from the depths of our brokenness.

Chapter 11

Lily

Since then, things improve. I'm still secretly humiliated about what I said to Blake, but he seems to have forgiven me. Thankfully, our childish argument is in the past. It's so easy to fall into a routine together. We go to work in the week and at the weekend, poor Livy gets a break from auntie duties. Even after spending so much time together, I find that I just want to be with Blake even more. It's silly really. I'm an adult. I shouldn't be acting like some love-sick teenager, but I can't help it. We seem to get each other.

He's been so good to me by supporting me at work. After my first paycheck, things get so much easier for me, and I can even afford to buy enough groceries. I'm not worried about the next bill coming in.

It's not just about money and childcare and making my life easy. He's so much more than that. Blake is wonderful in so many ways. He talks to me about anything and everything. We watch silly shows together as we talk on the phone at the end of the day. We send each other stupid messages. I feel like he's becoming my best friend, though he would never fully take that title from his sister. He's fantastic with Emma and she loves him to pieces. It's something I thought I'd never see. I was so sure that I didn't want a man in my life after Matthew, but this man...I can honestly see this being something special. That once-in-a-lifetime kind of love. I'm probably getting ahead of myself, but that's how he makes me feel.

After a month or so, Blake finally takes a step back at the jewelry store and I almost swallow my tongue when he announces that I'll be managing the store. I never expected it but now it makes sense why he's been so tough on me about getting things right. I'm honored and in disbelief at the same time. I gratefully accept the position. I expect to go back to getting the bus but he's up and dressed every morning and drops me off. He reminds me of the company car that he offered, but I'm not sure what I want more, my own car or being able to see him so often while he drives me everywhere. I'd miss our drives. I tell him that I'll think about it.

I'm always waiting for him to stop being so nice, but he doesn't. He's kind and thoughtful. I've always been aware of his looks, so I also think about that. I love his dark, tousled hair. I fantasize about kissing him and running my hands through it. I notice that his eyes are an intense steel grey when I'd previously thought they were blue. At six foot two, he has a strong, muscular build, with broad shoulders and a chiseled jawline that exudes a rugged attractiveness. For the first time in years, I start paying attention to how a man looks, and it makes me weak at the knees. Just being around him makes my heart flutter and my palms sweat. I'm not sure how much longer I can resist my attraction to him.

As I walk out of the store, ready to head home after a long day of work, I see Blake waiting for me in his car. This time, the kids are strapped securely in their car seats. A smile

immediately spreads across my face at the sight of their little faces peering out the window, their excitement palpable.

“Hey, guys!” I greet them, happy to see their excited faces.

“Hey, Lily!” he greets me with a warm smile as I approach the car. “Ready for a little adventure tonight?”

I can’t help but be intrigued by his words.

“Adventure? What do you have planned?” I quickly hop into the passenger seat. As I settle in, he turns toward me, his eyes filled with mischief.

“Well, it seems Olivia has gone out on a date with a new friend tonight. So, I thought, why don’t we have a little dinner party at her place?”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but I can’t suppress the smile that spreads across my face.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea! I’d love to join you and the kids for dinner.”

The children’s eyes widen with excitement as they hear our plan and they cheer from the backseat. I can see their little minds working, probably wondering what delicious meal we will be preparing together. With everyone in agreement, we make our way to Olivia’s house. The car ride is filled with laughter and playful banter. Emma shares stories from their day while Blake and I exchange jokes.

As we enter the familiar threshold of Olivia’s home, it feels both familiar and foreign at the same time. I have spent countless hours here with Olivia, but now the dynamic has

shifted, and I am in the company of her brother and our children.

We set the kids up with a jigsaw puzzle in the living room to preoccupy them, and then Blake and I take charge of making dinner. As we stand side by side in Olivia's cozy kitchen, the tantalizing aroma of spices filling the air, an easy rapport forms between Blake and me. The clinking of utensils and the sizzling of ingredients provide the perfect background melody to our playful banter.

I glance over at Blake, a mischievous glimmer in my eyes. "So, Blake, tell me, do you think you're as skilled in the kitchen as you are at flirting?"

We've grown closer over the past weeks and we are both feeling more comfortable in our attraction to each other. We haven't spoken about what it means, but we're both happy spending time together.

"Oh, Lily, you wound me! But I'll have you know—my culinary expertise is second only to my charm." He feigns offense, placing a hand dramatically over his heart.

I playfully roll my eyes, a smile tugging at my lips. "Is that so? Well, I guess I'll be the judge of that. Let's see what you've got."

As we continue to chop vegetables and stir sauces, our conversation dances between light-hearted teasing and genuine curiosity. There's a delightful rhythm to our exchange, a magnetic pull that keeps us engaged in this delicious game of verbal volley.

Blake turns to me, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “You know, Lily, they say the way to a person’s heart is through their stomach. I wonder if that applies to you.”

I raise an eyebrow, a playful challenge in my gaze.

“Oh really, Blake? Are you trying to woo me with your culinary creations?”

He smirks, his voice dripping with playful charm.

“Maybe I am. Who can resist the allure of a well-cooked meal and a charming cook?”

He’s charming. I’ll give him that.

I playfully tap a spoon against the side of the pot, my voice filled with mock seriousness. “Well, let’s see if your cooking skills live up to your flirting prowess.”

As we continue to cook, laughter and flirty remarks intertwine effortlessly. Our shared moments of tasting and seasoning become opportunities for stolen glances and lingering touches. The kitchen becomes our playground, where the simmering heat of the stove is matched only by the sizzling chemistry between us.

The sound of the kids’ laughter fills the air as they complete the puzzle, their sense of accomplishment evident in their smiles. They bounce into the kitchen, their energy contagious, and eagerly set the dining table in Olivia’s best cutlery and table pieces, proud of their contribution.

“Come on now guys, it’s ready!” Blake announces.

Finally, we all gather around the table. As we sit down to eat, a feeling of contentment settles within me. It's a simple yet profound moment, a reminder of the beauty that can be found in shared experiences. Throughout the meal, I savor each bite, relishing not only the delicious food but also the warmth and love that surround us. The kids giggle. Emma shares the favorite parts of her day while Blake and I listen, our hearts swelling with gratitude for this unexpected evening.

As the night draws to a close, and the kids begin to yawn, their little eyes heavy with sleep, we know it is time to bid farewell. We clean up the table together, first, restoring Olivia's kitchen to its usual order. By the time we're done and we walk back into the playroom, the kids aren't there.

"I wonder if Ethan's taken himself to bed," Blake says.

"Can you tell him to teach Emma?" I joke.

We head upstairs to check and to our surprise, both kids are curled up on Ethan's bed and fast asleep.

"Oh my god," I gush. The two of them look adorable.

"They're so sweet," Blake agrees.

He steps into the bedroom and clicks on the nightlight, bathing the room in blue and red patterns. He pulls the blankets over them.

"It's a shame to wake them," I say. "I could stay a bit longer?"

Blake turns to me, taking in my words. He thinks it over for a few moments, his eyes flitting down to my lips.

“I’d really like that,” he says after a moment. “We could have a drink and I could pay for you guys to get a taxi home.”

The implications of us spending some time together while the children are safe, and sleeping is too much to refuse. We head back downstairs and into the kitchen. Blake uncorks a bottle of red and then grabs two glasses. We make our way into the conservatory.

We sit together on the sofa. I could have sat in the chair opposite, but I want to be close to him. I hope I’m not misunderstanding and getting my signals crossed.

“Thank you for everything you’ve been doing for me and Emma. I don’t know what we’d have done if you hadn’t given me that job,” I admit.

“You would have found something,” he replies. “Livy was right, you are a good worker.”

I appreciate the words so much.

“Still,” I say. “I feel like I’m finally getting on my feet now. What about you? How is...everything?”

I think about the load that he’s carrying—house hunting, Ethan’s mental health, the businesses, the grief of losing Sarah—it seems like too much for one person. Life isn’t fair.

Blake smiles softly. “It’s hard,” he replies honestly. “But it feels a little easier with you.”

The words warm my heart.

The distance between us diminishes. I'm not sure who moves first, but, and our bodies lean closer, drawn by an undeniable force. Our lips are just a breath away, and the anticipation swells within me. In this moment of vulnerability and longing, we share a passionate, electric kiss. It's the culmination of desires long suppressed—a merging of souls that transcends time and space. Or hell, that's how it feels at least. Our lips move in harmony, each touch igniting a fire deep within me.

As our kiss lingers, the outside world fades away, leaving only the two of us intertwined in this shared solitude. The wine is forgotten on the table. The room pulses with captivating energy, and we're left breathless and yearning for more. We sit in silence, cherishing the weight of this stolen moment, knowing that our lives are about to change—probably forever.

Blake and I have crossed a threshold. That much is clear. Our destinies link as we embrace the truth that our connection goes beyond what we could have ever imagined.

Basking in the moonlight—looking delicious—Blake breaks the silence with an invitation that I don't expect. "Hey, Lily..." he says. His voice is soft, a hint of uncertainty lacing his words. "Since the kids are sound asleep...I was wondering if you'd stay the night. You know, for their sake. It would be a shame to wake them up when they're all settled, you know."

I turn to look at him. My heart flutters with a mixture of surprise and anticipation. The air crackles between us, and a

mischievous smile plays on my lips. The mention of the children feels like a thinly veiled excuse. I know there's more to it.

“Are you *sure* it's just for the kids?” I tease.

The corners of Blake's lips form a smug grin, and he leans in closer, his warm breath grazing against my ear.

“Maybe it's because I can't bear to be away from you,” he whispers, his voice sending delightful shivers down my spine. “But Ethan does love having you around. And I...I want you here with us, Lily. I want you here with *me*.”

His words wash over me like a tidal wave, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions that I can't even name. I feel desired. Wanted. Cherished. The spark between us intensifies, and I can no longer resist the magnetic pull drawing me toward him.

“I never forgot that night,” I tell him softly.

“Me neither,” he replies. “But...I'm glad we waited and it turned out this way. It means we have Ethan and Emma.”

He's right. Fate really does have a plan.

Without a word, I lean in and press my lips against his, indulging in the intoxicating taste of passion and desire. The kiss is fiery, filled with a potent blend of longing and pent-up yearning. Our bodies melt into each other, the warmth of his embrace cocooning me in a world of undeniable connection. We move to his bedroom and start kissing again. At this moment, as our lips lock and our bodies intertwine, the boundaries between us dissolve, and our clothes seem to fall

away. I hardly even notice who's undressing whom. We're lost in the moment. The way he touches me and clings to me makes me feel desired for the first time in my life. I've been used to hiding my body, being ashamed of my stretch marks and all the imperfections. Blake seems to love everything about me, and it leaves me wet and wanting.

"Are you sure?" I ask him.

I think about all those women who betrayed him. Who sold their stories, eager for their five minutes of fame. I don't want him to think that I'm like that.

Blake nods at me. "But I want more than one night with you," he assures me. "This isn't just sex for me."

I nod, believing his words. I have no reason not to. He's been nothing but honest with me. He makes me feel special.

"Me too," I agree, echoing the sentiment.

Before we know it, we're both naked, the last of our clothes falling away. Blake pulls me into his lap. We kiss furiously. It's been years since I've had sex, but it's never been this passionate and desperate. I feel like I'm trembling with desire.

"My wallet," he pants against my lips.

I nod, struggling to catch my breath as I bend down and grab it for him. He flips it open and pulls a condom out. He rips it open with his teeth and then quickly applies it.

Blake is hard all over, but nothing can match the part of him that I take in my hand—the part that's throbbing with desire.

And now I'm no longer in control. Straddling Blake, already wet, I press him inside and let out a moan. There's nothing more I need in this life. There's nothing more I could want more than this.

Blake guides my hips, helping me find a rhythm as we rock together, kissing the entire time. It's perfect. Every kiss. Every moan. The slide of our bodies moving together in sync.

We finish together, each other's names on our lips and everything feels perfect.

Chapter 12

Blake

Things only go up from there and we start to spend the evening together too. The soft golden glow of the setting sun casts a warm, luminous hue across Olivia's garden, creating an enchanting atmosphere as the summer holiday stretches lazily into the evening. The lingering daylight grants us the precious gift of time, and we seize the opportunity to bask in its embrace. We let the children stay up past their bedtimes and they think it's the best summer ever. The sound of their laughter fills the air, their joyful giggles echoing through the open space. Ethan and Emma, their spirits unburdened by worries or obligations, immerse themselves in the sheer delight of play. Their innocent laughter becomes the soundtrack of the evening, a symphony of pure happiness that envelops us all.

Perched together on the garden swing seat, Lily and I find solace in each other's company. With a glass of wine in hand, the coolness of the drink provides a refreshing respite from the warm summer air, we become spectators of this beautiful scene unfolding before us. Our eyes meet, sharing an unspoken appreciation for the simple pleasure of being here together. This is what it's about. Not money or wealth. Not my businesses. Just being able to watch Ethan as he plays, happy with Emma. Enjoying spending time with Lily.

“What was she like?” Lily asks from the side of me.

I turn and look at her curiously. For a minute I wonder what she's talking about, but I follow her gaze and it's focused on Ethan. It clicks. She wants to know about Sarah.

"I mean, you don't have to tell me," she says. "But if you ever feel like you need to talk about it then I want you to know that I will listen. I'm not going to pretend she doesn't exist or that she wasn't important to you. I don't ever want you to feel like I'm trying to replace her or that I'm disrespecting her."

The words make my heart warm. Lily is an exquisite person. She has such a bright soul. She's beautiful inside and out and I appreciate her efforts. I hadn't wanted to date again because I was worried about women tarnishing Sarah's name, but Lily is so understanding. Her words hit something deep inside of me.

"Okay," I reply.

I take a deep breath, mustering the courage. I can sense her genuine support and understanding. It's time to share a part of my life that I've kept hidden from everyone around me.

"She was amazing," I begin, my voice steady but tinged with vulnerability. "We met in college, during our freshman year. It was like something out of a clichéd romance novel, like love at first sight."

Lily listens attentively, nodding as she turns on the seat so she can look at me properly as she listens. She leans softly against the back of the seat, making it swing slightly.

“She was in a few of my classes—marketing, management, and organizational behavior. I remember seeing her for the first time and I thought to myself: wow, she’s the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen. I just knew.”

Lily’s eyes soften, encouraging me to continue. She reaches out, gently placing her hand on mine, a gesture of comfort that strengthens my resolve.

“We had this instant connection,” I say, a wistful smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “Sarah had this incredible energy, this zest for life that was contagious. She was adventurous, spontaneous, and passionate about everything she did. We got paired for this stupid project and had to make this presentation. It was terrible and we completely misunderstood the assignment. I was so annoyed and embarrassed, but she just laughed and laughed and before I knew it, I was laughing too.”

Lily leans in closer, her curiosity evident as she listens intently. Her presence emboldens me to delve deeper into my memories, to share the essence of Sarah.

“She was infectious with joy, you know?” I continue, my voice filled with nostalgia. “She brought out the best in me.”

“It sounds like you two really got on,” she replies. “It’s great that she could make you happy even if the situation was hard.”

“She was always like that. She saw the best in life. She was so positive about everything.”

A mixture of admiration and longing fills the air as I recount Sarah's qualities. I feel a twinge of sadness, but also gratitude for the time we shared. Lily's encouraging nod prompts me to reflect further, my words carrying the weight of emotions locked away within me. As I speak, Lily listens attentively, embracing my past without judgment or jealousy. Her genuine curiosity and sensitivity create a safe space where I can freely reminisce about the woman who once held my heart.

"She had a heart full of compassion," I say. "She cared deeply for others, always finding ways to help and support those around her. She was fiercely independent and had this unwavering determination to chase her dreams," I continued, my voice growing softer. "Kind of like you, Lily."

Lily looks at me with a smile and I can see that she appreciates my words.

Her voice breaks the silence, her eyes shimmering with empathy. "Tell me more, Blake," she says softly, her words urging me to open up, to share more of my memories.

And so, I oblige, pouring out stories of Sarah's love for art, her vibrant spirit, and the adventures we embarked on together. I describe the way her eyes sparkled with excitement, the warmth of her embrace, and the way she made me feel alive. Telling Lily about Sarah is liberating, as if I'm unburdening a part of myself that I've held onto for too long. With each word spoken, a sense of closure and gratitude settles within me, allowing me to fully embrace the present and the potential of what lies ahead.

“You and Ethan must miss her so much,” Lily says sympathetically, glancing toward my son.

He and Emma are drawing all over the floor with giant chalks. Ethan is lying down as Emma traces his outline with bright red. Once she’s finished, he jumps up to look at her handwork and laughs. It’s amazing how those two manage to get on without Ethan uttering a single word.

“Every day,” I admit. “I wish we could talk about it, but Ethan’s not said a single thing since it’s happened.”

“He will,” she tells me hopefully. She watches him with an adoring gaze. “I have a feeling that he will get through this. He’s a strong little boy. I have faith.”

“He is, isn’t he?” I agree. I’m probably biased about it. But he’s been through so much and I feel like Lily is right. Ethan is strong, just like Sarah was. He reminds me of her every day.

In Lily’s presence, I find solace and acceptance. She understands that sharing these memories doesn’t diminish the connection we have now. It only deepens our understanding of each other and the journeys we’ve taken to arrive at this moment.

And as I recount the tales of Sarah, a sense of peace washes over me. Lily’s presence brings comfort, reminding me that although the past holds its place in my heart, it’s the present and future that hold the promise of love and happiness.

Chapter 13

Lily

I wake up groggy and disoriented, a heavy weight settling over my body. The sound of my alarm clock echoes through the room, but I can't summon the energy to reach out and silence it. Something feels off, a strange unease that lingers in the air. As I attempt to sit up, a wave of nausea washes over me, forcing me back onto the pillows.

Oh, God. I feel like I'm going to puke.

I take a few minutes to compose myself.

I can hear Emma playing in her room, already awake despite it being early still. Thank God for the baby gate or she would be bouncing on my bed right about now. I sometimes feel bad for still having it up since she's not a baby anymore, but at times like this, I'm thankful.

Reluctantly, I grab my phone and find the number I've got saved for Tiffany. Out of all the girls at work, she's the most understanding and has tried to make an effort to be polite to me. My heart is pounding with a mix of guilt and apprehension. As the call connects, I clear my throat, trying to sound as professional as possible despite the fatigue that weighs me down.

"Hi, this is Lily," I say, my voice wavering slightly. "I'm feeling unwell today and won't be able to come into work. I apologize for the short notice."

I've only been there for little over a month, and I still haven't had the chance to build a strong rapport with my workers yet. I don't want to let them down, especially when they are still warming up to me. But I haven't got a choice. I feel awful. I hope they don't take it too badly.

There's a brief pause on the other end of the line. I'm not sure what to expect.

"Oh, Lily, I'm sorry to hear that," Tiffany says. "We'll manage without you today. Just take care of yourself and get some rest. Is there anything you needed to tell us for today?"

I feel bad but I take a deep breath, reminding myself that taking care of my health is essential. I can't pour from an empty cup.

"No, there's nothing in the diary," I recall. "But if you guys need anything then please don't hesitate to call me, okay? My phone's on loud."

"Sure thing, Lily. I'll let the girls know."

"Great. Hopefully, I'll see you tomorrow," I tell her.

"Sure. See you then!"

Pushing aside the guilt, I hang up the phone and make my way to where Emma is nestled on her bean bag, engrossed in playing with a noisy kiddie laptop that yells out the alphabet and plays music.

"Good morning, sweetie," I greet her.

"Mommy!" she cries.

She runs to the gate. She lifts her arms, gesturing for me to pick her up like I do every morning. I'm not sure if I can manage it this morning.

"Mommy's sick, honey. We need to stay home today," I tell her. "We can snuggle and watch movies all day," I suggest. I'm not sure if I can manage anything more than that.

She pouts at me. "Poor Mommy. I'll take care of you!"

She's so sweet. "Okay, thank you. No pick-ups today, though. I don't want to get any of my germs on you."

She tilts her head cutely as she thinks. "Okay," she agrees.

"Come on, you can get in my bed today."

"Yay!" the young girl cheers.

As soon as I open the baby gate, she runs out of her room and down the corridor. I watch as she jumps onto my bed, and as predicted, starts bouncing. I'll let her get it out of her system while I grab her an easy breakfast. I make my way downstairs slowly and grab her some fruit and a cereal bar and make her a cup of milk. I finally make it back upstairs and place the food down on the bottom of the bed before I settle back into bed.

"Be careful," I tell Emma as she sits down and starts eating like she's ravenous. Watching her makes my stomach churn a little.

I send a text message to our group chat with Blake and Olivia, keeping them in the loop. *Hey guys, not feeling well today. Taking a sick day and keeping Emma home just in case*

it's contagious. Sorry. Tell Ethan we're both okay, I know he worries. xo.

Almost immediately, Olivia responds with a supportive message. *Take care, Lil. Feel better soon :(Let us know if you need anything!*

Blake's response comes a little later, his words filled with concern. *Rest up, Lily. If you need anything, don't hesitate to reach out. Take care of yourself and Emma.*

Their understanding and support bring a sense of comfort amidst the feeling of guilt for staying home from work. It's a reminder that I'm loved and it's okay to take time for myself when I need to.

I put on Netflix, choosing a show with animals for Emma since she loves bunnies the most right now. I lie there watching it with her, feeling the exhaustion seeping into my bones, making every movement feel like a Herculean task. My mind races with worry as I contemplate what could be causing this sudden illness. I hope it's just a bug, something that will pass with time.

"Are you going to throw up, mommy?" Emma asks, scooting over to me and gently touching my head.

I manage a weak smile. "No. I don't think so. I think I caught a bug though, sweetie. But don't worry, it's nothing serious. We'll just have a cozy day at home together, okay?"

Emma's face lights up at the prospect of a day spent with me. She climbs into the duvet beside me, snuggling close

gently. We spend the day watching movies, cocooned in blankets, and sipping warm tea. The distraction of the films helps alleviate the discomfort for a while, and I find solace in the simplicity of these precious moments with my daughter.

In the quiet moments between films, I reflect on my decision to keep Emma home. I feel bad taking her away from Ethan for the day, but I want to protect him, even from the possibility of catching whatever illness has befallen me. I'm worried about her, too. I hope I haven't made her sick. The responsibility of motherhood weighs heavy on my shoulders, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Emma's happiness and well-being are my top priority.

As the afternoon wears on, I find myself drifting in and out of consciousness. Emma's soft voice and gentle touch bring me back to the present, grounding me in the reality of our shared day together. In a lull between movies, Emma leans against me, her head resting on my shoulder. She looks up at me with her innocent eyes, filled with love and trust.

"Mommy, I'm glad we're spending the day together. I love you." A warmth spreads through my chest, despite my weariness. Emma's words touch my heart, reminding me that even in moments of vulnerability and uncertainty, the love of my daughter remains a constant source of strength.

It isn't until partway through the day, amidst the laughter and cuddles, that a realization develops in the back of my mind.

My period. It's late this month.

Now usually, this wouldn't have me worrying. I think back to the night I spent with Blake. We were careful, but these things do happen. I try to push the nagging worry aside, convincing myself that it's just stress or a hormonal imbalance. But deep down, the uncertainty still eats away at me.

When Emma drifts off to sleep, her small body curled up beside me, I find myself lost in a sea of conflicting emotions. Fear, hope, and uncertainty swirl in my mind, creating a whirlwind of thoughts. What if? What if my late period is a sign of something more? The possibilities, both terrifying and exciting, flood my thoughts, leaving me overwhelmed.

I reach for my phone, my fingers trembling as I type in the search bar. *Late period, causes.* The screen illuminates countless articles and forums, each offering insights and anecdotes. I scroll through the information, my heart racing as I absorb the possibilities.

As I read about the signs and symptoms of pregnancy, my mind wanders to Blake. The memory of his gentle touch and kind words resurfaces, mingling with the uncertainty that fills my heart. Would this be a blessing or a burden? I'm torn between the fear of the unknown and the glimmer of hope that dances in the corner of my mind.

We've not talked about being official, but Blake has become vulnerable and soft to me and he's been nothing but amazing. I can't imagine him being angry about this. I worry because of

what happened with Matthew, but when I think about Ethan and how loved he is, I squash that down.

But...that would be another child in the mix. Ethan and Emma and a baby. Suddenly, the room feels suffocating, and I stumble out of bed, needing air. I walk to the window, staring out at the world beyond, hoping to find clarity amidst the chaos of my thoughts. The sky is darkening with painted with hues of pink and orange, a reminder that life and time go on, regardless of the turmoil within me. I realize we've not even had dinner. We've snacked in bed all day and Emma is napping despite the late hour. I'm going to regret that now. I try not to dwell on it. I'll try to make her something in a minute.

I take a deep breath, the cool air filling my lungs, and a sense of calm washes over me. I realize that I don't have all the answers, and that's okay. Whatever lies ahead, I am strong enough to face it. I am not alone. Emma's love and support, along with the possibility of a stronger connection with Blake, give me strength.

Closing my eyes, I offer a silent prayer to the universe, asking for guidance and clarity. I know that the road ahead may be challenging, but I am ready to face it head-on. There's no point worrying about the unknown. I know I have to do a pregnancy test. I head to the bathroom, hoping that I have an old one somewhere. Thankfully, I spot a blue packet at the back of the cabinet.

Chapter 14

Blake

My mind is consumed with worry as I drive to Lily's house, the weight of concern pressing heavily on my chest. Thoughts of Lily and Emma's well-being swirl through my head, fueling my determination to offer them support and comfort in any way I can. I know I'm overreacting, spiraling. I'm worrying too much. Since Sarah's cancer, I worry about little illnesses and silly symptoms. I know that I just need to see with my own eyes that they're okay. I know it's the only way to settle my overthinking mind.

I park the car and gather the small gesture I prepared—homemade soup and a get-well card from Ethan. I hope that this simple act will bring a smile to Lily's face and alleviate some of her discomfort. As I walk up the path to the front door, my heart beats with a mix of nervousness and anticipation. It's a bold move, showing up unannounced, but I can't ignore the worry that gnaws at me. And there's something more—a growing feeling that goes beyond friendship, something I can no longer ignore. Inside, I know what this means for me, and hopefully for us.

I ring the doorbell and then I wait.

Lily opens the door, surprise evident in her eyes as she takes in my unexpected presence.

"Blake? What are you doing here?" she asks, her voice a mix of confusion and curiosity.

She looks a little pale, but her face lights up when she sees me.

I offer her a warm smile.

“I brought some soup for you guys. Thought it might help you feel better,” I say, extending the container and card toward her. “It’s my mom’s recipe like she made for us when we were kids.”

A flicker of gratitude crosses her face as she accepts the offerings. “Thank you, Blake. That’s kind of you,” she says, her voice laced with appreciation.

As I step inside, I notice the weariness in her eyes, the fatigue that weighs her down. Her tiredness worries me, and it’s in moments like these that I realize how much she means to me.

We settle on the couch, and as we engage in light conversation, I can’t shake the growing desire to be closer to her, to know her on a deeper level. But I push those thoughts aside, focusing on the reason I’m here—to offer support and care. I shouldn’t overwhelm her with my feelings when she’s feeling ill.

“How’s Emma? Is she okay?” I ask.

“Oh, uh...”

At the mention of her daughter, a shift in Lily’s demeanor catches my attention. The room fills with unspoken tension, and I sense her hesitation. My heart skips a beat, already assuming the worst! I hope Emma’s okay.

“I have something to show you. Just wait here,” she says. She stands and walks off, leaving me alone and confused about what is happening. She’s acting very strange.

Lily returns and sits back down beside me. Taking a deep breath, she meets my gaze, her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and hope. She hands me a small object, and as I realize what it is, my breath catches in my throat—a positive pregnancy test.

Time stands still as I process the weight of this revelation. Lily’s vulnerability is palpable, and at this moment, I know that our lives are about to change in ways we never anticipated. I’m shocked and my mind races with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, unsure of what the future holds for us.

Nervous anticipation courses through my veins. I take a deep breath, my heart pounding in my chest. It’s hard to ignore the mix of emotions swirling within me—excitement, apprehension, and a touch of disbelief.

We’ve only been intimate that one night. We spent the evening together and made love several times. It was amazing and I think about it often. I hold it close to my heart. It was so different from how I’ve felt with the other women I’ve been with since Sarah’s passing. All I’d been able to give them was sex, nothing more. Lily is different. She understands about Sarah. She isn’t trying to replace my wife. She’s not forcing her way into my life. I feel like with her, things are different. She’s special.

The news is terrifying, faced with the possibility of becoming a father again, a wave of uncertainty washes over me. Sarah's passing is still fresh in my mind, and the wounds of her loss are far from healed. I never expected to have children with anyone other than her, and the thought of starting a new chapter with Lily stirs a mixture of emotions within me.

Yet, amidst the nervousness and trepidation, there's a flicker of hope and joy. The positive pregnancy test in my hand is a sign, one that shows maybe our paths were meant to intertwine, that there's a greater plan at work. It's a blessing, a gift that affirms our connection and will bring us to build a family together.

I can't help but think of Emma and Ethan, and the happiness that having a sibling would bring to their lives. It would make us a real family—a unit bound by love and shared experiences. The thought fills me with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and a few stray tears escape, reflecting how deep the emotions run.

“Oh, God,” Lily says, and I watch doubt and fear creep onto her face.

“No, no,” I tell her, quick to clear the misunderstanding. She thought I was unhappy with the news. “I'm happy. I'm very happy,” I say.

The universe has bestowed upon us a precious gift. And as I imagine the future, filled with laughter, tears, and the joy of watching our children grow, a newfound sense of purpose

takes hold. The path may be uncharted, and there will be challenges along the way, but together with Lily, we'll navigate them with love and resilience.

“You are?” she asks me in disbelief.

I wipe away my tears, a smile gracing my lips.

“This is wonderful,” I tell her with a nod, still feeling emotional.

The road ahead may be uncertain, but it's a journey I'm ready to embark upon. The life growing within Lily is a testament to the possibilities that lie ahead, and I feel a surge of gratitude for this unexpected turn of events. I understand that destiny has brought us together for a reason. We may have experienced loss and heartbreak, but now, we can build something beautiful—a family filled with love, strength, and bonds that will endure a lifetime.

As I look at the positive pregnancy test in my hand, I'm reminded that life is a series of unexpected twists and turns. And sometimes, the most extraordinary blessings come from the moments we least expect.

I reach out, gently taking her hand in mine, offering a reassuring squeeze.

“Lily,” I begin, my voice filled with a mix of emotions, “this is...unexpected. But know that I'm here for you. Whatever comes our way, we'll face it together. This is a blessing. This is life telling us that we should do this. We can be a real family.”

A tear glistens in her eye, and I wipe it away with my thumb, cherishing this intimate moment. Our connection deepens in this shared vulnerability, and I feel a surge of protectiveness and love wash over me.

Amid the uncertainty, a newfound clarity takes hold—I want to be by Lily’s side, to support her and the life growing within her. The road ahead may be challenging, but together, we’ll navigate it with love and determination.

“Are you sure?” she asks me. “I won’t be mad. I can do this by myself. I can—”

“No. This is destiny. We were pushed back together when we needed each other the most. Then we have sex a couple of times, and this happens? What are the chances?” I say, trying to explain the hundreds of thoughts running through my head.

A smile starts to grace her face and she looks beautiful. So perfect.

“Do you think so?”

I can understand her reluctance after what happened with Matthew. But I’m not him. I haven’t felt this happy since Sarah was still alive. Weirdly, I feel like she’s giving me her blessing. That this is a sign.

“As positive as that test,” I say with a grin. Lily laughs.

As we sit there, hand in hand, I realize that our bond has transcended friendship. It’s a connection born out of shared experiences, shared dreams, and now, shared parenthood. I’m filled with an overwhelming sense of gratitude—for Lily, for

the life that's begun to blossom, and for the chance to embark on this journey together.

“I guess we should make it official then,” I say, unable to wipe the smile off my face.

She nods and then bursts into happy tears. I hold her close as emotions overwhelm the two of us. No matter what lies ahead, I know that our love will guide us through. And as I look into Lily's eyes, I can't help but believe that the future holds a world of possibilities—a future where our hearts, intertwined, will navigate the joys and challenges that await us.

Chapter 15

Lily

After spending a late evening with Blake, he finally heads home around 11 p.m. He wants to get back to Ethan. A bittersweet mix of contentment and longing fills my heart as I see him go. Blake's concern for Ethan is evident, worried that the little boy might wake up in the middle of the night searching for his father. He's been having a lot of nightmares lately. Blake's response to that makes me feel assured that I'm making the right choice to be with him. He is a tender and understanding father. I'm sure he will be no different with our baby.

"Goodbye, Blake," I say, a hint of reluctance in my voice as we exchange farewells on my doorstep. We've made plans to meet in the morning for breakfast, a small moment of normalcy before I dive back into the demands of work.

"Are you sure you don't want to take another few days off? I can handle the girls."

Blake's concern for my well-being is evident. He wants to make sure I have enough rest after our life-changing discovery. His consideration warms my heart, but I assure him that I'm feeling much better already.

"I appreciate your concern, Blake," I reply, a grateful smile playing on my lips. "But truly, I'm feeling much better now. Resting today has done wonders. I'm sure it's a one-off while my body is adjusting. Plus, I don't want to leave the staff hanging for too long. You know how they are."

He looks at me with a mixture of relief and hesitation, as if he's torn between wanting to protect me and respecting my independence. I reach out and gently touch his arm, hoping to reassure him.

“Trust me, Blake,” I continue, my voice filled with conviction. “I know my body, and I feel like I've bounced back quickly. You'll see me in the morning. Breakfast together sounds like the perfect way to start the day.”

His eyes soften, a warm smile spreading across his face. He takes my hand in his and gives it a reassuring squeeze. It's a simple gesture, but it speaks volumes of his support and understanding.

“All right, Lily,” he says, his voice filled with affection. “If you're sure you're up for it, then I won't argue.”

I nod, grateful for his concern and the love that shines through his words.

“I promise, Blake,” I reply, my voice filled with sincerity. “Now get back home and to bed.”

He laughs, still fiddling with his keys. I can tell he's torn.

“Go on, I'm going to bed now,” I tell him with a grin.

He looks back up at me and then suddenly he's stepping into my space, kissing me on my doorstep, and stealing my breath away. I grip his strong shoulders, my knees feeling weak as his kiss seems to consume me. We pull apart a few moments later and he gives me a stunning grin before finally saying goodbye for real.

The next morning, filled with a mix of fear and hope, I sit next to Blake as we confront the reality of our unexpected pregnancy over breakfast at a diner. Thoughts run around in my mind. I'm full of worry and doubt about the challenges that lie ahead. I'm worried about finances and work. I'm pregnant with my boss's baby, who is also my best friend's twin brother. I haven't even told Olivia that we slept together. Our children are best friends. We come from completely different social classes. Money has always been tight for me. Blake is rich and owns a huge company. There is so much I don't know about him. I'm still traumatized from Matthew and Blake is grieving Sarah and healing from the loss of the love of his life. Then there's poor Ethan who is battling an awful mental health condition. And we're going to throw a baby into the mix. Where will we live? Is Blake planning to stay at Olivia's for long? My tiny, rented home isn't big enough, nor good enough for someone like Blake. What if he doesn't find somewhere new before the baby comes? Will he expect me to move into Olivia's house? There's space, of course. But it wouldn't be my home.

I'm probably getting ahead of myself again, but I don't know how to calm myself down.

I steal a glance at Blake and his expression is filled with determination and—dare I think it—love. A glimmer of reassurance flickers within me.

“Blake, I...I’m scared,” I admit, my voice quivering with uncertainty. “We already have two children between us, and adding another...Can we handle it? Will we be able to provide everything our baby will need?”

He takes my hand in his, his grip firm and reassuring. His eyes meet mine, and I see a profound sense of faith in us shining through. “Lily, I understand your fears, and they’re valid,” he responds, his voice gentle yet resolute. “But trust me, we will make it work. Our baby will want for nothing. You can keep your job at the store, or you can hand in your notice. I’m going to leave it up to you to decide. But I’m making it clear now that I won’t ever expect you to work if you don’t want to. We have each other, and together, we can overcome any challenges that come our way. I have enough money for our family for the next ten generations, so please, try not to panic. Let me sort out everything. I just need you to keep as relaxed as possible while you focus on yourself and the baby.”

His words sink into my heart, weaving a tapestry of hope amidst the uncertainties. I find solace in his unwavering belief; in the way he sees possibilities where I see obstacles. We have both faced challenges before, and we have always emerged stronger. Now we are united in our love and determination. I did it on my own, so I know I can do it a hundred times better with Blake at my side.

A part of me is screaming that this is all too good to be true. That part is telling me that I’m not good enough for Blake. He will get bored and then move on to someone else. But I think

about his fierce love for Sarah, and I know that this man loves with his entire body and soul. I should be honored to be on the end of such affection and devotion.

“I like working at the shop,” I admit. “I’ve never not worked before. What would I do all day?” I wonder if I would be bored at home with just the baby.

“I don’t know, but we can figure it out,” he assures me. “And nothing is set in stone, so just tell me and we can do it. We can do anything.”

I nod. Blake has done a great job of helping me feel lighter about it everything. The unexpected pregnancy has shocked us both, but if I listen to his optimism, I can feel a glimmer of excitement.

“Imagine the laughter in our home, the moments of joy as our children grow up together,” Blake muses, a smile playing on his lips. “Yes, it won’t be easy with the problems we have, but it will be worth it. We can create a beautiful life for our family.”

His words stir a sense of courage within me, nudging me to look beyond the fear and embrace the hope that blossoms within our hearts. We may juggle responsibilities and make sacrifices where we need to, but together, I feel like we can do it. Plus, we won’t be alone. We both have Olivia too. Strong, beautiful, and supportive Olivia. She’s going to be so happy when we finally tell her the special news.

“I have one condition though,” Blake says, looking at me sternly.

I wonder what it could be and my mind jumps to the worst-case scenario.

“What?” I ask, worried.

“You need a car, Lily. What if I’m busy and I can’t pick you up or you get stranded somewhere? I know you’re stubborn —”

“I’m not,” I immediately deny.

Blake fixes me a look. “Way too stubborn,” he continues. “But no girlfriend of mine is hanging around waiting for buses while pregnant. I’m getting you a car and it’s not negotiable.”

With a deep breath, I reach out to grasp Blake’s hand, intertwining our fingers as a symbol of our commitment to this new journey. Some things I know I just can’t win so I nod, grateful that I have someone who cares so much.

Chapter 16

Blake

As I step into the waiting room of the OBGYN, my heart pounds with a mix of nerves and excitement. The last time I was in this position, was when Sarah was pregnant with Ethan. I expect to feel sad, but I find myself excited and nervous. This is a moment I've been eagerly anticipating for the past few weeks. A moment that holds the promise of a bright and beautiful future with Lily.

I glance over at her, her face radiating both nervousness and anticipation, and I can't help but feel a surge of love and support for her. "Lily," I say, my voice filled with a mixture of excitement and reassurance, "It's going to be okay. Whatever happens, we'll face it together."

She smiles at me, her eyes sparkling with gratitude. "I know. I'm just a little nervous. I'm still wrapping my head around this all being real. I've always wanted a sibling for Emma, but I thought it would never happen. Just a few months ago you were still in the city and now we're here."

I hug her close to me. "I know. It's a lot. But this baby is going to be so loved. I promise I'm going to support you. I'm not going anywhere." I can understand why she's worried after how Matthew reacted to Emma. I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure that she never goes through that again.

"Lily Johnson!" the nurse calls out.

At the sound of her name, she turns to me looking for assurance. I smile at her. We stand together and I reach for

Lily's hand, holding it tightly. We follow her down the white corridor and into one of the rooms. As we enter the examination room, my nerves kick into high gear. I try to maintain a calm demeanor for Lily's sake, but my excitement is undeniable.

Dr. Neale, a warm and friendly woman, greets us with a smile.

"Hello, Lily," she says, her voice soothing and reassuring. "I'm Dr. Neale. And who is this? Are you dad?"

"Yes. My name's Blake," I say, unable to hide the pride in my voice. "It's nice to meet you. Thanks for taking us on. I know your books are full."

"It was no worry. I'm happy to help!" she tells us. "So, today we're going to measure the baby and check on its development. Are you both ready?"

Lily nods, her eyes filled with nervousness. I squeeze her hand gently, offering my silent support. Dr. Neale proceeds to prepare the ultrasound equipment, her expertise is evident in every movement. I'd looked for the best OBGYN in the area and she had come very highly recommended.

"All right, Lily, lie back and lift your shirt slightly," Dr. Neale instructs, her tone gentle.

Lily complies, her trust in the doctor evident.

As the ultrasound begins, I can't help but feel a sense of wonder. The screen comes to life, revealing a black-and-white

image of our tiny miracle. Dr. Neale moves the transducer with precision, capturing different angles and measurements.

“There it is,” Dr. Neale points out, her voice filled with excitement. “That little flicker you see is your baby’s heartbeat.”

My breath catches as I watch the monitor, the sound of the baby’s heartbeat echoing through the room. It’s a mesmerizing moment, one that fills my heart with overwhelming love and joy. I glance at Lily, her eyes fixated on the screen, her face glowing with emotion.

Dr. Neale continues her examination, measuring various aspects of the baby’s growth. Her words blend into a symphony of reassurance and delight.

“Everything looks great,” Dr. Neale says, her voice filled with warmth. “Your baby is developing beautifully. You’re doing a wonderful job, Lily.”

A mixture of relief and elation washes over me. This is the confirmation we’ve been waiting for, the affirmation that our dreams of becoming parents together are becoming a reality.

I lean in closer to Lily, my voice filled with awe and gratitude.

“It’s real, Lily,” I whisper, my eyes glistening with tears of joy. “Can you believe it? We made a little miracle together.” I’ve not been this happy in such a long time. I feel like fate has brought us together. I feel like my heart is going to burst.

Leaving the doctor's office, we clutch the ultrasound pictures tightly, like precious treasures. The weight of responsibility and the depth of our unspoken love fills the air with electric energy.

"Should we tell anyone?" I ask Lily.

I want to leave the decision to her. It's her body, after all.

Lily seems to consider it for a minute. "Can it just be for us for now?" she asks me.

I nod. "Of course. Whatever you want, sweetheart." The pet name just slips out. I feel high on my feelings for Lily right now that I can't stop it.

It makes her smile even brighter.

"Shall we go shopping and get some bits for the baby?" I suggest.

I'm too excited to go home and pretend this is happening. I need a little longer with just me and Lily. Besides, the kids are happy with Olivia. They love their auntie to pieces. It clicks that Olivia is going to be a step-auntie to Emma now. That we are going to be a family in a way. It's a nice thought. Somehow, I ended up with my teenage crush—the pretty girl who lived down the street, and I was too shy to admit my feelings. It's funny where life takes you.

"Okay," she agrees.

Our hearts swell with dreams and plans, imagining the nursery, the laughter of a child, and the shared experiences that await us. With excitement fueling our every step, we find

ourselves in a baby store, surrounded by colorful aisles filled with tiny clothes, soft blankets, and adorable toys. We wander through the aisles, our hands brushing against each other as we pick up tiny onesies and cute nursery decorations.

As we select items for our baby, our conversations are filled with laughter and anticipation. We talk about the kind of parents we want to be. In these moments, our bond deepens, our unspoken love grows stronger, and the realization of the beautiful life we are creating together becomes even more tangible.

Leaving the store, our bags filled with baby things, we walk hand in hand, a spring in our steps and hearts bursting with joy. Our shared excitement serves as a reminder of the love we share and the incredible journey that lies ahead. We eagerly embrace the beautiful adventure of building a loving family together.

Chapter 17

Lily

Like all good things in life, eventually, they have to come to an end. I feel like I've been living in some kind of fantasy for the past few months. Blake is the perfect, supportive partner. He's great with Emma. I completely adore Ethan and Olivia and I have never been closer. I love my new job. I'm glowing with joy from my secret pregnancy and the way my life is going. I feel happy and hopeful for the future and all it holds.

Then Matthew comes along and smacks me right back into reality.

The sight of his name dancing across my phone screen is the last thing that I want to see. I want to ignore it. My life would be simpler if I changed my phone number and I'd never have to think of him ever again, but I know that isn't the right thing to do. Instead, I swipe the answer button on my phone and bring it to my ear.

"Hello?" I answer, my voice betraying a mix of surprise and apprehension. It feels like a cruel interruption, shattering the harmony I've found in my life.

"Hi, Lily, it's me," Matthew replies needlessly.

I frown and try to give him the benefit of the doubt. It's been months since I last spoke with him, and it hadn't been a nice exchange. I'd said more than a few colorful things after he made plans to meet Emma at the park and then stood us up. He called two whole days later with the excuse of not being in

the right headspace to see us. He couldn't even visit with his own daughter in the park. Then he'd vanished until now.

"Yes, what is it?" I ask, my voice guarded and tinged with skepticism. It's hard to shake off the memories of the pain and disappointment Matthew had caused in the past. Yet, a part of me still clings to the possibility of growth and change.

There's a brief pause on the other end of the line as if Matthew is gathering his thoughts, trying to find the right words to express the remorse that has brought him to reach out to me. My fingers instinctively tighten around the phone, anticipation, and caution mixing within me.

"Lily, I...I've been doing a lot of soul-searching lately," Matthew begins, his voice carrying a weight of sincerity. "I want to apologize for everything, for the mistakes I made and the pain I caused. I never realized the gravity of my actions until recently."

His words strike a chord deep within me, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions. It's a delicate balance between wanting to believe in his sincerity and guarding my heart against further hurt. The scars from the past still sting and aren't easily forgotten.

Curiosity tugs at me. I find myself asking the question that has plagued my thoughts since his unexpected call, "Why now, Matthew? After all this time?"

There's regret in his voice as he replies, "I've come to realize the importance of taking responsibility for my actions, especially when it comes to our daughter."

I sigh. “Well, that’s great. But you’re about four years too late,” I respond, irritated with him.

“I know,” he says. “You’re right. I’ve missed out on so much. I want to be there for Emma. I want to make things right if you’ll let me.”

Matthew’s remorseful tone permeates through the line, his words heavy with regret. It’s as if he’s finally come to terms with the weight of his past actions and the impact they had on our lives. In his plea for a second chance, I can sense his genuine remorse and longing for redemption.

“Matthew. This is...” I don’t know what to say.

Caught off guard by his sudden reappearance, conflicting emotions swirl within me like a tempest. The memories of our shared history, the love we once had, and the dreams we had built together resurface, tugging at my heartstrings. It’s a battle between the lingering past and the blossoming future that I’ve found with Blake.

Blake has brought so much joy and stability into my life. I’m reminded that he gives love and support unconditionally. He has become the anchor that grounds me, the foundation upon which I can build a future for myself and my daughter. It’s a love that feels real, safe, and authentic. As much as I want to shut the door on the past and move forward, I can’t help but consider the impact on our daughter. Emma deserves to know her father, to understand her roots and where she comes from. It’s a responsibility that weighs heavily on me as a mother, and I believe that open communication and a shared

understanding between her parents are essential for her well-being.

Taking a deep breath, I gather my thoughts, needing to express the concerns that have plagued me.

“Matthew, I appreciate your remorse, but it’s not as simple as just starting over,” I respond, my voice tinged with a mixture of caution. “There’s a lot of pain and mistrust that we need to address. And...I’ve met someone.”

The line falls into an uneasy silence, punctuated only by the distant hum of static. My heart races as I wait for Matthew’s response, unsure of how he will take this unexpected revelation. Part of me wonders if I have crossed a line. If sharing this newfound connection with Blake is too much information for him to handle. He’s always been the jealous type. Though he doesn’t love me anymore, he is still a possessive person. He’s never wanted me to be happy unless it was with him. But I know that honesty is crucial. I owe it to both Matthew and myself to be truthful about the changes in my life.

“Oh,” Matthew finally utters, his voice carrying a mix of surprise and resignation.

I can almost envision the conflicted expression on his face, the realization sinking in that our chance of rekindling what we once had has come to an end.

“So, if you’re looking for anything but a relationship with Emma, then it’s just not possible,” I continue, my words clear and resolute. It’s important to establish boundaries and make

my intentions known. Emma's well-being and stability are my utmost priorities, and I won't allow any false hopes or misconceptions to cloud our path forward.

There's a heavy pause as if Matthew is grappling with his own emotions, trying to find the right words to respond to me. I can almost hear the weight of his sigh on the other end of the line, a mix of disappointment and acceptance.

"I understand," he finally murmurs, his voice carrying a trace of resignation. "I never meant to complicate things further, Lily. I intend to make things right, to be a father to Emma. If that's all we can build upon, then I'll respect your wishes."

His words settle over me, a bittersweet reminder of the past and the present colliding. I realize that this conversation is not only about the potential reconciliation between Matthew and me but also about defining the boundaries of my own newfound happiness with Blake. It's about protecting the love and stability we have built, not only for myself but for Emma and our growing family.

"Then...I'd be happy to at least talk about what should happen going forwards."

There's a mix of gratitude and hope in Matthew's voice as he responds, "Thank you, Lily. I understand that it won't be easy, and I'm willing to do the work. I want to be a father to Emma."

"I'm glad to hear that because it's what I want too. She deserves to have you in her life," I admit.

I could be bitter about it, especially since he's made so many mistakes. But at the end of the day, he is her dad. I can't stop him from seeing her and I don't want to. Even if he sees her once a month then that is better than him dropping off the face of the planet for months at a time.

“Great. I'm in town tomorrow morning. I've started a new job and I'll be busy during the day. Could we meet first thing? Say eight?” he suggests.

I start work at nine so I could meet him before then and use my job as an excuse to not hang around too long. The idea of sitting and talking to Matthew all morning isn't a nice thought. I can meet him, plan a time to reintroduce him and Emma, and then head off to work. I know it'll be hard to tell Blake. He understands the pain and trauma I've experienced from Matthew. I know Blake will be supportive but he's protective of me and of the people he loves. It's going to be challenging to make him see that Matthew deserves a chance.

“Okay.”

With a deep sigh, I agree to meet with Matthew, aware that it will dredge up emotions and memories I've tried to bury. It's not because I harbor hope for a romantic reconnection, but because I believe in the importance of closure, growth, and co-parenting for the sake of our daughter's future.

Chapter 18

Blake

I wake up to the sound of labored breathing and I'm confused for a moment. I'm at home—Olivia's—and I look down next to me. Sometime in the night, Ethan climbed into my bed without waking me. There is a warmth radiating from his small body. I sit up, forcing away the tiredness as I realize something is wrong. I reach for his head, placing a hand over the flushed skin. Panic floods through me. I can feel the heat from his skin on my hand. He has a fever. My heart starts pounding with worry but I tell myself to stay calm. It's just a temperature but he still needs Tylenol.

I slip from my bed and make my way downstairs to get the children's liquid pain relief. I pass Olivia's room and her bed is empty and made. She must be still out on her date. I glance at my watch and it's just before midnight. I'm glad my sister is having a good time with this new man of hers, Eric. Even though Olivia is picky, she only has good things to say.

I grab the medicine and a thermometer and head back upstairs, taking them two steps at a time. Ethan is sprawled out on my sheets and has kicked the blankets off. I sit to the side of him as I prepare the medicine. I gently press the thermometer into his ear. It flashes a sad red face with 102 written underneath it. I give him a soft shake. I know I need to get his temperature down. I'm not sure what's causing this, but it came on so suddenly and with such a high temperature, too. He must have some kind of virus or flu. Ethan felt fine all day so it surprises me to see him like this.

“Ethan, buddy,” I say softly, attempting to rouse him. “You need to take some medicine.”

He grumbles but opens his mouth. Relieved that he understands me, I press the syringe against it and thankfully, he takes it.

“Good boy,” I tell him.

I strip his night clothes off with a little difficulty. It’s getting harder as he grows bigger. I settle beside him, curling around him protectively. His small body feels fragile against mine, his skin still burning with fever. I stroke his hair gently, hoping that my touch brings him comfort.

The room is dimly lit, and the silence hangs heavy in the air. I can’t shake off the unease that gnaws at me. Ethan’s labored breathing and flushed cheeks are alarming signs that his condition is worsening. I can feel the responsibility pressing down on me, the weight of being the sole caregiver in this moment of crisis. I try not to panic as I stare at him, watching his chest rise and fall rapidly.

Desperate to bring down Ethan’s fever, I reach for the aircon remote and turn it up, hoping to offer some respite from the heat that radiates from his body. Even with the Tylenol, and the cool air, his fever still feels stubbornly high, refusing to yield. I reach for the thermometer again. This time it flashes 103. It’s going up.

Suddenly, Ethan’s body convulses. Panic engulfs me as I hold him close, my heart hammering with fear. My mind races. I’m flooded with thoughts and questions. What do I do? How

can I help him? The overwhelming urge to protect him at all costs takes hold of me, driving away any semblance of calmness or rationality. I know I need to get it together and fast.

I scramble to grab my phone and dial the emergency services, my fingers trembling slightly.

“911, what’s your emergency?” the operator’s voice echoes through the receiver.

“My son is having a seizure,” I blurt out, my voice strained with worry. “He has a high fever, and it won’t come down. Please can you send someone? My wife died having a seizure. I don’t know what to do.”

All logic seems to fly from my mind. All I can think about is how the last time this happened, it was Sarah’s body I was gripping as Ethan screamed.

“Okay, what’s his name, please?”

The operator remains calm and composed. She guides me through a series of questions. I answer as best I can, but my words are rushed and filled with anxiety. Each passing second feels like an eternity as I wait for their instructions, desperate for guidance on how to help my son.

“Stay on the line with me,” the operator says reassuringly. “I’m sending help your way. In the meantime, try to keep your son safe and comfortable.”

I nod, even though the woman can’t see me. I gently pick him up, putting him on the floor and then I place a pillow

beneath his head, ensuring that he doesn't hurt himself during the seizure. The sight is terrifying, his small body convulsing uncontrollably, and a surge of helplessness wash over me. I know I need to grab him some things to take with us. He needs clothes and toiletries but—

“Daddy!”

The sound pierces through my panic.

I hear my son's voice for the first time in a year and he's screaming my name. I drop to the floor, reaching for him as he comes around. He looks at me confused and delirious with fear. I reach for his hand and grip it in my own tightly. The minutes stretch on, each second feeling like an eternity as I cling to him, whispering soothing words, attempting to comfort him. Another seizure hits him and I'm shaking, tears blurring my vision.

“I'm here, Ethan,” I whisper, my voice filled with both fear and assurance. “You're going to be okay. Help is on the way. Daddy's called the hospital.”

The operator stays on the line, her voice a lifeline of support as I watch over Ethan. I try to remain as calm as possible, taking deep breaths to steady my racing heart. But it's a struggle, as every fiber of my being longs for this nightmare to end and for my son to be safe.

Finally, the sound of sirens pierces through the air, signaling the arrival of the paramedics. I relay the information to the operator, my voice trembling with relief. I leave the phone on speaker as I run to unlock the front door.

As the paramedics rush into the room, their trained eyes assess Ethan's condition with efficiency and care. They work quickly, their movements precise and calculated. I step back, allowing them the space they need to provide the necessary medical attention.

"What's been happening, Dad?" they ask as they quickly check over him.

I can't help but feel a mix of gratitude and anxiety as they work. Gratitude for their expertise and swift response, and anxiety for what lies ahead. I know that my son is in good hands, but the fear of the unknown lingers in the back of my mind.

"I woke up an hour ago and he had a fever. He's had medicine but he just started seizing. I didn't know what to do. His mother had epilepsy due to a brain tumor. It's not that, is it?"

The paramedic looks at me sadly. "We can't tell right now. But with such a high fever and the seizures, it's best if we take him to the hospital, okay?"

I watch as the man picks him up, not bothering with a stretcher, and then I follow him as he runs down the stairs with him and into the ambulance.

"What do I do?" I ask helplessly.

I hover nearby, ready to offer any assistance they may need. Though my heart is heavy with worry, I draw strength from

the sight of these dedicated professionals doing everything they can to help Ethan.

“Get dressed and pack him a bag. You can meet us at St. Mary’s Pediatrics.”

Then they’re gone. It’s as simple as that.

They’ve taken my son and I’m left standing in the driveway with no shoes on and shivering in my pajamas. I gulp and wipe my face where it’s wet with tears. Somehow, I need to do what they say. I hurriedly dress and grab my phone charger. Then grab Ethan’s things, packing his favorite bear, and some extra pajamas. I collapse on his bed for a moment, watching his night light project blue and red. I’m holding back a sob. His room looks so peaceful amidst the chaos of what’s just happened.

He can’t sleep without his nightlight; I think to myself stupidly but it’s enough to help me get up and pull myself together a bit.

I’d do anything to have Sarah here with me. She would tell me to stop panicking and would already have planned what we needed to do. But she’s not here. I’m never going to see her again. I need to do this alone. I grab the bag and then run downstairs, locking up the house before heading to my car.

Chapter 19

Lily

The next morning, I arrive at the breakfast cafe, dressed in my finest attire, ready for work. The black dress hugs my curves perfectly, accentuated by the bold red belt cinched around my waist. With each step, my Louboutin heels click against the floor, adding a touch of confidence to my stride. My hair cascades in soft curls around my shoulders, and my makeup is carefully applied, highlighting my features.

As I glance at myself in the mirror on the wall, a surge of pride washes over me. I've come a long way since the days of feeling unworthy and insignificant. Working at the jewelry store has allowed me to discover a newfound sense of self-worth and confidence. I've learned to embrace my beauty, both inside and out.

I sit down across from Matthew in the outside seating area, the clatter of plates and murmurs of conversation filling the air. My palms feel damp, a telltale sign of the anxiety bubbling within me but I don't let it show. This meeting is supposed to be a chance to discuss our daughter's future, but I can already sense the tension hanging in the air. It's not going to be easy.

"Hi," I say awkwardly as I sit down.

"Hey," he replies, doing a double take when he sees me.

I can sense Matthew's surprise as his eyes meet mine, his expression momentarily frozen. Gone are the days when his hurtful words pierce through my soul, eroding my self-esteem. I'm no longer that fragile girl he once knew, desperate for his

validation. I've moved on, and Blake's unwavering love and support have helped me see my own worth. Despite Matthew's shocked reaction, I refuse to let it faze me. It's his loss, not mine. I've found someone who cherishes and uplifts me, who sees the strength and resilience that were hidden beneath the scars of my past. The mirror may reflect my external transformation, but the true change lies within.

"That's a nice car that you pulled in with," he comments.

Past Lily would have shrunk at the comment, especially since the car was a gift from Blake.

"Thanks, it's new," I counter.

It's none of his business where I got my shiny new car. I'm not going to let him ruin it for me. I love the car and Blake has felt so much better knowing I can get around safely.

"Anyway, we're not here to talk about me," I say, changing the subject. "You said you have a new job?" I prompt him.

"Yeah, I'm training at an auto shop," he says.

"That's good," I say. He's been out of work and trying different things for years. This might be a good fit for him.

"So, you want to see Emma," I say. "We should set up a time to meet. We could meet somewhere fun, like at that new indoor playground. I can stay with you guys until she gets used to you," I suggest.

Matthew frowns. "She's my daughter, she doesn't need to get used to me. I'll come pick her up someday soon and then I'll drop her back to you in the evening."

I resist scoffing. He's got to be kidding. He clearly knows nothing about small children. He knows nothing about Emma.

"She doesn't know who you are," I explain softly, but I keep my voice firm. "You've only seen her a handful of times. You can't just take her if she doesn't even know you and expect her to behave and have a good time. She'll cry."

I can tell Matthew is getting annoyed. "Well, she'll just have to learn to get used to it. She's my daughter and I have a right to see her."

"I know that." I snap at him. As usual, he's not seeing sense. "I'm not saying you can't see her. I'm just trying to explain that it's not going to be that simple. You need to ease her into these things. Even when she joined preschool, I had to start by dropping her off for only a couple of hours before picking her up. Eventually, she was fine to stay the entire day. With kids, you need to build up to these things."

"You just don't want me to see her. You've never given me a fair chance, Lily," he says, his voice filled with a mix of frustration and accusation. "You didn't put in enough effort to make this work. It's always been your way or the highway. You never care about how I feel."

I clench my fists under the table, feeling the heat rise within me. How dare he twist the truth to fit his narrative? The memories of broken promises and abandoned plans flood my mind, but I try to stay composed. I owe it to Emma to keep a level head.

“Matthew, it wasn’t only my fault,” I respond, my voice tinged with a touch of exasperation. “Relationships require effort from both parties. You can’t solely place the blame on me. I do care about how you feel, but you put your own feelings before Emma’s and that’s just not acceptable. It was you who made plans last to see her and then didn’t show up. You made us wait for you and you never came. You can’t keep doing that when you’re a parent.”

“Well, you should have rescheduled and checked whether I was free,” he insists.

I feel like banging my head against the wall, instead, I take a deep breath.

“That’s not my job,” I reply. “I’m not your parent. I shouldn’t have to arrange playdates for you. That’s your job as a father.”

“Oh, and you’re an expert on fathers, are you?” he rebuts. “Where was your father growing up?!”

As we continue our tense back-and-forth, my phone buzzes on the table, interrupting our conversation. I glance at the screen, seeing Blake’s name flashing across it. I hesitate for a moment, torn between answering and maintaining the fragile equilibrium of this discussion.

Matthew’s ire flares up as he watches my gaze.

“Can’t you focus on us for once?” he snaps, his frustration clear in his tone. “It’s like you don’t care about what I’m saying. I’m trying to fix things and you’re not listening to me.”

I take a deep breath, attempting to steady myself before addressing his accusation. “Matthew, I understand your desire to have a relationship with Emma. Her well-being comes first. I need to be available for her because she needs me. You can’t just appear in her life when you feel like it and then vanish for months when things get too hard. Newsflash: Parenting is hard.”

His face scowls in frustration, and I can see the anger simmering beneath the surface. If he thinks I’m hindering his attempts to connect with our daughter, it’s only because I’m protecting Emma. Being her parent means making tough decisions. I’m not about to let her spend an entire day with a man who is a stranger to her.

“Look,” I say, my voice firm but tinged with empathy. “I want what’s best for Emma. We need to find a way to coexist and communicate effectively for her sake. It won’t be easy, but it’s necessary. You’re clearly having some kind of issues with your mental health. I understand that. Please, if this is going to work then you can’t keep blaming me. You told me you want to be more responsible for Emma’s sake.”

He folds his arm and childishly looks away, thinking for a moment. I let the silence hang between us. I want to give him a chance, but he needs to meet me halfway. He can’t just show up and make these demands. I’ve stepped into a new chapter of my life, surrounded by love, support, and a renewed sense of confidence. He’s not about to destroy that for me or for Emma.

Chapter 20

Blake

I wake up at Ethan's bedside in the hospital room. The soft morning light filters through the window, casting a gentle glow on his sleeping face. He stirs, his eyes fluttering open, and I offer him a tender smile.

"Hey there, buddy," I whisper softly, my voice filled with relief. "You're going to be okay. Rough night, huh?"

Ethan rubs his eyes, his hand reaching for mine. I take his hand, holding it tightly, feeling the warmth and love that flows between us. It's a bittersweet moment, grateful for his well-being but still reeling from the events of the previous night.

As I sit by Ethan's side, my mind races with the information the pediatrician shared with me. They suspect it was a grand mal seizure, likely caused by the fever. The medical tests, including a CT scan, showed no concerning signs. Ethan's EEG, MRI, and overall development appear normal, offering a glimmer of hope in this challenging situation.

They've started him on medication to manage any future seizures and suspect that the virus he had triggered this episode. It's a relief to hear that all the tests came back clear, but the worry lingers in the back of my mind because of how quickly I lost Sarah. Thankfully, the doctors took his illness seriously and ran all the tests they needed to reassure me. I need to protect my son and shield him from harm that may come his way. That means I'll be bringing him back for regular tests now to be sure something hasn't been missed.

I reach for my phone to call Lily again to update her on Ethan's condition. A pang of disappointment washes over me when I realize she's not answering. I didn't want to bother her in the night but by now she should be up now and, on her way, to work. She's a busy woman but I would love to talk to her. I need to tell her all about last night. How I felt so helpless and alone. How I heard his voice and how scared I was to see him having a seizure. I sigh. I'll have to chat with her when she picks up Emma at three o'clock. It feels like a long time away, but I can wait if she's swamped at the store.

To my relief, Ethan is discharged in the next hour and I'm glad to be strapping him into his car seat and driving home.

"You want me to grab us pancakes?" I ask, glancing into the rear-view mirror.

He's awake and though he's looking pale, the doctor assures me that he's okay. He needs to take a regular pain reliever and lots of fluids. He hasn't spoken a word since he cried last night, but I'm happy that he felt able to call for me when he needed me the most. I hold it close to my heart and see it as a sign that he's recovering. Slow progress is still progress at the end of the day.

In the mirror, he nods his head. He's cuddling his bear and manages to give me a little smile. He has a big sticker on his pajama top declaring him a brave boy for being so good at the hospital.

I grin and then turn left, heading towards the café where we've made our Saturday morning pancake spot. The smile is

knocked off my face as I pull into the parking lot and I see Lily's car. Shouldn't she be at work right now? I spot her in the outside seating area, talking to a man I don't recognize. My heart skips a beat and thoughts of insecurity and doubt surge through me. Who is that man? Why haven't I seen him before? Is this why she hasn't been answering the phone? As the thoughts whirl in my head, a nagging realization creeps in. Lily hasn't been completely truthful with me.

The thought of her hiding something from me is hurtful and makes me angry and afraid. Trust is the foundation of a real relationship and right now I feel betrayed as if our relationship is not sincere. How could she have kept secrets from me? I have been living in a fantasy, oblivious to the truth. I've opened up to Lily about Sarah and shared my vulnerabilities. I let myself fall in love with her and it turns out our relationship was built on lies. Now it feels like a knife is twisting in my chest. How could she have deceived me?

My hands tighten on the steering wheel, my knuckles turning white with the intensity of my emotions. I feel a lump forming in my throat, making it difficult to find the right words. But I can't let this fester within me; I need to go and talk to Lily. I need to find out what's going on.

I pull into a space and then grab Ethan from the back, carrying him on my hip as I walk over to my girlfriend. I look down at her and then toward the man sitting opposite her.

"I've been calling you all morning," I say, ignoring the guy completely. "I thought you were at work?"

My voice is strained, a mix of frustration and concern. I watch Lily's eyes widen as she turns her attention to me, realizing the weight of my accusation. The man sitting across from her shifts uncomfortably, clearly unsure of how to react to the sudden tension.

Lily's voice trembles slightly as she tries to find her words. "Blake, I...I didn't expect to see you here. I...I can explain."

Her response only fuels my frustration. I take a deep breath, attempting to calm the storm of emotions raging inside me.

"Explain? Then explain why you're here with someone I've never seen before. Explain why you haven't answered my calls."

Lily's gaze shifts between me and the man, her face a mixture of confusion and concern.

"Blake, this is Matthew. He's...he's Emma's father."

My heart sinks as her words register. Emma's father. I hadn't considered the possibility of him re-entering her life. The realization dawns on me, and I feel a sense of guilt wash over me for jumping to conclusions without knowing the full story. Still, I've been up all night and the exhaustion and all the emotions from the hospital weigh heavily on me, making it difficult to completely let go of my guarded stance.

"Why didn't you tell me you were meeting?" I ask, my voice softer this time, laced with a touch of vulnerability. "Why keep it a secret?"

Lily's eyes glisten with unshed tears and I can sense her worry and frustration.

"He only just called me last night. I thought I'd talk with him this morning and then we could talk together about it once I had a better idea of what he wanted."

Emma's father is looking confused watching us.

"Wait. Who is this guy?" he asks Lily. "Why are you being like that with her?" he demands looking at me aggressively.

"I'm her boyfriend," I snap. I don't have time for this guy. I've heard the horror stories and I have no patience for him.

"There's no need to be rude, pal," Matthew says, glaring at me.

"Forgive me if I'm not in the mood for pleasantries, but I suspect you're the reason she's been ignoring me."

He's taken aback by my response, his confusion morphing into a mix of surprise and realization. He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him off, my frustration getting the better of me.

"I don't have time for this," I assert, my tone firm. I turn back to Lily. "I've spent the entire night at the hospital with Ethan. I've been trying to reach you to let you know what's been happening."

Lily's ex-boyfriend's expression shifts, his eyes widening at my confrontational tone. At the news, Lily looks horrified and stands, immediately reaching for Ethan. He holds his hands out and lets her take him instead. Matthew glances at Lily, his

gaze filled with a mix of concern and realization as he watches her fuss over Ethan.

“I...” He looks between us. “I had no idea about the hospital. I just wanted to talk to Lily about Emma. That’s all. She told me she wasn’t seeing someone. It isn’t like that.”

My anger towards him starts to ease. I assumed, from what Lily has told me that he was a terrible person but my reaction to why he was there was based on limited information. I have a right to be worried but if he’s just trying to make plans to see Emma, then he has a right to do that. We’ve all been caught off guard by the events that have unfolded.

“Look, I’m happy you want to talk about Emma. But now isn’t a good time. We can discuss this later,” I say firmly, my focus on Lily and Ethan. “Right now, Ethan needs our attention.”

“Blake’s right, Matthew,” Lily agrees.

“Come on,” I say. “We need to talk about what happened at the hospital.”

Lily nods, her gaze still filled with a mix of worry and relief. “Yes, of course, Blake. I’m sorry Matthew, I promise that I will text you this time to reschedule. Let’s go.”

As we turn to leave, I glance back at Matthew, his bewildered expression reminding me of the complexities that exist between him and Lily. Why is he back? What does he want? For Emma’s sake, I hope that this isn’t a sign that things are about to get more complicated.

Chapter 21

Lily

We step into Olivia's house, the familiar scent of her home wrapping around me like a warm embrace. The atmosphere is a bit tense as Blake and I exchange glances, anticipating the difficult conversation that lies ahead.

"We're back, Livy," he calls.

The woman appears, looking confused, Emma trailing after her.

"Where did you go last night?" she asks. "I got home in the early hours and you and Ethan were gone. I worried you'd packed up and left."

I look at each of the twins, surprised that Blake hadn't told his sister what happened last night. Instead of seeking comfort from her, he wanted to tell me first. It is a touching revelation because it shows how much I mean to him. I also feel terrible because he struggled with this all alone last night.

"What's wrong, Ethan?" Emma asks, tilting her head as she looks at him.

Ethan, exhausted from his eventful night, clings to Blake's side, his sleepy eyes reflecting the remnants of worry and discomfort. We exchange a silent understanding, determined to shield him from any further distress.

"He needs to get to bed, sweetheart," Blake says.

Olivia, sensing the weight of the situation, takes charge. She leads Emma outside, engaging her in conversation and

distracting her with the offer of turning on the bubble machine. Their laughter echoes through the open window, providing a temporary reprieve from the heavy air that hangs within the room.

“Come on, bedtime.”

Blake gently guides Ethan towards the staircase, his strong yet gentle touch reassuring the little boy. I follow closely behind, my hand hovering near the small of Ethan’s back, offering silent support. We ascend the stairs, the creaking wood a familiar lullaby of comfort.

In Ethan’s room, his bed stands like a sanctuary, waiting to cradle him into a peaceful sleep. Blake carefully eases Ethan down onto the soft sheets, arranging his favorite stuffed animals around him with tender care. I watch them, my heart swelling with love for this man who cares so deeply. As we tuck him in, I can’t help but notice the way Ethan’s eyes flutter, his body already surrendering to the promise of rest. The lines of worry that are etched into his face begin to fade, replaced by the serenity of slumber.

“We need to talk,” Blake says softly.

I turn my attention to him, his eyes meeting mine, their depths reflecting the turmoil we’ve faced together. Closing Ethan’s bedroom door with a gentle click, we step into the hallway. The muffled sounds of Olivia and Emma’s laughter drift through the house, serving as a reminder of the joy that still resides within the chaos.

“What happened?” I ask softly.

“Not here,” he replies.

He leads me to his room, and we close the door behind us. I’ve been in here a few times, but this time the atmosphere is serious. I can tell that something has shaken Blake to the core. We sit down on the end of his bed and face each other. Blake’s grip on my hand tightens, his fingers interlacing with mine as if seeking comfort in our connection. I can feel the weight of his exhaustion and it fills me with an ache of understanding. The unspoken words hang in the air, heavy with the need for truth and healing.

“As I said, I was at the hospital with Ethan,” Blake finally says, his voice carrying a mix of weariness and concern. “He had a seizure, Lily. It was...terrifying. He wouldn’t stop shaking. I thought I was going to lose him.”

My heart lurches at his words and I feel a wave of guilt wash over me. How could I have been so consumed by my own emotions that I failed to realize the ordeal he had been through with Ethan? The realization hits me like a tidal wave, and I squeeze his hand tighter, seeking to convey my remorse and empathy. I should have called him last night and told him about Matthew. If I had, then he wouldn’t have been so shocked this morning after his horrible night.

“I had no idea, Blake,” I whisper, my voice tinged with sorrow. “I’m so sorry. Is he going to be okay? This isn’t...like Sarah, is it?”

“No,” he says. “They did so many tests and rushed them through for me. He’s okay. To be safe they want to see him

again in six months. They've given me some medicine to give him if it happens again."

I feel like a weight has been lifted from me. Nothing could be worse than going through that again. It would be so much worse with Ethan. Blake can't take any more heartbreak in his life.

"That's good," I say relieved. "So, it's a good prognosis."

He nods, but he still looks at me with an expression I don't understand. He gulps thickly, breaking eye contact with me.

"I'll forgive you, you know," he says. "If it's not mine."

For a moment I stare, not comprehending what he means. It takes me a few seconds until it clicks and I recoil back from him. I snatch my hands away from his.

"What do you mean?" I ask, the devastation clear in the tone of my voice. I know what he means, though. I feel sick with the burning betrayal in the pit of my stomach. I don't know how he can think this. How can he sit here and say something like that to me? I haven't been with anyone but him in years. In fact, he's only the second man I've ever been with. Matthew being my first. There are literal years between them.

"I won't be mad," he continues. "I know people make mistakes and...I think I'm in love with you. I'm not sure how to let you go. So please, even if it is his, be with me instead of him."

The words feel like daggers to me as well as making my heart swell. I feel so conflicted. This isn't how I expect a love

declaration to go. But really, we've never done things in the right order. We fell in love in secret as teenagers, both convinced it was one-sided. Then we both moved on and had children before destiny pushed us back together. As I stare at Blake's devastated face, I realize he's just feeling insecure because I kept the secret about meeting Matthew from him. He's so tired and only thinking this way because he's been through such a traumatic twelve hours with Ethan. Then he stumbled upon me and Matthew together and his mind is running through all the worst-case scenarios. Usually, it's me that acts like this. I am insecure and make assumptions. I blurt my mouth off before I have time to think things through. Now is a time to be patient with him so I swallow how I feel about the accusation. Arguing with him right now will just make him feel worse and make him more suspicious.

"There's no one else, Blake," I assure him.

I reach for his hand again, offering him love and support.

"There isn't?" he asks.

I hate the uncertainty I hear in his voice, but I know it's a passing worry. He just needs to hear me say it.

I shake my head. "You and Ethan are so important to me. I'd never betray your trust like that. This baby is yours. *Ours.*"

"I'm sorry. That was completely inappropriate to say," he tells me. He brings a hand to his face and sighs. "What's wrong with me?" he laments. "I do trust you. I just...I got the thought in my head, and I just had to get it out."

“I know. I understand,” I say. “I didn’t mean to keep things from you,” I confess, my voice trembling with vulnerability. “When Matthew reappeared, I...I didn’t want to burden you with it until I knew what I was getting into with him coming back into Emma’s life. I thought I could handle it on my own but hiding and excluding you from the issue isn’t healthy for a relationship. It wasn’t fair to you.”

Blake’s gaze softens, his features relaxing as he absorbs my words. I can sense the walls of doubt and uncertainty gradually crumbling, replaced by a renewed sense of trust and empathy.

“We’re a team,” he says.

I nod, tears streaming down my face as a mix of emotions overwhelms me. The weight of the misunderstanding and the fear of losing Blake slowly lifts from my shoulders.

“Yes, we are a team,” I reply, my voice filled with conviction. “And teams make mistakes, but they also learn and grow from them. I promise to be more open with you, to share my burdens and fears, just like you have done with me.”

Blake reaches out and wipes away my tears, his touch a gentle reassurance that we can weather any storm together.

“I’m sorry for doubting you,” he says, his voice filled with remorse. “It was a moment of weakness and fear. I never should have questioned your faithfulness or the paternity of our child. I love you, Lily, and I trust you.”

I lean into his embrace, feeling the warmth of his love surround me. We sit there, wrapped in each other’s arms, the

air thick with forgiveness and a renewed sense of connection.

“I love you too, Blake,” I whisper, my voice filled with sincerity. “And I forgive you.”

At that moment, we reaffirm our commitment to each other, vowing to communicate openly, cherish the love we share, and navigate any challenges that come our way as a united front. As the weight of the misunderstanding lifts, we find solace in our renewed bond, knowing that our love is stronger than any doubt or insecurity. Together, we embrace the future with open hearts, ready to face whatever may come, knowing that our love and trust will guide us through it all. In the quiet of Olivia’s house, with Ethan peacefully sleeping in the next room, we find solace in each other’s arms, embracing the healing power of forgiveness and the strength of our love.

Chapter 22:

Blake

I take a deep breath, my hand lightly resting on Lily's belly, a mixture of anticipation and nervousness coursing through me. It's hard to believe that soon, it will be obvious that a baby is growing there. Our child. A surge of joy and excitement fills me as I imagine the future that awaits us.

"Are you sure?" I ask Lily once again, my voice tinged with both excitement and a hint of doubt. This is a big step, and I want to ensure that she's certain about it.

She grins at me, her eyes shining with unwavering certainty. "Yes!" she tells me enthusiastically. "It's not like we can keep it a secret much longer. I'm going to start showing soon! You're so clingy and protective. Olivia is going to figure out that we're at least sleeping together. She's not blind."

Her words ease some of my worries, reminding me of the bond we share and the love that has brought us to this point. I can't help but smile at her infectious enthusiasm and the way she effortlessly puts my concerns to rest.

"Okay," I agree, a sense of contentment washing over me. This is our journey together, and I'm ready to embrace it with open arms.

Tonight we will share the news with my sister, Olivia. I'm so nervous and excited that I feel like pacing. It's a Friday night and Emma is staying over for a sleepover. Olivia is completely unaware that Lily will also be staying the night,

too. It's the perfect opportunity to surprise her and share the incredible news.

As we stand inside Olivia's kitchen, waiting to make our announcement, I feel a bit overwhelmed. This moment is significant not only for Lily and me but for our entire family. I can't wait to witness Olivia's reaction and see her embrace this new chapter in our lives.

Lily squeezes my hand, her touch radiating warmth and reassurance. We've been through so much together already, and this moment is a culmination of our love and resilience. I'm grateful for her support and for the strength we find in each other.

Olivia enters the room, her face curious yet suspicious and a hopeful glimmer enters her eyes.

"Hey, you two. Are you okay?" She looks at the lack of space between us and perks up, a hopeful look on her face. "Wait, don't tell me: you're dating."

Her playful remark brings a wide grin to my face.

"Better," I tell my sister, unable to contain my excitement.

She raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Better than dating?" she questions, anticipation evident in her voice.

Lily and I exchange a knowing glance, a silent agreement passing between us. We're about to share the most incredible news. The anticipation within me bubbles over.

"We have some exciting news," I announce, my voice laced with a mix of joy and nervousness, aware that this moment

will shape our family's future.

Olivia's eyes widen, her curiosity piqued. "Well, what is it? You're both practically swooning!"

Lily takes a deep breath, her voice filled with sheer happiness as she shares the news we've been holding onto with bated breath. "I'm pregnant, Liv. We're expecting a baby."

The words hang in the air, and for a moment, silence follows. Then, Olivia lets out a gasp of delight, her hands instinctively flying to cover her mouth, her eyes shimmering with tears of joy.

"Oh, my goodness!" she exclaims, her voice filled with wonder. "No?!"

"Yes!" Lily confirms, her smile radiant and contagious.

"Oh, man! You slept with my best friend!" she accuses, playfully smacking her brother. Olivia playfully accuses us, her delight palpable. Her scolds lighten the atmosphere. "And you! You slept with my brother."

We find ourselves enveloped in a tight embrace, the shared joy and happiness filling the kitchen.

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you," I say, my voice filled with sincerity. "You were right. I deserved that chance with Lily, and hearing you say that to me was what I needed, even if I didn't like it at the time."

Olivia plants a kiss on my cheek, her gesture brimming with love and acceptance.

“I know you both so well, and what you needed was each other,” Olivia tells us sincerely, her voice filled with genuine understanding and affection. Her words carry a profound sense of acceptance and support, easing any lingering doubts or fears. “I know Sarah would be so happy that you two found each other.”

Her mention of Sarah brings a bittersweet ache to my heart. I know deep down that Sarah would have embraced Lily with open arms, and hearing Olivia acknowledge that sentiment warms my soul. It’s a reminder that love can transcend something as dark as death and that our journey is guided by those who watch over us from above.

“Thank you. It’s still difficult to accept she’s not here, but I think you are right,” I say, feeling poignant. “And the kids get on so well. They’re going to wet their pants when we tell them.”

“Oh, God! The kids!” she exclaims, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. As Olivia’s excitement takes hold, she bounces on the balls of her feet, unable to contain her joy. The thought of the kids sharing the bond of siblings fills her with glee. “They’re going to be so happy when they find out! They’re going to be brother and sister!”

The image of Emma and Ethan’s faces lighting up with sheer delight at the news brings a broad smile to my face. The idea of our family expanding, intertwining their lives in even deeper ways, fills me with a profound sense of happiness and

gratitude. I can already picture the adventures, laughter, and shared moments that await us all.

“I know,” Lily says, her voice tinged with a mixture of excitement and caution. “But we’re going to leave it a little longer to tell them about the baby. I just want to be in the clear and confident that nothing is going to go wrong.”

Her words resonate with me deeply. I understand her desire to wait, to ensure that everything is progressing smoothly before sharing the news with our children. Lily’s past experiences have taught her to be cautious and to anticipate the unexpected. I wrap my arm around her, pulling her closer, offering a silent reassurance that I stand by her side.

Her worries remind me of the hurdles we’ve overcome together. Lily has indeed faced disappointments and setbacks in her life, and the fear of things not going her way is a valid concern. I don’t want to dismiss or downplay her anxieties. Instead, I choose to honor and support her feelings, understanding the significance they hold for her.

“So no baby shower or gender reveal just yet,” Olivia suggests, trying to gauge our readiness for the celebratory milestones that often accompany pregnancy.

“Oh, no, please,” Lily replies, her voice filled with a mixture of gratitude and a touch of apprehension. Her overwhelmed expression speaks volumes, her emotions still raw and vulnerable. She’s not quite ready to dive into the whirlwind of surprise parties and elaborate announcements. I respect that wholeheartedly.

My sister nods, a compassionate smile gracing her lips. She understands, as we all do, that this journey is unique to Lily and me. We'll celebrate in our own time, on our terms, when Lily feels more at ease and confident.

“Okay, no surprise parties,” Olivia affirms, her voice gentle and understanding. “Wait, does that mean you guys are moving in together then? Blake, you’re going to need a house. One that’s big.”

Olivia’s question hangs in the air, and I can sense her curiosity and anticipation. She’s always been perceptive, and it’s no surprise that she picks up on the need for a bigger space now that our family is expanding. She knows how frustrated I’ve been that I still haven’t found somewhere.

“I know,” I agree.

I need to reconsider my previous house-hunting efforts. The inadequate houses I had been looking at won’t suffice anymore. We’re not just talking about accommodating me and Ethan anymore. We’re talking about creating a home for three children and a loving couple. We are growing into a family of five and it’s time for our living arrangements to reflect that. I know what I must do.

As I meet Olivia’s gaze, she understands the unspoken message that passes between us. We’ve always had a unique way of communicating without words, a shared understanding that comes from years of sibling connection. I silently urge her not to say anything just yet, to let me handle the situation in my own way and time. Lily, perceptive as ever, picks up on

our silent exchange, familiar with our unspoken conversations that have been a part of our relationship since childhood.

“Stop doing that weird twin thing,” Lily says, looking between us with an amused smile.

“What thing?” we both say at the same time and then we dissolve into laughter.

Chapter 23

Lily

The silence that descends upon Olivia's house is both soothing and unnerving. For the first time in weeks, Blake and I find ourselves alone, surrounded by the remnants of family life. The absence of the children's laughter and the chaos that accompanies their presence creates a void that is simultaneously calming and disorienting.

We stand in the living room, our eyes meeting with a mixture of relief and anticipation. I'm grateful for this moment of respite, a fleeting opportunity to reconnect. I want us to bask in each other's company without the demands and distractions of parenting.

I take a step closer to Blake, feeling a cascade of emotions surge within me. The weight of the past weeks, with its sleepless nights, tantrums, and constant juggling, begins to fade into the background. Now, it's just him and me, trying to figure out the contours of our relationship beyond just being parents.

"Hey," he says, a cheeky smile spreading on his face.

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips as I observe Blake, his face bathed in a soft glow of sunlight filtering through the windows. There's a hint of weariness in his eyes, a testament to the challenges we've faced together, but also a profound sense of devotion and love that since I've met him remains unwavering.

"Hey, yourself."

I reach out and take his hand, intertwining our fingers, relishing the simple act of connection. It's a small gesture, but one that carries the weight of our commitment to each other, a reminder that amidst the chaos and busyness of life, we are still partners, lovers, and friends.

Blake sighs. "Thank God for my sister," he says.

I can't help but agree. With us both working, taking care of two kids, and adjusting to pregnancy, time alone has been scarce. As we settle into the couch, the comfort of familiarity envelops us. We exchange glances, a silent understanding passing between us. This moment is a rare gift, an opportunity to rediscover the nuances of our relationship, to reconnect on a deeper level.

Without talking, we gravitate toward each other, seeking touch and connection. The house seems to sigh with contentment, its walls witnessing the tenderness and vulnerability that blooms between us. With the children's absence, the air becomes charged with a different kind of energy, one that holds the promise of intimacy and shared secrets.

I lean in closer to Blake, my heart beating a little faster as I smell the soft scent of his cologne. "It's just you and me," I whisper, my voice tinged with a mixture of longing and relief. "No distractions, no obligations. Just us."

A soft smile plays on Blake's lips as he meets my gaze. "I've missed this," he says, his voice filled with a tenderness that melts my heart. "The quiet moments of just you and me.

All we seem to get is stolen glances. It's easy to get caught up in the chaos of parenting, but being here, with you, reminds me of the depth of our connection."

I nod, my eyes searching his face, taking in every line and curve. "We're more than just parents," I reply, my voice filled with conviction. "We're partners, friends, and lovers. I want to cherish every aspect of our relationship, not just the role of mom and dad."

Blake's fingers brush against my cheek, a gentle caress that sends shivers down my spine. "I couldn't agree more," he murmurs, his voice filled with sincerity. "I want to be present in every moment with you, to nurture our bond and create memories that belong to just the two of us."

I find myself nodding, agreeing with him. The weight of the world lifts from my shoulders, replaced by a renewed sense of hope and possibility. I lean into Blake's embrace, feeling the warmth of his presence envelop me. Together, we find rest in each other's arms, savoring the tranquility that this rare moment of peace has given us. I inhale in his arms.

Before I realized what is happening, we are kissing. Blake's lips are soft and insistent against me, and it ignites a fire inside me that I haven't felt in weeks. I know the time we have is limited. Olivia has taken the children out for dinner. We have maybe an hour or two before they are going to be back through the door and demanding our attention again. It doesn't take long for things to get intense and hot.

Blake's hands are all over me. I giggle as he grabs me and pulls me on top of him so I'm straddling him and facing him on the couch. With my weight pressing on him for a moment I worry that I'm too heavy, especially since my stomach is starting to grow and with it, the extra pounds of pregnancy. Then I remember that this was Blake. He can pick me up effortlessly—as if I weigh nothing. He's strong and he loves it when I'm on top. I push away my insecurities and try to enjoy the moment we have.

“I've missed you,” he moans against my lips. “I missed touching you.”

The words make my stomach warm, arousal surging through me. Blake has a way of making me feel so desired. I'm not sure if I'll ever get used to it.

“God, you're so beautiful.”

I flush at the words, my face growing hot as he praises me. I've never been able to take compliments, but I must learn to since they pour from Blake's lips. I feel each one stirring uncomfortably in my soul. Each word heals a small part of me that I didn't know was broken.

“I want to make you feel good,” he says, his voice rough with desire.

I can feel how hard he is. His arousal is pressing against me. I can't stop myself. I reach down and rub him through his jeans, pressing against the hard line under his pants. I caress the length.

“Okay,” I find myself agreeing.

Blake’s hands are on my thighs, pushing my dress up as he kisses down my neck and across my collarbone. My breath hitches and I tangle my hands into his hair. Eagerly, I encourage his touches.

“Oh my god,” I gasp out.

It’s probably the hormones but I feel like everything is amplified and I start to feel a little dizzy from it all. I feel horny and desperate. I cling to Blake.

“Hey, sit here for me,” Blake requests. He pats on the couch beside him.

I wonder what he has planned for me, but I climb off him doing as I’m told without questioning him. I settle on the sofa to the side of him and then watch in confusion as he sinks to his knees in front of me.

“What are you—?”

My question is answered as he grabs me by my thighs and pulls me down slightly. My dress is pushed to my waist and he’s grabbing my panties. Wide-eyed and excited, I watch as he slowly kisses along my thighs and up further.

“Oh my God,” I whisper as sink back into the cushions.

Blake’s mouth is so incredibly soft and I feel like I’m floating as he takes care of me. No one has ever done this for me before and I lie there feeling in awe as pleasure builds inside me embarrassingly fast. I scramble for Blake’s hand, and he links his fingers with mine.

“Blake, oh, oh my god.”

The added connection has me moaning his name as I rock my hips against the sweet torture of his mouth. My orgasm seems to explode from within me. I’m gasping and moaning. When he pulls away, he’s grinning at me and I laugh, feeling breathless.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” I tell him.

He grins and then sits back next to me, leaning forward to kiss me on the head. The minutes slip away. The two of us both gasp and moan as we immerse ourselves in making each other feel good. Feeling the depths of our connection, it’s like the world stands still.

Chapter 24:

Blake

I take a deep breath. My heart is heavy with a mix of anticipation and nostalgia as I stand before Ethan, helping him straighten his new school uniform. The navy blazer fits him perfectly. His cute face looks up at me, beaming with pride. His small book bag looks giant on him, and I take time to snap some photos of him in front of the door of Olivia's house. It was a tradition that our mom did with us, and I want to carry it on with my own children. He looks so adorable, and a bittersweet smile tugs at the corners of my lips. If only Sarah was here to witness this milestone, to share the joy and excitement that fills the air.

Olivia is there to give him a good luck kiss and then we're in the car and heading on our way. As we approach the entrance of the new private school, Ethan's small hand clutched tightly in mine, I can't help but feel a surge of nervousness. Will he make friends? Will he feel comfortable in this unfamiliar environment? I hope with all my heart that this new chapter in his life brings him happiness and growth.

The teacher, Miss Johnson, meets us at the door, her warm smile instantly puts me at ease. We've spoken a few times and when I was looking around the school we met. She's a bright and bubbly woman and I'm glad she will be Ethan's teacher.

"Hi," she greets us. "You must be Ethan." She radiates kindness and understanding, and I find solace in the fact that Ethan will be in good hands.

“Hello,” I reply trying to project an air of confidence, but inside, I’m a bundle of worries and hopes for my little boy. “Yes, this is Ethan.”

“I’m Miss Johnson and this is Miss Tracy,” Miss Johnson says, gesturing towards a friendly-looking woman standing beside her. “She’ll be Ethan’s one-on-one teaching assistant like we talked about. Tracy has experience working with children who have additional needs.”

Although the school had already told me their support plan for my son, relief washes over me. I extend my hand toward Tracy, grateful for her presence and expertise. It’s nice to meet who is going to spend the days with my son.

“Thank you for being here for Ethan,” I say, my voice filled with gratitude.

“It’s my pleasure,” she responds, her voice gentle and reassuring. Tracy smiles warmly, her eyes filled with compassion. “I’m here to help him navigate through his new school experience smoothly. We’ll take it one step at a time, okay?” she says, talking to Ethan. “You and I are going to be really good friends.”

The little boy looks a little unsure, but he nods.

“I’ve got a cool gift for you here,” she says.

Tracy hands Ethan a large blue tablet. It’s got a soft case around it, decorated with planets and stars, which he loves. His name is on the back in a cute font. There’s also a strap so he can wear it like a bag. He puts it on curiously and then smiles

up at me excitedly when he presses the screen, and it comes to life. It's got several pictures on the screen and as he clicks them, there are different commands and requests. He quickly hits the one that's a picture of someone waving.

“Hello,” the tablet says in a boy's voice. Then, “Good morning.”

I look surprised and delighted towards Miss Johnson and Miss Tracy. They had told me they would have everything ready for him, but I hadn't realized they would get the tablet ready and customized so quickly. This is the opposite of how his last school dealt with his mutism, and I'm so happy that I pulled him from there and found this place.

“That's right! Good morning,” I tell him proudly.

I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders, knowing that Ethan will be with people who understand and support him. It eases my worries, if only slightly. I'm still reluctant to leave him behind, vulnerable in this new environment. I am still worried about the seizures he had a few weeks ago. He has medicine in his bag and the school is aware, but it's nerve-wracking to hand over someone so precious into a stranger's care.

“See, you're an expert already,” Tracy tells Ethan.

He looks back down at the tablet and then it announces, “Thank you!”

I know he's going to be okay.

After exchanging a few more words with Miss Johnson and Tracy, I give Ethan a tight hug, pressing a kiss to the top of his

head. “You’re going to do great, buddy,” I whisper, my voice filled with both pride and a touch of sadness. “Remember, I’m just a phone call away if you need me. Daddy can come straight back if it’s too much.”

Ethan looks up at me, his eyes filled with a mix of excitement and apprehension. He nods and then looks toward Tracy. With a heavy sigh, I watch as he enters the classroom, Tracy by his side, the door closing behind them.

As I make my way back toward the parking lot, my mind consumed with worry, I’m suddenly startled by a familiar face. Matthew, Emma’s father, loiters near my car, his presence unexpected and unsettling. My eyebrows furrow in confusion, and I quicken my pace, my heart pounding in my chest. How did he know I was here? Did he follow me? It is the only explanation.

“What are you doing here, Matthew?” I ask, my voice laced with suspicion.

The sight of him at my son’s school leaves me on edge.

He turns to face me, a sly grin playing on his lips. “Just thought I’d check up on who is spending all their time with my daughter,” he says, his voice dripping with false cheerfulness.

I feel a surge of anger and protectiveness rise within me, and I step closer, my voice low and controlled. “You have no right to be here, Matthew. This is none of your business. I don’t mind you seeing Emma. I will always support that but stay away from my son.”

His grin widens, his eyes glinting with a mixture of amusement and malice. “Oh, I’ll stay away, Blake. But don’t think I won’t be keeping an eye on things. Emma deserves better than what you can offer her.”

I’ve never heard something so ridiculous in my entire life. How can such a deadbeat dad make those kinds of claims? He’s delusional.

“What are you talking about?” I scoff. “I’m a good partner to Lily, and I love the children. I work hard. I can support both Lily and Emma. I earn more in one day than you could in your entire lifetime.”

“Oh, I’m not talking about that,” he snaps at me. “I’m talking about your violent tendencies. See, I’ve been doing my own research and I don’t think Lily will want you around Emma if she finds out what you’re capable of.”

Horrified, I immediately know what he is talking about, and I know that he is right. A surge of adrenaline courses through my veins and I resist the urge to lash out at him. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to remain calm. I don’t want to make this any worse.

“Just stay away from my son, or I’ll call the cops,” I tell him, glaring at him as I get into my car and then slam the door.

Chapter 25

Lily

I step into the familiar warmth of the jewelry shop, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. I'm greeted by the sparkling display of precious gems and intricate designs. With the holidays behind us and the children back at school, I finally have the chance to immerse myself in work and embrace the joy it brings. It's not just about earning money; it's about pursuing a passion and finding fulfillment in what I do. I feel like I've found that here. I'm a little worried about how I'll juggle working once the pregnancy is further along but I'll have to deal with that when the time comes. For now, I've kept the knowledge of my pregnancy only between family.

"Hey," I say to my co-workers with a warm smile.

"Hi, Lily," Tiffany says.

We exchange pleasantries for a few moments. We share stories of our weekend, the atmosphere buzzing with energy. I feel like the girls have warmed up to me since I've followed Blake's advice. I've become more confident and allowed myself to take more pride in my own wants and needs, they've picked up on it too. I fit right in. I've become one of those flawlessly pretty girls that I always thought were better than me. Now I know that I just lacked confidence.

The soft glow of the showcase lights illuminates the room, casting a magical ambiance that never fails to captivate me. This place holds a special kind of allure, one that draws me in

and allows me to lose myself in the beauty and sparkle of each piece. As I slip behind the counter, I run my fingers over the smooth surface, tracing the elegant curves of the display cases. This has become my sanctuary, a world where I can immerse myself in the artistry and craftsmanship of fine jewelry.

As I settle into my workstation, I take a moment to appreciate the intricate pieces laid out before me. Rings, necklaces, earrings—they all hold a unique story and significance, waiting to be discovered by someone who will cherish them. I stare longingly at the engagement rings and allow myself to fantasize about wearing one. Blake would probably pick something pretty and delicate, with a huge diamond or some kind of rare gemstone. Something worth more than I can comprehend. It's a startling thought. In just a few months, I've gone from swearing off men to trusting one with all my heart. I brush the thoughts of marriage aside. I'm not sure if we are there yet. The baby is going to take up a lot of time and funds. It would be sensible to wait.

The day unfolds in a blur of activity. Customers come and go, each with their own preferences and visions. I assist them with care, listening intently to their wishes and offering guidance. It brings me immense satisfaction to know that I've played a part in creating moments of joy and celebration. Amidst the busy hum of the shop, I find solace in the rhythm of my tasks. My hands move with a now practiced grace, delicately arranging jewelry, polishing it to perfection, and arranging it back into its designated spot. The repetitive

motions become meditative, allowing my mind to wander and reflect on the future that awaits us.

In between serving customers, I steal moments to research and educate myself further about gemstones and their symbolism. I want to be knowledgeable, to provide not just a product, but an experience steeped in meaning. This dedication to excellence is my way of demonstrating that I am capable and deserving of providing for our little one.

I make my way into Olivia's house, an energetic Emma at my heels. She's had a great first day at school and has been chatting my ears off in the car, telling me all about her day. I'm so happy for her. She loves the routine that school brings, and she is eager to go again tomorrow. I wonder how Ethan has settled in.

Another thing I've had on my mind all day is Sarah. Specifically, in relation to Ethan. I know I need to talk to Olivia about it before Blake gets home. I've always been able to turn to her for advice on matters that weigh on my mind, and I know this is no different. Stepping into the role of a mother in Ethan's life is a daunting prospect, one that fills me with both excitement and trepidation. I'm nervous, but resolute in my determination to create a unique bond with the child while honoring the memory of Sarah. I need to ensure that I never make Blake or Ethan feel like I'm trying to be a replacement. I'm just not sure how to go about it.

“Hello?!” I call out.

“Out here!” I hear Olivia respond.

I head down the hallway and I see she’s sitting outside, enjoying the sun. I open the French doors and step into the garden. Today’s been the first time in ages that she’s not had both the kids and it seems she’s been lounging by the pool all day. I’m greeted with a warm smile.

“You okay?” she asks, sensing the weight of my thoughts without me uttering a single word. “What’s on your mind?” Her eyes are filled with genuine concern.

Thankfully, Emma is already running off, opening the giant chest of toys in the grassy area of the garden.

I take a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. It’s not an easy topic to discuss, but I know Olivia’s insight and understanding will be invaluable. I meet her gaze, hoping to convey the depth of my emotions.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the baby,” I admit, my voice wavering slightly. “About family. About me and Blake and how we are doing this. I’m eventually going to be stepping into the role of a mother for Blake’s child.”

Olivia nods, her expression sympathetic. “Yeah, it’s kind of unavoidable at this point. Having cold feet?” Despite her question, she asks me softly. There is no sound of judgment in her tone, only support.

“No. I’m happy but I’m nervous,” I try to explain. “I love Blake and I just...I adore Ethan. Which is probably why I’m

so worried. I don't want to mess things up for them. I know they've been through a lot."

Olivia nods. "They have, but so have you," she replies.

"I know," I tell her, feeling a little glum about how my mind is all over the place. "I know I deserve the happiness I've found, but at the same time, I'm just waiting for something to go wrong."

"Not everything goes wrong," she replies, giving me a gentle look.

I sigh. "I know. But haven't you ever been so happy that you think that there must be some kind of catch?"

Olivia raises an eyebrow at me. I know I'm being dramatic. Maybe it's just the hormones. I'm officially midway through my second trimester. I was the same when I was pregnant with Emma.

"Well, how about we think about it this way: if it's something we can fix, let's talk about how to fix it, but if it isn't, then we can put a pin in it and deal with it when it comes."

As usual, Olivia is talking sense. This is entirely why I talk to her about these things.

"Okay," I agree.

"So, what's worrying you the most?" she asks.

"Sarah," I admit. "I'm so worried that Ethan is going to think that I'm trying to replace her. He's still so traumatized by

what happened. Now I've dropped into his life and I'm going to be his stepmother," I sigh.

"Lily," Olivia says, reaching for my hand. "Ethan loves you. I know he can't say it, but he shows it every day. He loves Emma to pieces and he's so excited when he knows you are visiting. The fact he holds your hand and lets you pick him up is an enormous deal."

I know that Olivia is right.

"But what if Blake decides that this is all too much?" I ask, feeling insecure.

Olivia sighs and turns to face me properly. "I know my brother. That's not going to happen. And even if it does, I promise everything will be the same. He will be a father to that baby and a best friend to you. You won't lose us."

I nod, feeling a little emotional. "I just feel all over the place. I've gone from being a single mom to having a new relationship and now I'm pregnant. Don't get me wrong, I want this, but it's just a lot all at once."

"I can imagine that's a lot to process," Olivia replies. "It's completely normal to feel a mix of emotions, Lily. You're not alone in this."

I take comfort in her words, knowing that she understands the complexities of the situation. Olivia has always been a pillar of support, a constant in our lives. I don't know what I would do without her.

“I want to be a good mother to his child, to our child,” I continue, my voice filled with determination. “But I don’t want Sarah to be forgotten or overshadowed. I don’t want Ethan or Blake to feel like I’m trying to replace her. How do I even begin to navigate this, Liv? I feel so out of my depth.”

“Well, it’s like you said,” Olivia continues calmly. “If you keep talking about Sarah and honoring her memory, then you will do fine. You’re such a sensitive person, you’re not about to trample on her memory.”

Her words resonate deep within me, providing a glimmer of clarity amidst my swirling doubts. I let out a shaky breath, I need to be more confident in myself. She’s right. Maybe I’m thinking too much about it.

“Well, I’ll try my best not to,” I insist. “Maybe I’m just having doubts because Matthew’s back as well. I know I should have called him to try and fix things between him and Emma but...I just haven’t.”

Olivia’s eyes soften. “Lily, please don’t doubt yourself because Matthew is back. He was always putting you down. You have a kind and compassionate heart. You would never try to replace Sarah. The love you have for Blake and this baby is unique and special. Just like the bond he shared with Sarah. It’s different but the same. And your love for the new baby will be its own beautiful thing, just like your love for Emma and Ethan.”

I feel a surge of gratitude for her. For her wisdom and unwavering support.

“You’re right, Olivia.” She has a way of grounding me, reminding me of my own strength.

“Of course, I am,” she jokes.

“I need to embrace our connection,” I tell her. “I can honor Sarah’s memory. I don’t want to replace her. I think if we keep her memory alive, Ethan will be okay. We can all bond with the baby together.”

I’m not sure how it’s going to work, but we can figure it all out together.

Olivia’s smile widens, her eyes sparkling with encouragement. “Exactly, Lily. You have so much love to give, and we are all fortunate to have you in our lives. Just be true to yourself, and everything will fall into place.”

I lean forward and give Olivia a heartfelt hug, grateful for her guidance.

“Thank you, Olivia. Your words mean the world to me.”

Olivia returns the hug, her warmth radiating through our embrace. “You’ve got this, Lily. I do not doubt that you’ll be an amazing mother to Ethan because you already are. And remember, I’m always here for you.”

Chapter 26

Blake

I walk hand in hand with Lily; the dim glow of the streetlamps casts a warm ambiance around us as we make our way to the restaurant. Tonight is a special evening; it's date night. A chance for us to escape the chaos of everyday life and enjoy each other's company. We have both been longing for a moment of peace. We've been so busy the past few weeks. The kids are settling back into their school year. Lily has been focussing on work and has finally told everyone she is pregnant. She is preparing the girls for her going on maternity leave. Whereas, I have been sorting out our future living arrangements. Tonight is for us. Olivia has agreed to have the kids for us, so we are blissfully child-free for the evening.

As we step into the elegant establishment, the air is filled with the tantalizing aroma of exquisite cuisine. Soft music plays in the background, creating a romantic atmosphere that matches the fluttering anticipation in my chest. I glance at Lily, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and I can't help but smile too.

We're shown to our table, tucked away in a cozy corner of the restaurant. The soft candlelight casts a gentle glow on Lily's face, accentuating her beauty. It feels like we're in our own soft little bubble, a world where time stands still.

The waitress approaches our table, her professional smile adding to the refined ambiance. She holds a notepad and pen,

ready to take our orders.

“Good evening,” she greets us warmly. “Are you ready to order?”

I glance at the menu one last time, my eyes drawn to the section featuring the chef’s specialties. My choice is clear, and I look up at the waitress with a smile.

“I’ll have the Beef Wellington, please,” I say, my voice confident and filled with anticipation for the culinary delight to come. It’s been a while since we’ve been out on a date. In fact, when I think about it, I haven’t ever taken Lily out like this. We really have done everything backward.

The waitress nods, jotting down my order. She then turns to Lily, her attention focused and attentive.

“And for you, madam?”

Lily scans the menu, her eyes carefully considering the options. She looks a little hesitant and I suspect she’s looking at the prices.

“Whatever you like, sweetheart,” I remind her.

“Okay,” she agrees. “I’ll have the risotto, please,” Lily says, her voice tinged with excitement.

The waitress nods, scribbling down the order before turning her attention back to us. “Excellent choices. Can I offer you any drinks?”

I glance at the wine list, my gaze settling on a rich red that pairs perfectly with the Beef Wellington. “I’ll have a glass of

your finest red wine, please,” I request, knowing that its flavors will complement the meal.

Lily, on the other hand, prefers a non-alcoholic option, keeping her focus on the health and well-being of our growing family. “I’ll have a virgin pina colada, please,” she says with a smile. “No alcohol. I’m pregnant.” She puts her hands over her stomach protectively.

The waitress nods with a smile, noting down our drink orders. “Very well. Your food and drinks will be on their way shortly. Please enjoy your evening.”

With a polite nod, the waitress departs, leaving us to bask in the anticipation of a delectable meal and the warmth of each other’s company.

I reach across the table, gently sliding my fingers into Lily’s, a silent affirmation of our shared excitement and connection. As we wait for our dishes to arrive, the air is filled with a sense of contentment, the promise of a memorable evening ahead.

“I only just realized we’ve never been on a proper date,” I tell her.

Lily frowns. “Of course, we have,” she responds. “We go out all the time.”

I give her a look. “Without the kids,” I add.

She looks at me with doubt, not believing me. “I...oh, God, you’re right!” She laughs.

Our drinks arrive and we chat while we're waiting for our meals to arrive. We decide we need to start going out more together before the baby is born. We also show each other some things we want to buy for the baby. Lily has found the cutest stroller and she's determined she wants to buy it with her wages. I love that she is so independent, and she wants to get things for herself.

The conversation flows effortlessly between us, laughter, and affection lacing each word spoken. For a moment, it feels like the world has faded away, leaving only the two of us in this secluded corner of the restaurant. Just as we're savoring the moment, relishing in the connection we share, an unwelcome presence disrupts the serenity. I catch a glimpse of Matthew standing near the entrance, a look of determination etched on his face. My heart sinks and I exchange a worried glance with Lily.

"Blake is that...Matthew?" Lily's voice trembles with a mix of surprise and concern.

I nod, a knot forming in my stomach. I thought I'd have more time to talk to Lily about Matthew. I still haven't told her that he showed up unannounced at Ethan's new school. This is not how we envisioned our evening.

Matthew approaches our table, his eyes fixed on Lily. The tension in the air is palpable, threatening to suffocate the delicate atmosphere we had carefully cultivated.

"Lily," Matthew begins, his voice strained but determined. "We need to talk. Now. It's important."

I exchange a brief glance with Lily, silently conveying my support.

She takes a deep breath, mustering her strength. “I’m a little busy right now,” Lily tells him. “You can’t just barge in here when we’re out on a date.”

“Fine, then. It’s Blake I have a problem with anyway,” he rebuts, his voice drips with accusation, each word slicing through the air like a sharp blade. Matthew’s gaze locks onto mine, his eyes burning with intensity. “Blake,” he spits out my name, his voice laced with venom. “You have no right to be in Emma’s life. You’re unfit to be a father.”

My jaw tightens and a mix of anger as a defense rises within me. I want to lash out, to retaliate against his unfounded claims, but I know that would only escalate the tension, casting a darker shadow over our evening.

“Matthew!” Lily exclaims. “That’s completely uncalled for. You know nothing about Blake.”

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing thoughts. This is not the time nor the place for a heated argument. My gaze shifts to Lily, searching for guidance, for a sign of how to navigate this treacherous terrain.

“You can’t just turn up after months of pretending Emma doesn’t exist and make claims like that,” Lily continues. “Blake has been there for her almost every day for the last six months. So, if anyone doesn’t deserve to be her father then it is you.”

As usual, Lily has spoken before she has thought about what she's saying. I appreciate that she's just trying to defend me, but I know arguing with Matthew will only make things worse.

"Matthew," I reply, my voice steady but tinged with frustration. "I understand your concerns, but I assure you: I am committed to being a positive influence in Emma's life."

Matthew scoffs, his disbelief palpable. "I knew you would say that Blake but *actions* speak louder than words."

I fight the urge to retaliate, to defend my character but as I look at him, I realize that he knows something that Lily doesn't. I glance toward Lily. Instead of arguing, I choose a different path. I take a moment to collect myself, to channel my emotions into a calm resolve.

"Matthew," I say, my voice measured. "I understand your skepticism, but I ask that you give me a chance to prove myself. Emma's well-being is my priority, and I will do whatever it takes to ensure she is safe and loved."

"Damn straight I'm skeptical," he says.

I meet Matthew's gaze, my eyes locked onto his. "Look. We're going to have to find a way to coexist for Emma's sake," I propose. "I'm not going anywhere, and she deserves to have both of us in her life, supporting and loving her."

"I think Lily will feel differently once she knows about your little issue," he says spitefully.

Lily looks between me and Matthew confused. “What is he talking about?” she asks.

I sigh. The entire evening has been ruined and I can feel a headache coming on. All I wanted was some time to come clean about everything. I just wanted a nice date with Lily, a chance to spoil her and enjoy her company. I know that Lily is going to understand, but I should have told her about this earlier. I worry that Blake is right. I worry that if Lily finds out she will say I shouldn't be around Emma too. What if she changes her mind about us?

“Lily, I was going to tell you,” I say. “I just...I wasn't sure how to broach it.”

Lily's eyes meet mine. Her concern and support are evident in her gaze. She knows that I'm being serious right now. She reaches out, her hand gently squeezing mine, offering a silent reminder that we're in this together.

“What is it?” she asks.

I hate how worried she looks.

“Can we just leave?” I ask. “I know we're on a date, but I think we should talk in private.”

Matthew is staring between us, glad that he's ruining our evening and I don't want him here for this conversation.

“Okay, don't worry,” she agrees. “Let's go.”

Lily glares at him. “Don't you have anything better to do?” she snaps at Matthew as she stands.

She grabs my hand, and we leave, my heart palpitating at the conversation we're about to have.

Chapter 27

Lily

I step into the luxurious hotel room, the soft lighting and elegant decor creating an atmosphere of intimacy and privacy. Blake follows closely behind me, a hint of anticipation in his eyes.

Blake decided to come here tonight, and I can't help but feel a mix of nervousness and curiosity as to why. Why did Blake insist on a hotel instead of having our conversation at Olivia's place? We could have gone home or to my apartment— Though I'm secretly glad he didn't want to go to mine. I've never had him over because my place is tiny and honestly, I'm embarrassed to call it home.

I accept that there must be something important he wants to discuss, and the thought fills me with a sense of unease. There is something that Matthew has discovered about Blake before I could. I'm not sure how to feel about that. We had a fight over me hiding Matthew showing back up in our life, all the while, Blake had his own secret.

As I glance around the room, taking in the plush furnishings and the exquisite view from the window, my mind races with questions. What could be so pressing that he felt we needed to be alone in this lavish setting?

I turn to Blake, trying to mask my worries behind a small smile. "This room is beautiful," I say, my voice carrying a hint of uncertainty. "But why didn't we just talk at Olivia's? What's so important that we had to come here?"

Blake takes a step closer to me, his eyes filled with nerves. He reaches out and gently takes my hand, his touch seeking reassurance.

“I wanted us to have a private space where we can focus on our conversation,” he explains, his voice calm and steady. “I didn’t want the kids to overhear.”

Overhear? His cryptic words bring an unease that lingers within me. I trust Blake, but the gravity of his choice to bring us here makes me wonder what he’s about to reveal.

I take a deep breath, mustering the courage to voice my concerns. “Blake, you know you can tell me anything, right?” I say, my voice soft. I feel like we’ve come so far. I’m not sure there’s anything that I can’t deal with as long as he is honest with me. “I just...I can’t help it. I’m worried about what you’re going to tell me.”

He squeezes my hand gently, his touch grounding me. “Lily,” he says earnestly. “I want to be completely honest with you. So, let’s...let’s just sit down.”

“Okay,” I reply, a touch of vulnerability seeping into my voice. “Let’s talk. I’m here, ready to listen.”

Blake’s gaze softens, his eyes filled with gratitude and a touch of vulnerability that mirrors my own. He pulls me into a warm embrace, holding me close for a moment.

“Thank you, Lily,” he whispers, his voice filled with sincerity.

We sit down on the bed, both taking our shoes off and turning to face each other. We look silly, all dressed up fancy, crossed-legged on the bed. I'm sad that our date was ruined but I'm happy we can still spend the night together.

"I haven't been completely honest with you," he begins, his voice filled with a mix of regret and determination. "Today isn't the first time that Matthew has shown up like that. He turned up at Ethan's school on the first day."

"What?!" I gasp out. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I can't believe that Blake didn't tell me. Matthew stalking my boyfriend and his son is serious.

"I think he's been following me for some time now," Blake continues. "And the reason he's so angry, the reason he believes I'm unfit to be in Emma's life, is because he found out about something from my past."

My eyes widen with surprise and worry coursing through me. "What are you talking about?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Suddenly, I'm thinking of a thousand things that he might not have told me. It's probably worse in my head, so I try not to overreact. After all, if it was something terrible then Olivia wouldn't have let me get into a relationship with Blake. Nor would she be so supportive of him. She's always had a strong sense of justice. But even knowing this, I feel on edge as I wait for him to come clean.

Blake takes a deep breath, his gaze fixed on mine. “After Sarah died, I didn’t handle it well,” he confesses, his voice tinged with remorse. “I spiraled into a dark place, drowning my sorrows in alcohol and that’s when I had all those one-night stands.” He gulps thickly. “It escalated one night, and I ended up getting into a fight. It was messy and a terrible mistake. I deeply regret it.” He looks down, ashamed. He looks pained and pale like he might be sick.

A fight? Blake is such a gentle soul. Despite being tall and looking gruff, I’ve always thought he was so sensitive for a guy. I feel a mix of emotions swirling within me—surprise, disappointment, but also a deep sense of understanding. He didn’t tell me about this part of his life, and while it hurts, I can comprehend why he kept it hidden.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me,” I say softly, my voice trembling slightly. I would have understood. “But...I understand why. It’s not an easy thing to admit and I can see how much you regret it.”

“I do.” Blake nods, his eyes reflecting his gratitude for my understanding. “I’m truly sorry, Lily,” he responds, his voice filled with sincerity. “I wish it hadn’t happened, but it did. I was arrested because of it I have a criminal record. I already apologized to the man involved. I had to pay a fine. Obviously, I paid for his medical bills. I’ve been trying to leave that part of my life behind and become a better person.” His remorse is palpable. I can sense the weight of his past actions on his shoulders. I take a moment to process everything he’s just revealed, allowing empathy to soften my initial shock.

“I wish you would have told me,” I admit. “I thought I was supportive enough that you could talk to me about anything.”

He nodded, looking disappointed. “It wasn’t you. It was me. I’m ashamed.”

I sigh. “I believe in you, Blake,” I say, my voice filled with compassion. “I know that people make mistakes, especially when they’re going through a difficult time. And I can see how much you’ve grown since then.”

A small smile tugs at the corner of his lips, gratitude flickering in his eyes. “Thank you, Lily,” he whispers, his voice filled with sincerity. “A part of me was worried that this would be the end.”

I frown. “You thought I’d break up with you?” I ask.

He shrugs self-consciously.

This isn’t like him, doubting himself like this. I can see how much it has worried him. I reach out and gently squeeze his hand, a gesture of reassurance and support.

“We all have our struggles, Blake,” I say, my voice steady. “What matters is how we learn from them and move forward. You’ve shown me time and again that you’re dedicated to being the best partner and father you can be.”

A sense of relief washes over him and I can see a flicker of hope in his eyes.

“Matthew finding out...it’s like a ghost from my past haunting me and I worry about what he might do next.”

As Blake shares his worries, a new layer of concern settles on my face. “You’re right,” I say, my voice laced with concern. “I can’t believe he’s doing this. This is all my fault. Maybe if I’d just texted him and gave him what he wanted then he wouldn’t be acting like this.”

“It’s not your fault,” he assures me. “But I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t worry me though. I think we should contact a lawyer. We could set up something formal so that Matthew can have supervised visits with Emma. We should establish clear boundaries and protect our children.”

I nod, my mind racing with thoughts of protecting our family. There’s another worry that weighs heavily on me. “It’s not just about Matthew’s words,” I say, my voice filled with apprehension. “It’s how he keeps finding you, turning up at Ethan’s school and now here tonight. He’s stalking you, Blake.”

A shiver runs down my spine as I voice my fears, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

“You’re right. We’ll have to take extra precautions,” Blake assures me, his voice firm. “We’ll be vigilant, and if things escalate, we’ll involve the authorities.”

I nod. That sounds sensible. I’m not sure where to start finding a lawyer, but I’m confident that Blake will be able to find a reputable person to help us.

“I don’t think we need to call them yet. I think he needs a chance. I want Emma to have her father in her life. We should give him a chance. You said he got a job and has had past

issues with his mental health. It could be he just needs support.”

His words offer solace, and I find strength in his unwavering faith. I know I’ve got an incredible partner in him. He is being so supportive and trying to do this right, even though Matthew has been so awful to him.

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely, my voice filled with resolve.

Blake smiles. “Everyone deserves a second chance.”

As we sit there, hand in hand, I can’t help but feel a sense of unity. We might be facing challenges we never anticipated, but together, we’re a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter 28

Blake

After coming clean about my past to Lily, I knew it was crucial to take proactive steps in resolving the situation with Matthew. With the determination to establish a healthy dynamic for Emma's sake, I set out to find a family lawyer who could guide us through the process.

Sitting in the lawyer's office, my heart pounds with a mix of anxiety. Lily sits beside me, her unwavering support giving me the strength to face the challenges ahead. Matthew, seated across from us, exudes a guarded yet curious demeanor. His eyes flicker with a mixture of skepticism and resignation.

"Thank you for attending today," Mr. Briggs, the family lawyer says.

"It's our pleasure," I say, my voice steady despite the underlying tension in the room. "We appreciate your help in finding a healthy solution for our family."

Mr. Briggs nods, his eyes filled with empathy. "Of course. Now, let's discuss the options we have."

The lawyer lays out our options, emphasizing the importance of finding common ground and focusing on Emma's well-being. As the discussion unfolds, we slowly begin to see eye to eye. It's not an easy road, but we all share a desire to do what's best for Emma.

"Great. As we move forward, we'll need to establish a visitation schedule that works for both parties," Mr. Briggs

explains. “This will provide structure and stability for Emma while allowing Matthew to spend time with her.”

Lily nods, her expression serious yet determined. “Yes. We all want to prioritize Emma’s happiness and make sure she feels loved by everyone,” she says, her voice filled with conviction.

“Do you agree, Matthew?” Mr. Briggs asks.

Matthew, who has been relatively quiet up until now, only nodding here and there, speaks up, “Yes. I want to be in Emma’s life,” he says, his voice tinged with a mix of regret and longing. “I want to make things right. I got a little lost along the way.”

“That’s okay,” Mr. Briggs assures him. “That’s why we’re all here. It’s encouraging to see that we’re all on the same page,” he remarks, a note of optimism in his voice.

Together, we craft a plan that allows Matthew to have supervised visits with Emma. We start small, agreeing to Sunday mornings as a starting point, with the intention to gradually increase the time they spend together. It’s scary to step into the new routine, but deep down, I believe that with support, Matthew can become a reliable and responsible presence in Emma’s life.

The weeks pass and I hold my breath, waiting to see if Matthew will follow through. To my relief, he shows up on

time, his commitment shining through despite our initial concern.

Emma's face lights up with joy upon seeing her father, and my heart swells with a mix of pride and relief. It's a small victory, but an important one, as it sets the foundation for a healthier relationship between them.

Gradually, everyone settles into the new routine. Sundays become a day of connection and bonding for Emma and Matthew, and Lily and I find solace in the fact that we've created a space where Emma can maintain a meaningful relationship with her father.

There are still challenges along the way, but with open communication, patience, and the support of the lawyer, we navigate them as a team. We find common ground, compromise, and always prioritize Emma's best interests.

As time goes on, the nervousness that once filled the air is replaced by a sense of stability and contentment. We witness Matthew's growth and dedication, and our blended family begins to flourish. The smiles on Emma's face and the laughter that fills our home are a testament to the progress we've made. To the love that binds us together.

Though our journey had a rocky start, we have managed to overcome our differences and create a space where everyone can thrive. Our collective efforts have paved the way for a brighter future, one where Emma grows up surrounded by love, support, and a sense of belonging. And as we continue

this journey, I am filled with gratitude for the resilience and unity that has brought us to this point.

I watch Ethan and Emma settle into his bed. Tonight, we've allowed them to snuggle together and watch a movie in the big bed. Their teddies are tucked in with them. They're already too sleepy, their eyes drooping as they drink hot chocolate from their spill-proof cups.

"You two have sweet dreams," Lily says, kissing Ethan on the head and then Emma.

Ethan looks up at her and then touches her face lovingly, locking eyes with her. I watch the gesture, it warms my heart. It makes me emotional. I never expected my son would have the chance to have a mother again.

"We love you," I say softly, and then click the nightlight.

The children are transfixed to the TV, already half asleep. We gently close the door and exchange a soft look. Our children are so cute and with them settled, a sense of calm descends. I look at Lily and her beauty captivates me. She radiates warmth and a peacefulness surrounds her.

She's the missing piece I've been searching for since Sarah died.

We sneak off to my room, feeling like naughty teenagers as we change for bed and then snuggle in together. Lily hasn't been back to her apartment in days, and when she does visit,

it's usually to just grab some items for her and Emma. It's happened so slowly that I don't think she's realized that she's been living with me at Olivia's house.

I reach out to hold Lily's hand. Our fingers interlace, forming a connection that transcends words.

"You know, Lily," I begin, my voice filled with sincerity, "I'm so grateful that our paths crossed. From the moment I laid eyes on you all those years ago, I felt a connection. I knew you were special. But now, it's become so much more than I ever imagined."

A gentle smile graces her lips, her eyes shimmering with understanding and affection. In this intimate moment, I find the courage to express the depths of my feelings.

"You've brought so much light and joy into my life, Lily," I continue, my voice filled with emotion. "I never thought I would have a second chance at love and family, but being with you has shown me that anything is possible."

Her gaze locks with mine, and I can see the reflection of my own vulnerability in her eyes. It's a shared vulnerability, a mutual acknowledgment that we're both taking a leap of faith.

"Thank you," she replies softly. "I feel the same way, Blake," she whispers, her voice carrying a mixture of tenderness and determination. "You've shown me what it means to be loved unconditionally, and I'm grateful for every moment we share. I feel like we're really settling in as a family."

Nights like this are just perfect. The children are snuggled together and safe. We can go to sleep together and wake up with each other in the morning. We are a real family. And soon, our baby will be here joining in our chaos and our joy. I know that everything will be perfect.

“I feel the same,” I admit. “I love you so much.”

I close the space between us. Lily’s lips are sweet, and she tastes like toothpaste. The two of us smile, snuggling together.

“I want you,” she whispers.

I immediately feel my body respond; I’m already growing hard at her words as I feel her body press against me. Lily is so beautiful. So perfect. It’s impossible to not return her feelings.

“I want you too,” I admit.

We kiss again. This time deeply. Her breasts rub against my chest and her nipples press against me through the thin material of her pajamas. Her breathing becomes heavy as she pants against my neck, and her fingers trace my jawline as her hormones flare. I reach under her top, cupping her breasts and her breath hitches in delight. She’s oversensitive now that she’s in the third trimester and I’ve had fun learning all the ways to make her moan.

This time, she has no patience and I’m not going to complain.

“Please, please make love to me. I need you badly,” Lily pleads in a whisper.

She's far too pregnant to be on top or to have me on top of her without it being uncomfortable, so I gently guide her to roll over. Like this, I can kiss the back of her neck and reach between her thighs to make sure she's warm and ready for me. I slip my hand under her clothes and to where she is slick and wanting. I rub over the most sensitive places and let myself find pleasure in listening to her moan.

"Good girl," I encourage her as she rocks against my hand.

After a couple of minutes, Lily is shuffling out of her pajama bottoms, and I follow her example. We kick out clothes off and then I grip her leg, holding it up so I can line up from behind and press inside of her. She relaxes back against me.

"My god," I groan softly.

We're both aware we need to be quiet, so Lily buries her face into the pillow below her. We start to move together. She grinds her hips backward and I meet her halfway. She feels so hot and wet, and I pant against the nape of her neck.

The sound of our heavy breathing fills the room as we move together. Even though I can't see her face, our connection is intimate. It goes beyond fleeting emotions and casual sex. We are bonded with a shared vision of a future filled with love and family. As we bask in the warmth of each other, a sense of peace settles in me.

"I love you," I remind her, kissing her neck.

She reaches behind her, rubbing her hand across my face lovingly and I kiss.

We have something special. We are something that goes beyond the surface. The love we share is deep and passionate and I feel that as we make love. We savor every moment, cherishing the intimacy and closeness we've cultivated. It's in these quiet moments that our hearts speak the loudest.

Chapter 29

Lily

As we pull up to the address Blake gave me, my heart pounds with anticipation. He said we were meeting someone for a playdate for the kids, but there was something about the excitement in his voice that hinted at something more. My mind races with possibilities as I turn down an unfamiliar street. I find the house number and park on the side of the road, outside the giant gate.

I glance down at the GPS. It's definitely the right address. I was expecting a diner, or a playground, or something similar, but this is a house. Well, a mansion would be a more accurate description. Its grandeur and elegance take my breath away. I have no idea where we are as I've not been to this part of the town before and I'm suspicious. I wonder who lives here.

I step out of the car and peer into the driveway. I spot Blake's car alongside an unfamiliar one and I feel relief. I'm in the right place. I open the back of the car and unclip Emma from her car seat. She steps out and then hand in hand, we walk up the long-pebbled driveway and past the immaculately manicured front lawn.

"Ethan!" Emma yells as she spots the little boy.

Ethan waves and then comes running over to us. He grabs me around my legs, scooping them into a hug, and then rubs across the now prominent baby bump—his way of saying hello to his new sibling. As predicted, the kids were ecstatic to learn they both would have a new friend to play with soon.

“Hello, sweetie,” I greet him, rubbing his hair.

He beams up at me.

Finally, I notice Blake standing on the front porch. I walk up to him surprised. The kids run around in the driveway for a moment. The sun casts a warm glow over the sprawling property, making it feel like a scene from a fairy tale.

I turn to Blake, my eyes wide with wonder. “Where are we, Blake?” I ask, my voice filled with awe. “What are we doing?”

He smiles, his eyes shining with joy and anticipation. “Lily, this is our new home,” he says, his voice laced with excitement.

I feel my heart skip a beat as I process the words. I look around me. That can’t be right. I’m used to living in my expensive, tiny box apartment. Even though I’ve been paid well at the store, I never expected that I would afford something like this. It must be worth millions of dollars. Sometimes it’s easy to forget how much money Blake has. He can just buy something like this because he wants to. I had honestly thought we’d stay with Olivia for a few months and buy something eventually. He’s been busy, working hard to create something for our family.

“Our home?” I question in awe.

Blake’s been looking for a new place since I met him. He’s been very secretive about it and now I see why. This beautiful house, this dreamlike setting, is meant for us. Blake has planned this surprise, carefully orchestrating the playdate as a

cover to unveil our future together. He'd wanted it to be a surprise and I truly love the effort that he's gone to.

"Are you joking?" I ask.

I resist pinching myself. This can't be real. Things like this just don't happen to me. I knew that we would end up living together, especially since I've been spending less and less time at my apartment, but I didn't expect him to make such a grand gesture. Olivia has made it clear that Emma and I are always welcome to stay at her place, so this is really a shock.

Blake's realtor, Elise, opens the front door, her voice filled with enthusiasm. That's how I that it isn't a joke.

"Welcome! I'm so excited to show you around," she says, unable to contain her excitement. "You must be Lily! I've heard so much about you!"

"Oh, God. I must be dreaming," I utter, looking between the realtor and Blake.

"No! I promise it's ready to move in as soon as you're ready," she assures me.

Blake wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me closer. "Lily, I wanted to create a space for us. Here we can build our family, make new memories, and write our own story," he says, his voice heavy with emotion. "I found this place a couple of months ago and I just knew it was perfect. I've already bought it and made all the changes that I thought we'd need. I hope you'll love it as much as I do."

Tears well up in my eyes as I take in the magnitude of this gesture, the love and commitment he's pouring into our future. I squeeze his hand, unable to find the words to express the depth of my gratitude and love for him. No one has ever done something like this for me.

"Oh, Blake," I say breathlessly. I'm so happy that I don't really know what to say. I reach down and rub my hand over my baby bump, a gesture that brings me comfort and assurance. "Hear that, baby, your daddy has found us somewhere to live."

The realtor leads us inside, and as we step through the grand entrance, I'm greeted by the exquisite interior, filled with natural light and tasteful décor. I've only seen the entrance hall and I already love it.

Overwhelmed with emotions, I turn to Blake and throw my arms around him, embracing him tightly. "I love you," I whisper, my voice filled with joy and gratitude. "I love you so much. This is perfect."

He holds me close, his embrace providing a sense of security and warmth. "I love you too, Lily. I want us to be a family, to create a home filled with love and happiness," he murmurs, his words resonating deep within my heart.

I feel a surge of hope and excitement for the future. This house is more than just bricks and mortar—it represents the love we share, the dreams we have, and the journey we are embarking on together.

“We have done all the hard work, so you don’t have to,” Elise tells us. “We’ve babyproofed the entire house. We’ve made several upgrades and enhancements to make this place even more extraordinary.”

She begins to guide us through the house, showing us room after room. I can’t help but imagine the possibilities and the memories we will create within these walls. Each room we explore holds its own unique charm, from the spacious living area adorned with tasteful decorations to the cozy study, perfect for quiet moments of reflection. Blake walks beside me, his hand still enmeshed with mine, as we take in the grandeur of our new home.

“We’ve replaced all the carpeting in the house,” Elise says, her voice brimming with satisfaction. “It’s all brand new and chosen with both style and comfort in mind. You’ll feel like you’re walking on clouds in every room. I know Blake was worried about the children slipping and bruised knees. So that’s all sorted.”

I look down at the soft carpet and step out of my shoes. She’s right. It is like a cloud against my toes. I can’t believe that Blake thought about such small details. He’s so thoughtful.

“Also, we’ve prioritized your safety and peace of mind,” Elise explains, a touch of pride evident in her tone. She steps over a screen on the wall and touches the glass. It comes to life. “This cutting-edge security system ensures that you and

your family will feel secure and always protected. It's the latest in-home security technology."

Blake looks pleased as Elise shows him how to navigate the touchpad. I watch him fondly, looking around me as I try to take it all in.

"We can change anything that you don't like," he's quick to assure me as he sees me looking.

I'm not sure there's a single thing that I don't like. "No, I love it!" I eagerly say. "It's just a lot to take in."

Upstairs, the realtor leads us to the newly decorated room. "And this, Lily, is the nursery," Elise says, her voice filled with enthusiasm. "It's been carefully designed with love and attention to detail. I'm sure your little one will feel right at home here."

Soft pastel colors adorn the walls and the sunlight streams in through the window, casting a gentle glow over the space. My heart flutters with excitement as I imagine our little one, our precious baby, in this room. I step inside, taking in every detail with a mixture of joy and wonder. A crib sits in one corner, adorned with soft blankets and stuffed animals. The walls are adorned with delicate artwork, and a rocking chair awaits those late-night snuggles and soothing lullabies. It's a haven, a space where dreams will come to life.

The realtor continues to show us the other rooms, pointing out the separate bedrooms for Ethan and Emma, each with their own bathroom. That's going to save so much squabbling. Each room is thoughtfully decorated to reflect their unique

personalities—a galactic space theme for Ethan, and a rainbow theme for Emma—a place where they can each call their own. My heart swells with gratitude knowing that they will have their own space to grow and thrive. They've been sharing a bed at Olivia's, and I bet they'll love having their own room, especially as they get older.

As we make our way back downstairs, the realtor opens the double doors through the kitchen, revealing a backyard oasis. A sparkling pool glistens under the sun, beckoning us to dip our toes in its cool waters. The garden stretches out before us, a canvas waiting to be filled with laughter, play, and cherished memories.

“Your pool area is now equipped with a top-of-the-line pool cover,” Elise says, a smile playing on her lips. “Not only does it provide an added layer of safety, but it also keeps the pool clean and reduces maintenance efforts. It's designed with both functionality and aesthetics in mind. I know you wanted the pool covered before the kids visited,” she adds.

Emma's eyes light up with excitement as she takes in the sight before her. “Mommy, look! Is that our pool?! Can we swim in the pool every day?” she exclaims, a wide grin spreading across her face.

I chuckle at her enthusiasm, her pure joy contagious. “Maybe not *every day*, sweetheart, but we'll definitely have lots of fun in the pool,” I reply, my voice filled with warmth and affection.

Blake wraps his arm around Emma's shoulders, joining in on the playful banter. "Yes, Emma, we're going to live here all together. Every day will be a pool party!" he teases, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Emma giggles, her laughter filling the air. "This is the best day ever!" she yells, her voice echoing around the garden.

I can't help but agree with her sentiment. It really is.

Epilogue

Blake

The sound of laughter and excitement fills the air, creating a symphony of joy that reverberates through our new home. Ethan and Emma, the stars of our blended family, scamper from room to room, their laughter echoing through the hallways. Their faces light up with sheer delight as they claim their bedrooms, their own personal havens within this house that now holds all of our dreams.

“Are you sure we can live here, mommy?” Emma asks, looking around her new bedroom. It is triple the size of the room she is used to so I understand her hesitance.

“Yes, baby, this is our new home. See, all your things are in here,” Lily tells her.

I nod and grab a box which is labeled—’Emma’s teddies’, opening it for her and then placing it on the floor.

“See,” I assure her.

She grins as she peers into the box. “Thank you, Blake, I love you,” she tells me.

Her words of love hit me all at once and my heart feels warm. I’m so happy that I can support this little girl and ensure she gets all the best things in life.

“I love you too,” I remind her sincerely.

“Ethan! I found Freckles!” Emma calls and then runs from the room, Freckles the bear in her hand.

We watch as Ethan appears too. He grabs Freckles and then runs away, making Emma squeal in delight and then run after him.

“You two stop running!” Lily warns. “You’re going to knock one of the poor movers down the stairs!”

The two giggle, and the sound of them running continues.

We exchange a look. It’s hard work having two young children, but we wouldn’t change it for the world.

“Excuse me?” one of the movers asks, popping his head into Emma’s room.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“I’m not sure about this, it’s not labeled,” he says. He’s carrying a large box that looks heavy.

I shrug. “Don’t ask me, pal. She’s the boss,” I say, gesturing towards Lily.

“Oh, it’s for the office,” she says and then follows the man. “Just down here.”

I have no idea how she knows, but she just does.

Lily, my partner and the love of my life, moves gracefully through the rooms, her presence commanding attention as she effortlessly takes charge. Her radiant smile and infectious laughter fill the space, infusing it with a sense of warmth and happiness. The way she effortlessly multitasks, overseeing the movers and directing the placement of furniture, amazes me. She’s a force to be reckoned with, a true superhero in my eyes.

She isn't allowed to carry anything or unpack. Her pregnancy, nearing its final weeks, has brought about a captivating glow that seems to emanate from within. As her hand lovingly rests on her growing belly, a mix of awe, love, and anticipation swells within me. We are about to embark on a new chapter of our lives, welcoming our little one into the world. The thought of holding our newborn in my arms fills me with an indescribable mix of nervousness and excitement. We've created a home where our family will thrive, and I can't wait to witness the love and joy that will overflow from these walls.

Amidst the blur of unpacking boxes and the movers arranging furniture, my eyes are constantly drawn to Lily. I steal glances whenever I can, unable to resist the magnetic pull she has on me. She is my anchor, my rock, and my greatest source of inspiration. Amid the chaos, her presence brings a sense of calm and serenity to my soul.

After a few hours, we are finally alone. Me and Lily, and the children. We work together, organizing our belongings and creating a sense of familiarity in our new surroundings. I can't help but be overwhelmed by a profound sense of gratitude. We have come so far, overcoming obstacles and challenges, and now we stand here, on the precipice of a new beginning.

We've been so immersed in the process of unpacking and settling into our new home that the concept of time seems to have slipped away from us. It's only when Emma and Ethan, with their adorable pouts and hungry expressions, cling onto us that we realize just how famished we all are. Their

complaints about their rumbling tummies fill the air, and it's impossible to ignore their pleas any longer.

Emma's whine breaks through the noise, reaching my ears with an urgency that demands immediate attention. "Blake, we are starving," she says, her voice tinged with a mixture of impatience and hunger. I can't help but chuckle at her determination.

Beside her, Ethan adds to the chorus of hunger, pouting up at us with wide, pleading eyes. His small hand tugs at my shirt, as if to emphasize his point.

Lily and I exchange a knowing glance, our shared realization of our own growing hunger mirrored in our eyes. I run a hand through my hair, a sheepish grin forming on my face.

"You know what, guys? You're right," I reply, a touch of amusement lacing my words.

"In fact, now that you mention it, I feel like I'm about to pass out if I don't get some food in me right this second," Lily says.

Emma's face lights up, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Pizza!" she exclaims, her excitement contagious.

Lily nods in agreement, her hand resting gently on her baby bump. "Baby agrees, pizza it is," she says with a laugh, her voice filled with a mix of affection and hunger.

With a renewed sense of purpose, we gather ourselves and make our way toward the kitchen. The scent of freshly

unpacked boxes still lingers in the air, but now it's mingled with the promise of warm, cheesy pizza. I can't help but feel a surge of gratitude for the beautiful chaos that is our life.

We all sit at the counter and gather around the iPad as we all add our orders to the delivery app.

Emma, leaning in with curiosity, eagerly offers her suggestions. "Me and Ethan want pepperoni with extra pepperoni," she declares, her voice filled with unwavering conviction. Her eyes sparkle with excitement, mirroring the anticipation that buzzes in the air.

As we continue to input our orders, laughter, and friendly banter fill the kitchen, turning the act of selecting a pizza into a light-hearted game. Lily's fingers dance across the screen, ensuring that each order is accurately recorded to avoid tantrums. The excitement of the moment elevates the simplest of tasks into something special. This isn't just any pizza order; it's our first meal in our new home, a symbolic celebration of our journey as a blended family.

With the final order confirmed, Lily's finger hovers over the submit button. She glances up, meeting each of our eyes with a shared sense of anticipation and joy.

"Alright, everyone," she says, her voice filled with a touch of theatrical flair. "Our first meal in our new home is on its way. Let the feast begin!"

We all cheer, a chorus of laughter and excitement filling the room. It's a small moment, but it holds the promise of cherished memories and the joy of being together.

We wait for the arrival of our much-anticipated pizzas. The aroma of freshly unpacked boxes is overtaken by the tantalizing scent of melted cheese, warm dough, and savory toppings as it finally arrives.

In this simple act of ordering pizza together, we solidify our bond as a family. It's not just about the food; it's about the shared experiences, the laughter, and the love that infuses every bite. As we eagerly settle into our first meal in our new home, I can't help but feel a surge of gratitude for the journey we've embarked upon. Our new home is more than just a physical space; it's a sanctuary where love, laughter, and joy live.

With the aroma of freshly devoured pizza still lingering in the air, it's time to settle down and prepare for the night ahead. The children, their energy waning after a day of excitement and exploration, go to their respective bedrooms.

"I'll handle this," I tell Lily. I know going up and down the stairs was getting troublesome for her. She must be exhausted after today.

As I step into Ethan's room, I find him sitting on the edge of his bed, his tired eyes still sparkling with remnants of the day's adventures.

I approach him with a soft smile, my heart filled with affection for this young boy. I sit down beside him, my hand resting gently on his shoulder.

"Time for bed, buddy," I say, my voice gentle yet firm.

Ethan looks up at me, his gaze filled with a mix of contentment and weariness. He knows the routine well and understands the importance of a good night's sleep. Without protest, he pulls back the covers, revealing the crisp sheets that will cradle him in their comforting embrace. I tuck Ethan in, my hands working with a tenderness born out of love and a desire to protect. I smooth the blanket over his small frame, ensuring that he's snug and secure. As I lean down to kiss his forehead.

Moving on to Emma's room, I find her curled up in bed, her eyes already drooping with sleepiness. I approach her bedside and gently brush a few strands of hair away from her face.

"Time to rest, sweetheart," I whisper, my voice a gentle lullaby.

"Okay, Blake."

Emma snuggles deeper into her pillow, her eyelids fluttering closed. With a soft sigh, she lets go of the day's excitement, surrendering to the tranquility of slumber. I adjust her blanket, making sure she's cocooned in warmth and love.

I head back downstairs to find Lily sitting in the garden. As the sun begins to set, casting a golden glow over our new home, I sit next to her. I pull Lily close, my heart overflowing with gratitude.

"We're finally here. We did it," I whisper, my voice filled with a mixture of awe and tenderness.

“Our home. Our sanctuary.” Lily’s eyes meet mine, her love shining through, and she nods, a soft smile gracing her lips. “We’re building something beautiful here,” she says, her voice filled with certainty. “A place where our children can grow, where we can thrive, and where love will always be our foundation.”

Our hands intertwine, and I know that our journey as a blended family has just begun. We may face challenges along the way, but with Lily by my side, I’m confident that we can overcome them. As we settle into the evening, surrounded by the warmth of our new home, I’m filled with a profound sense of gratitude. In each other, Lily and I have found the missing pieces of our hearts, and together, we’re writing a beautiful new chapter—one filled with love, laughter, and the realization of our dreams.