

Rachael Sommers

Chemistry



Chapter 1

LILY STARED WITH A SENSE of resignation as the departure time of each flight listed on the board changed to the same word:

CANCELED.

This was not good.

“Excuse me?” The woman standing in front of her in the check-in line stepped toward the nearest member of airport staff. “My flight is canceled?”

“All of the flights are canceled, ma’am.” He looked like he’d rather be anywhere else, and Lily didn’t blame him. He was about to say the same thing a hundred times over.

“But why?”

His gaze flitted to the windows of Miami International Airport. The panes were streaked with rain, and the palm trees in the distance were bent in half. “Have you seen the weather, ma’am?”

She waved a hand. “It’s just a little rain.”

Lily snorted. She wouldn’t call a category three storm “a little rain”. The woman turned to throw Lily a haughty glare.

“I’m afraid there’s not much we can do. We have to wait for it to pass.”

Lily sighed. It had been a risk to travel to the airport—she’d been keeping a careful eye on the news for the past few days—but it wasn’t like she had much choice.

She’d given the keys of her apartment over to its new owner that morning.

Curling a hand around the handle of her suitcase, Lily stepped out of the line. There was a hotel somewhere in the central terminal, and if she

was quick, she might be able to grab a room before everyone else had the same idea.

Trying to re-book a flight for later in the week would be much more fun if she could do it sprawled on a double bed with room service.

As she walked, Lily pulled out her phone and dialed her sister's number.

"Christ, Daisy." Lily jerked the phone away from her ear when greeted with the sound of a wailing baby. "I think I've gone deaf."

"You've gone deaf? Try being in the same room. She has the lung capacity of an adult human."

"What did you expect marrying someone who's six four?"

"Don't. She's already doubled in size since she was born. She's going to be a giant." Emma's crying lessened, and Daisy's sigh of relief was audible. "Are you all right? Is your flight on time?"

"My flight is canceled."

"What? Why?"

"Have you not seen the news?"

"I have a six-week-old baby, Lily. I haven't watched anything."

"There's a storm. All flights are grounded until further notice."

"Shit."

"Yeah." Lily's black Vans squeaked on the marble floor as she weaved her way through the people scattered throughout the terminal. "I'm going to see if I can get a room nearby to hole up for the night."

"Do you think you'll be able to get here tomorrow?"

"I don't know." Lily shot a baleful look at the black sky through a nearby window. "Right now, I doubt it. Which means I'm probably going to miss the first day of my new job, and then they'll fire me, and I—"

"Okay. Stop." Daisy cut her off mid-spiral. "They're not going to fire you, even if you do miss your first day."

"They might."

"They won't."

"It doesn't make a good impression though, does it? I knew I shouldn't have booked a flight so close." Not that she'd had much choice. The move back to her hometown hadn't exactly been planned and selling her apartment and packing up her things—as well as finishing up her last two weeks at work—had meant cutting it fine.

"It's not your fault. You couldn't have predicted this."

“Should’ve. It is hurricane season.”

“True. You did abandon us for the sunshine of Florida.”

“Not for much longer.” As nice as it would be to be back around her family, Lily would miss Miami. It had been where she’d found herself, her place in the world, and she’d be sad to leave it behind. “Can you call Mom and let her know?”

“Course.”

Lily spotted a sign for the MIA Hotel and quickened her pace, ducking around a group of British tourists arguing about the best way to proceed. “I hope she’ll be okay watching Hades for a while longer.”

“Please. She loves having a cat in the house again. You might not get her back.”

“She’s welcome to cat sit whenever she likes.” Lily stepped inside the hotel and joined the back of the line snaking from the check-in desk. It wasn’t too long; she hoped they had enough rooms left for the handful of people in front of her. “Right, I’d better go. I’ll call you later.”

“Bye!” Daisy hung up, and Lily tapped her foot as she waited to reach the front of the line.

“Do you have any rooms free for the night?” Lily said, when she could finally step up to the desk.

“You’re in luck,” the clerk said with a tired smile. “There’s one left.”

Lily didn’t feel particularly lucky as she forked out a hundred and twenty dollars for the luxury of not having to sleep on the airport floor.

But at least Lily was inside. And the room was nice enough, a queen-sized bed in the center and a comfortable-looking red leather armchair tucked into the corner.

Sinking onto it, Lily abandoned her suitcase by the bed and pulled out her phone. She had a call to make.

Lily hoped her new boss would be forgiving.

* * *

“Look who finally made it!” Lily was greeted by Daisy, her face alight with a broad grin, outside Arrivals at O’Hare. Lily was swept into a tight hug as soon as she was within arm’s reach, and nearly inhaled a mouthful of her sister’s hair.

When they were younger, they'd often been mistaken for twins with only a one-year age gap between them. They had the same dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, a spattering of freckles across white cheeks that were easy to redden. Lily was an inch taller—and never let Daisy forget it.

"Glad to be back?"

Lily squeezed her sister tight. "You have no idea." Her bank balance sure was—one night at the MIA Hotel had turned into three while she waited for a space on a flight to Chicago to become available.

"How's my favorite sister-in-law?" Alex stood beside Daisy, a baby carrier in one hand.

"I'm your only sister-in-law," Lily said, feeling tiny standing in front of him. "And I'm good." Lily glanced inside the carrier; Emma slept soundly within. "I see she's stopped screaming."

"Don't jinx it. This is the longest she's slept this week." Daisy started off toward the exit. "I'm guessing you still have a job?"

Lily rolled her suitcase behind her, squinting in the late afternoon sun as they stepped outside. She regretted her decision to pack away her sunglasses. It was a warm day, and though it didn't compare to the Miami heat, she couldn't complain.

"I do. They were understanding."

"I told you." Daisy nudged Lily with her shoulder. "Wasn't it an institute day you missed anyway?"

"Yeah, but still. It was supposed to be my chance to familiarize myself with the school and the staff." Which she'd have to do between classes on Monday morning.

"You'll be fine."

They reached Alex's Volvo, and Lily put her case in the trunk while Daisy secured the baby carrier on the backseat.

Alex slid behind the wheel and Daisy into the passenger seat, leaving Lily in the back beside her sleepy niece.

Daisy turned to glance at Lily over her shoulder. "Want to go to Mom and Dad's or your new place?"

"The new place, I think." As much as she'd like some of her mom's cooking, Lily wanted to settle in as soon as possible.

Especially if she only had a day before working full time.

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“I’ll let Mom know they can meet us there if they want.” Lily fired off the text and then leaned her head against the back of the seat.

She was exhausted. It had been a hectic few months between her career change and moving halfway across the country, but it felt right, and she couldn’t wait to get started on her new life.

In an old haunt.

As Alex pulled onto the highway, Lily glanced out of the car window. It had been ten years since she’d left Illinois for college. Returning only for holidays since, she was back—possibly for good.

Lily had worried it would feel like a step backwards, but instead she felt content. Her new place wasn’t quite in her hometown of High Grove, but it was only a half-hour drive—so, as her mom had said when Lily had told her she was coming back, she had no excuse not to visit.

It was small for a house but compared to the apartment she was used to in Miami it was spacious. And—most crucially—here, she’d be living on her own.

Not with her cheating ex.

Plus, it was a five-minute drive to the high school where Lily would start teaching on Monday. Which, as she struggled to get out of bed in the morning, was an added bonus.

“Looks like they beat us here,” Alex said, as he pulled onto Lily’s street.

Her parents’ Accord was parked behind her Corolla, abandoned in the driveway since she’d driven it up a few weeks ago with as many of her belongings she could fit inside it.

They stepped out of the car as Alex pulled in behind them, and Lily was swept into her mom’s arms before she was properly out of the car.

“Give her a chance to breathe, Mom,” Daisy said, unbuckling Emma from the car seat when she fussed.

“I can’t help it. I’ve missed her.”

“I’ve missed you too, Mom.”

“What about me?” Her dad said, and Lily hugged him, too.

“And you.” Lily heard a yowl from inside her parent’s car and peered through the rear window. A cat carrier sat on the backseat, and Lily caught a glimpse of a black paw trying to bat at the latch, green eyes glimmering from within. “Has she been living up to her namesake?”

"She's been wonderful," her mom said, a fond look on her face. "But I'm sure she's eager to explore her new home."

Lily was, too. She grabbed the carrier and led the way to the front door.

"I hope you don't mind," her dad said as she slid her key into the lock. "But we've done some work on the place since you were last here. Wanted to help you settle in—especially with the delay."

Curiosity burning, Lily let herself inside.

The cream wallpaper she'd chosen to replace the dingy gray in the hall had been hung, and the carpets lining the stairs looked like they'd been deep-cleaned. A glance into the living room revealed her new couch had arrived safely, and the flat pack furniture had been assembled, a TV stand and a bookcase pressed carefully against the wall. It was still bare—the price of having to start all over again, her old furniture tainted with memories she'd rather not re-visit—but at least it was all hers.

Lily suspected the same sight would greet her upstairs, and the knowledge she wouldn't have to spend hours assembling her bed before she could go to sleep made her want to cry.

"Obviously, you can move it all around," her dad said. "But we wanted to make life as easy for you as possible."

"You did all this for me?" Lily said, her throat feeling tight.

"We all did," Daisy said, knocking Lily's shoulder with her own. "Welcome home, sis."

* * *

Lily's footsteps echoed in the empty hallway, devoid of the sound of lockers clattering open. In an hour, this place would be heaving with teenagers fresh from their summer vacation, and Lily reveled in the calm before the storm.

"I'm sorry, again, for not being here on Friday." Lily turned to her new boss—the head of Greenfield High School's science department—and was promptly waved off.

"Please don't apologize," Alisha said, her heels clicking against the floor. "It was out of your control. And you're here now. That's the most important thing." A tall, Black woman with warm brown eyes in her late-forties, Alisha Woods struck Lily as straightlaced and intimidating, but her smile as she ushered Lily into a classroom was kindly. "Here we are. This is your room."

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Lily stepped inside and glanced around, taking it all in. It was bright and airy, the windows along the rear wall offering a view of the sports fields at the back of the building and letting in plenty of the early morning sun. Wooden benches pointed toward the white boards at the front of the room, with green stools neatly tucked underneath.

"It's perfect." The walls were bare, but Lily could work with that. She set her bag on the teacher's desk—her desk—and ran her fingertips across its surface.

"I'll give you a quick tour of the rest of the department while it's still quiet," Alisha said, turning toward the door and leaving Lily hurrying to catch up. "We have four other science teaching staff. Andrew is physics, Mei is earth and physical science." She pointed at their classrooms as they passed, the lights within dim. Alisha seemed to be the singular early riser.

"Brandon does a bit of everything across the whole school, so he's often not around, and Eva..." Alisha trailed off, glancing at the room at the end of the hall. It was the only one bearing a name; Dr. Eva Thomas was engraved on the plaque.

Lily tried not to think it was pretentious. She'd reserve her judgment until she'd met her.

"Eva is our resident biologist. I should warn you now—she can be prickly."

"Prickly?"

"Yes. I'd give her a wide berth. Most other people do."

Well, that didn't sound encouraging.

"This is my room." Alisha propped open the door to let Lily see inside, the walls plastered with an array of brightly colored posters. "If you ever need anything, please don't hesitate to ask. I've been teaching for years, but I still remember how overwhelming my first year of it was. I don't know if you've had a chance to look at your schedule yet, but you have first period free today, so you have a chance to settle in before you get thrown in at the deep end."

Their next stop was the teacher's lounge. "There is one over in the main building, but everyone tends to use this one. It's cozy." It was smaller than Lily had been used to at the school where she'd finished her training, with a few padded chairs placed around a large wooden table in the center of the

room. A fridge sat beside a sink along one wall, and Lily was delighted to see a Keurig coffee machine on the counter.

“Feel free to help yourself,” Alisha said, noticing the direction of Lily’s gaze. “There’s a monthly contribution toward keeping it stocked, or you can bring in your own if you wish. There’s a toaster and a microwave, too. All I ask is you clean up after yourself—which doesn’t stop half of the department from leaving a mess behind. This might be the cleanest you’ll see the place.”

“I think it’s a requirement for every department to have a serial slob.”

“That’s been my experience.” Alisha’s smile eased some of the nerves that had been somersaulting around her stomach all morning.

Lily had yet to meet any of her students, but at least Alisha had offered her a warm welcome.

“I’ll leave you to get yourself settled.” Alisha glanced at the silver watch around her wrist. “There’s still forty minutes until classes start if you want to explore the rest of the school, and I’ll see you later. I hope you settle in okay.”

“Thanks, Alisha.”

Alisha disappeared down the hall, and Lily returned to her classroom to fetch her lunch so she could put it in the refrigerator. She grabbed her trusty mug, too, a present from the students she’d spent her last few weeks of teacher training with. Miss Cross, was written on the side using symbols from the periodic table.

Lily was filling it with coffee when the door to the teacher’s lounge opened behind her. A white man who appeared to be in his early thirties joined her.

“Oh, hi.” He pushed square-framed black glasses up his nose before stretching a hand toward her. “You must be Lily. I’m Andrew.”

If pressed, that was what Lily would have guessed—something about his skinny frame, glasses and tweed suit screamed physicist.

“That’s right, it’s nice to meet you.” Lily shook his hand.

“How are you feeling?” He leaned past her to put a salad in the refrigerator. “Alisha said this was your first job.”

“Nervous, but excited to get going.”

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“Good, good. The kids aren’t so bad here. They’ll try and test you, but as long as you’re firm with them I’m sure you’ll be fine. I know Alisha will have already offered, but if you need anything, please ask.”

“Thank you.” Coffee in hand, Lily retreated to her classroom, settling behind her desk and pressing the power button on her new staff-issued laptop. She spent a few minutes familiarizing herself with the system, relieved to find it was similar to the ones she’d used before—the last thing she needed was to be plagued by IT issues on her first day.

That wasn’t the way to win over her classes.

Lily glanced at the clock on the wall. It was seven thirty, which left her with twenty minutes before the building would be flooded with kids. Already she could see them gathering outside, eager to catch up after their summer break.

Deciding to leave exploring beyond the safety of her own floor for another time, she went in search of the nearest staff toilets, instead. On her return, Lily paused in the hallway to read a poster on the wall detailing the science and STEM clubs the school ran as extracurriculars.

Lily failed to notice the door opening behind her and didn’t realize she was blocking the doorway until someone collided with her back, jolting them both.

“Oh, gosh, I’m sor—” Lily turned to apologize, but the words died in her throat because the woman glaring at her was drop-dead gorgeous. Short dark hair framed a strong jawline, black-rimmed glasses sitting on her nose above sharp cheekbones, her white skin flawless.

A dark stain was spreading across the front of the woman’s white blouse, drips of coffee from the mug gripped in her hand splashing onto the floor, and Lily gulped.

“I’m so sorry.” The blouse looked expensive, and this was not the way to make a good impression on her new colleagues. “Is it hot? Let me help.”

“Of course it’s hot!” Her voice was as cool and steely as the gray of her eyes, her expression morphing to disgust as she glanced down at herself. “Why are you standing there?”

“I-I was reading the posters.” Lily waved toward the wall, trying not to quail beneath the weight of the woman’s gaze as she stared down at Lily’s black slacks and floral blouse. “I’m Lily. Lily Cross, the new chemistry

teacher. I hope you aren't hurt, and I'll pay for your blouse to be dry cleaned."

Lily stretched out a hand, glancing over the woman's shoulder and realizing she was outside of Eva's room.

Eva looked at her hand, lip curled in distaste, and Lily let it drop back to her side. Lily thought of Alisha's earlier warning—she hadn't realized that prickly was code for extremely rude. And a little scary.

On the plus side, Eva's attitude made her instantly less attractive.

"I'll be surprised if you last the week." Eva brushed past Lily in the direction of the staff toilets, leaving Lily staring after her.

A low whistle caught her attention, and Lily turned to see an Asian woman exiting the classroom opposite Lily's, dark curls framing a smiling face. "Damn, newbie. You're lucky you're still alive."

Lily groaned. "Not the first impression I hoped to make. Or be greeted with."

"Eh, I wouldn't worry about it. She wouldn't like you anyway." She said it so cheerfully Lily had to laugh.

"You're Mei, right?"

"Yeah. Welcome to the madhouse. I promise no one else will be as unwelcoming."

"Even the kids?"

"Oh, the kids are a breeze compared to her. Trust me."

The shrill sound of the bell echoed in the hall, and Lily jumped.

"Here they come," Mei said, as shadows started to approach from the building's entrance. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

"Good morning," Mei said to her students, receiving a few grunts in response. "I see we're not awake yet. You've had the whole summer to catch up on sleep! Look alive, people."

* * *

Lily spent first period decorating. She hung a large periodic table on one wall and some posters about different educational styles on another. Her desk remained bare, but she was sure after a week or two it would be covered—she would never be one of those teachers who managed to keep an immaculate workspace.

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Having printed off her schedule, Lily sat to study it. All her classes were sophomores, and it would be their first taste of chemistry since middle school. Lily knew most of them dreaded it—it involved a lot of math, and not nearly as much lab work as they’d prefer—but she was looking forward to trying to change their minds.

Forty-five minutes passed quicker than Lily expected, and when the bell rang, she climbed to her feet and smoothed out the creases in her blouse as she waited by the door for her new students.

They arrived in dribs and drabs, and Lily ushered them inside. She let them sit where they wanted, though she wouldn’t hesitate to shift them around if she found some didn’t work well together.

Once all the seats were filled, Lily took a deep breath and moved to the front of the room. She leaned back against her desk and willed her fingers not to shake as she wrapped them around its edge. “Welcome. I’m Miss Cross, and I’m going to be your chemistry teacher for the next year. I thought we could start by going around the room and have each of you give me a chemistry fact.”

Lily saw a few eye rolls but didn’t let it discourage her.

“Let’s start here.” She moved toward the first desk on the front row, where a kid with a mop of dark curls sat. “What’s your name?”

“Luke.”

Lily made a note on a piece of paper, knowing she’d never remember their names if she didn’t write them somewhere.

“Okay, Luke, can you think of a fact for me? It can be anything you like.”

“Uh...” Luke paused, pen twirling. “Technetium was the first ever man-made element.”

Lily hadn’t expected that from a fifteen-year-old. “Wow, that’s right. Who’s next?” Lily glanced at the next student along.

“Marie Curie is the only woman to win a Nobel Prize in two different sciences.”

“Great, and you are?”

“Amanda.”

Lily remembered the (they/them) pronouns from the class list she’d been given and made a mental note not to slip up when referring to Amanda in future classes. “And sitting next to you is...?”

“Macie. Bromine and mercury are the only elements liquid at room temperature.” Macie offered the fact without being prompted, and Lily smiled.

Lily made her way around the room. Whether they knew it or not, the fact they chose told her a lot about them, and by the time she reached the end Lily felt the last of her nerves fade away.

Macie raised a hand as Lily returned to her desk.

“Yes, Macie?”

“Do you have a fact, Miss Cross?”

Thankfully, Lily had anticipated someone asking and had a few prepared. “How about the fact that while oxygen gas is colorless, its solid and liquid forms are blue? Or the human body contains enough carbon atoms to provide graphite for nine thousand pencils? There’s one letter of the alphabet that doesn’t appear on the periodic table—can anyone tell me what it is?” Several pairs of eyes flitted over to Lily’s poster, and she smiled. “Preferably without cheating.”

“Z!”

“X!”

“J!”

“K!”

“No, that’s potassium, you idiot—”

“While I appreciate the enthusiasm”—Lily raised her voice to cut through the noise—“let’s not all shout out at once, okay? And let’s not call people idiots, either.” She looked pointedly at the culprit.

“Sorry, Miss Cross.”

“I did hear the right answer in there somewhere, though. Who said J?”

Luke’s hand raised.

“Well done, Luke. Now, I know sometimes it can be hard to speak in front of the class, so here’s some incentive.” Lily reached behind her desk for the box of candy she’d bought the previous day, trying not to laugh at the widening eyes of her class. “No one has any allergies, do they?” She’d glanced over the medical information for all her students and didn’t remember any, but she wanted to be sure. When there were no nods, Lily held the box toward Luke. “If you answer a question—right or wrong—you get candy. But you have to raise your hand rather than shout out. Sound good?”

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She was met with vigorous nods.

“Let’s test it out, shall we? Who can tell me what the smallest unit of matter is?”

Several hands shot into the air, and Lily chose at random.

“An atom.”

“Correct.” Lily offered Ben the box. “And what is the center of the atom called?”

Again, she had a few students to choose from.

“The nucleus.”

“Which consists of...?”

Lily continued to build the questions until they’d all gotten a piece of candy, impressed with their base level of knowledge and confident she had a bright group of kids.

Time flew by, and when the bell rang and signaled the end of her first class, Lily felt good, amped up for her next and ready to do it all again.

Chapter 2

THE FIRST DAY OF THE semester was always Eva's favorite, but today she couldn't enjoy it as much as she usually did.

Five minutes of scrubbing at the stain on her blouse hadn't been enough to get it out entirely, and she'd had a question about it from every single class she'd taught. And as for the woman who'd caused it in the first place... well, that was like looking at a ghost.

It had been two years since Eva had last laid eyes on her ex, but Lily and Victoria seemed to share some similarities. Blonde hair, bright blue eyes, pale white skin and a full figure. Victoria would never be caught dead in a shirt like Lily's, but it had still been enough to make Eva do a double-take. Enough to make Eva react more viciously than she might have done were it anyone else.

No matter. Eva refused to let their encounter ruin the rest of her day.

Eva knew she had a reputation for being one of the toughest teachers in the school, yet that didn't stop those students she'd never taught from testing her limits, seeing how far they could push things before she snapped.

It was her fourth class of the day, and she'd handed out six detentions.

More were brewing as she watched her freshman honors students file into her room, talking animatedly with one another. If they thought Eva was going to give them an easy ride because she had them the period before lunch, they were sorely mistaken.

"Quiet, please." Eva rarely needed to raise her voice to take command of a room, and silence fell when she stood in front of the board. "I am Dr. Thomas, and for the next two semesters, we will be studying the four

pillars of biology: cells, genetics, ecology, and evolution. A lot of people consider biology to be the easiest of the sciences”—an opinion not helped by cramming the entire biology syllabus into their freshman year—“but I think you’ll soon learn it’s not the case.”

A hand raised at the front of the class.

“Yes?”

“What is the easiest? In your opinion?”

Eva wasn’t going to be drawn into a debate within the first five minutes. “They’re all on equal footing, but if any of you consider this class an easy ride, you’re in for a rude awakening. You’ve been placed in an honors class based on placement tests and teacher recommendations but make no mistake: if you don’t pull your weight, you will be moved. I don’t tolerate slackers. Understood?”

Twenty heads bobbed in unison.

Eva slipped her glasses onto her nose to take roll call, noting where each student was sitting as they answered. She prided herself on learning their names—and identifying any potential troublemakers—quickly.

“Another thing I don’t tolerate is people talking when I am,” Eva said when she was finished, leveling a glare at two kids in the back row of seats. One of them dropped their head, looking at the desk with pink cheeks, but the other stared right back at Eva.

Her first problem student.

Eva refrained from rubbing her palms together.

“Francesca, is it?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ‘Yes, ma’am’, or ‘Yes, doctor’, if you prefer.” Eva hadn’t spent six years slogging through a PhD program not to use the title that came with it, but she didn’t always use it in the classroom.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Do I need to move you elsewhere, or do you think you can manage to keep your mouth shut for the next forty minutes?”

“I’ll try my best.” Francesca smirked, leaning back in her chair like she was sitting at a restaurant with her friends. The logo of her jacket caught Eva’s attention—Gucci—and Eva tried not to generalize but her most difficult, entitled students were usually the ones with the richest parents.

“If you can’t manage it, you can spend an hour with me after school practicing.” Eva rose to her feet to stand beside the board, her PowerPoint presentation for the introductory lesson already on the screen. “Now, let’s get started, shall we? Who can give me the definition of a cell?”

Eva kept a close eye on Francesca throughout the rest of the class, expecting some pushback, but to her surprise, none came. Her dressing-down seemed to have scared her classmates, too, and Eva didn’t issue a single detention for the remainder of the period.

When the bell rang, Eva followed her students out into the hall. Lunch duty wasn’t something she particularly enjoyed, but it was a necessary part of the job. Eva garnered a few curious looks over the state of her shirt, and she folded her arms across her chest to hide the worst of the brown mark, a glare enough to silence any snickers sent her way.

Several other members of staff stood huddled together in groups, but Eva skirted around them. She didn’t make a habit of engaging in idle chit-chat with her colleagues, and was purposefully standoffish, careful to cultivate an attitude of do-not-approach to students and staff alike.

Eva was happiest on her own—had never seen the point in forming relationships with others when they always inevitably ended, leaving her lost and disappointed and wondering why she’d ever bothered in the first place—and made sure everyone else knew it.

She was on her third loop when another teacher joined the fray. Eva recognized the blouse of her department’s newest hire and rolled her eyes, because of course she shared a duty with Lily.

Just her luck.

Lily looked lost and out of place, hovering inside the doorway. Nerves showed in the way she wrung her hands as her eyes darted around the room. Young and fresh-faced, she didn’t look like she’d be the sternest, and the way she’d quailed under Eva’s glare earlier didn’t bode well for her.

When her eyes met Eva’s, a flicker of recognition passed across Lily’s face, but surely after their previous meeting she wouldn’t be stupid enough to approach.

Would she?

Eva watched and waited, adopting an air far from welcoming.

It didn’t have the effect she was hoping for, because much to her horror, Lily approached with a spring in her step and a hesitant smile on her face.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot before," Lily said, coming to a stop by Eva's shoulder. "I—"

"I don't think we did, actually." Eva chose to examine her nails rather than meet the other woman's gaze. It was a behavior more reminiscent of her students than of a thirty-five-year-old, and sure, Eva could entertain her, but Eva didn't need a friend—especially one who reminded her of her past—and if she humored Lily on her first day, she'd talk Eva's ear off in the weeks to come.

"Oh."

Eva glanced up. Lily looked crestfallen, but Eva refused to let it bother her. "If that was all...?" Eva raised an eyebrow and watched Lily's throat work as she swallowed.

"I'm sorry again about your blouse. Like I said before—I'll pay for the cost of dry-cleaning."

"I think you've done enough already, don't you?" A scrub with vinegar and a few rounds in the washing machine and Eva was confident it'd look as good as new. And it meant she wouldn't have to talk to Lily again.

"O-okay, then. See you around, I guess." Lily walked away, and Eva tried to ignore the defeated slump of her shoulders as she approached a different group of teachers.

She'd bounce back. Eva had met her type before: bright with enthusiasm and eager to please, but Eva didn't have the time nor energy to deal with it.

Not with what awaited her at home. Any nurturing or patient instinct—of which, admittedly, she already had little—was reserved for her mother, and the role of carer Eva had stepped into when she'd moved to High Grove from Washington D.C. two years ago.

She worked to pay the bills for them both, and that was all.

If the new hire thought she was going to change that, well.

She was mistaken.

* * *

Downtrodden after her attempt to make amends with Eva, Lily tried to shake off the memory as she slipped into the teacher's lounge, her stomach rumbling.

Inside, Mei and Andrew sat at the table, both smiling at Lily as she approached the refrigerator.

"How's your first day going?" Andrew said, once Lily had grabbed her pasta salad and joined them. "The kids behaving themselves?"

The kids weren't the ones she was having an issue with. "Yeah, they've been great. A few of them have tried it on, but I haven't had to hand out any detentions yet."

"Speaking of detentions," Mei said, sipping from her mug of coffee. "We're having a wager on how many kids Eva is going to keep after school tonight if you'd like to join. It's five dollars, winner takes all. We have guesses of five, seven and eight."

"So many?" Lily was shocked. "It's the first day."

"Oh, you're adorable." Mei patted the back of her hand. "You can go lower if you want."

"But I wouldn't," Andrew said. "It's usually high. She likes to set a precedent."

Lily could barely comprehend it. The most she'd ever had to keep behind was four. Then again, based on what Lily had seen so far, she wouldn't be surprised if Eva handed out detentions if the kids dared breathe too loudly. "How does she get away with it?"

"Because it works," Andrew said around a mouthful of his salad.

"Yeah, cause they're too scared of her to step out of line again," Mei said.

Andrew shrugged. "It's not my style, but you can't argue with the results. She doesn't have any issues with behavior, and we've had the best biology grades in years since she's been here."

"I know. It's annoying." Mei sighed, before turning her attention back toward Lily. "So, what's your guess?"

"Uh, twelve." If it seemed outlandish, neither of them commented. Mei made a note of it in her phone as Lily reached into her bag to see if she had a five-dollar bill in her purse. She did, and as she was handing it over the door opened behind her.

"Are you betting on detentions again?" Alisha said, making a beeline for the coffee machine. Lily felt her cheeks warm and wondered if this was supposed to be a secret, not wanting to get on the wrong side of Alisha on her first day.

Mei seemed nonplussed. "Uh-huh. What's your guess?"

“Considering I’ve heard her chew out at least six different kids, and we’re not yet halfway through the day... Let’s go with twelve.”

“You’re out of luck, boss, Lily already took that.”

“Good guess,” Alisha said, nodding at Lily. “I’ll have thirteen, then. How are you finding things, Lily?”

“Fine.” Lily knew it was still early, but she was enjoying her day so far. The kids were good, seemed eager to learn, and she was excited to dive in.

“How did you get into teaching, anyway?” Mei asked. “Was it always the plan?”

“Far from it. After I finished my degree I worked in industry for a while, at a pharmaceutical company.”

“Wow, that’s a change of pace. Why’d you switch careers?”

“I didn’t feel fulfilled, I guess. I always wanted to do something to make a difference, and I thought that job would, but... It’s disheartening to dedicate so much time to developing a drug with the potential to help thousands of people for it to fail at the first hurdle or get sold at extortionate prices so only the richest can afford it. I enjoyed being a tutor when I was at college, loved seeing students succeed, and I guess it spiraled from there. What about you all?”

Lily wasn’t surprised Mei answered first—she seemed the most talkative of the lot. “I always wanted to teach. Got my master’s in education and never looked back. Specializing in earth and physical sciences wasn’t part of the plan, but”—Mei shrugged—“it’s the way things worked out.”

“What did you want to teach?”

“I started out in elementary school, believe it or not.”

Lily scrunched her nose. High schoolers could be a nightmare, but she did not have the patience for younger kids. Plus, they were brutal.

“Yeah, I didn’t last long,” Mei said, lips twitching. “I was already certified to teach high school, so when a job for an earth and physical science teacher came up, I took it.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“God, too long.” Mei grinned as Alisha mock-glared at her. “Five years I think?”

“Yep.” Alisha joined them at the table, mug held between her palms. “I’ve been here ten, and Andrew you’re on your fourth year now, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh.”

Lily was impressed. At the school where she’d done her training, the longest anyone had stuck around was two years. “You have a high staff retention rate.”

“It’s all due to Alisha,” Mei said, and Andrew nodded in agreement. “Once you sign your contract, she never lets you leave. You’re stuck here forever now, Lily.”

“From what I’ve seen so far—which admittedly isn’t much—I think I’m okay with that.”

“We’ll change your mind soon enough.”

“Don’t scare her off,” Alisha said, but it was good-natured. “And don’t remind me how long I’ve been here, either. It makes me feel old.”

“You’re hardly old,” all three of them chimed in unison.

“Tell that to my creaky joints.”

“How did you become a teacher, Alisha?” Lily was eager to learn about her new colleagues—and to take some of the attention away from herself.

“I was a social worker for a few years. Spent a lot of time with a lot of different kids and seeing how many adults in their lives let them down—I don’t know. It’s like you said, Lily, about wanting to make a difference. To give them something stable. I went back to school to get my teacher’s license. They needed science teachers, so I became one.”

“My story isn’t as interesting,” Andrew said, when Lily moved her gaze to him. “I was working at an energy company and hated it. My brother was a teacher and seemed a hell of a lot happier than I was, so I looked into it, and here I am.”

“Here we all are,” Mei said, leaning over to throw her trash away. “What made you choose Greenfield, Lily? Are you from nearby?”

“I grew up a few towns over. I left for college, but my family never moved so when I found this job listing it made sense to move back. My sister recently had a baby, too, so it means I’ll be able to spend more time with them.” They didn’t need to know the other reason she’d wanted to leave Miami—to escape the memories of the woman she’d thought she was going to spend the rest of her life with.

“That’s sweet. Do you have kids of your own? A husband?”

“Uh, no to both.” A forever no, to the husband, but she wasn’t sure she was ready to out herself to her new colleagues yet.

“Give the poor woman some time to breathe without being interrogated, Mei,” Alisha said, and Mei flushed.

“Sorry. It’s been a while since we had any fresh blood in the department. Eva was the last, and you can guess how well my questions went with her.”

“Like a lead balloon?” Lily said.

“It’s been two years and we still don’t know anything about her. If the kids didn’t need to know her last name, I think that would be a secret, too. The only thing we do know is she used to be some hotshot professor at Georgetown.”

Lily’s interest was piqued. “And she teaches here?”

“Uh-huh. There are all kinds of rumors about how it happened, but no one knows for sure. Or if they do”—Mei glanced toward Alisha—“they won’t say.”

“I’ve told you a million times: I have no idea why she left Georgetown.”

Lunch passed too quickly, and soon Lily was back in her classroom and welcoming her final class of the day.

Once it had finished, Lily relaxed back in her chair, revitalized after her first proper day of teaching. All the students she’d met so far were lovely, and Lily was looking forward to getting to know them better as the year wore on, ready to challenge them and watch them succeed.

A light knock sounded on her door, and Lily turned to see Mei. “Hey. We’re about to see who won our bet if you’d like to join us.”

Lily had forgotten all about it in the excitement of atomic structure. She followed Mei out the door and found Andrew and an older white man she assumed was Brandon standing in the hall.

“Okay, I’m going in,” Mei whispered, tiptoeing toward the classroom at the end of the hall, and Lily pressed her lips together because she looked ridiculous.

Lily edged closer with everyone else, and when Mei reached Eva’s door, she ducked to one side, her lips moving as she counted the kids within through the glass panels.

“Damn,” Mei said when she’d finished, before retreating to the safety of the group and reaching into the pocket of her blazer. “Okay, the grand total is...twelve, so, newbie, you win.”

Mei handed Lily an envelope, and Brandon clapped his hands together.

“Beginner’s luck.” He had a wide smile, his beard peppered with gray. “Nice to meet you, by the way, seeing as no one is going to introduce us.”

Mei pulled a face. “We had more important things to attend to! And that’s Alisha’s job, anyway. It’s not my fault she’s in a meeting. What’re you gonna spend it on, Lily?”

Lily glanced at the envelope. “No idea. Treats for the department, maybe?”

Brandon grinned. “I like you—you’re going to fit in great around here. Right.” He slapped his hands against his thighs. “Speaking of treats, I’d better get going. There’s cake in the math office with my name on it.”

“They always have cake over there.” Mei was remorseful as she watched him go. “And we never have any.”

“You know, if you bought some there would be,” Andrew said, and Mei elbowed him in the side.

“Stop making sense.”

Lily smiled at their bickering, and, as she slipped her winnings into the pocket of her slacks, she hoped Brandon was right: she did want to fit in.

* * *

Twelve students were forced to spend an hour in silence with Eva at the end of the first day.

None were happy about it, but no one dared miss it, not wanting to face her wrath. Eva was satisfied, as she watched the last of them hurry out the door, she’d well and truly set a decent precedent for the year ahead.

She was quick to follow them out. A teacher’s work might never truly be done—with something to grade, parents to call, or lessons to plan—but she was needed at home, and there was no reason she couldn’t do it there.

Eva was the first of the department to leave, the lights on in all the other classrooms as she stepped out into the hall. A janitor mopped the floors near the main entrance, and Eva nodded to him, skirting around the edge of the wet floor and swiping her badge to exit. Eva slid behind the wheel of her Mercedes and the engine purred to life.

Home was forty minutes away, but Eva liked the drive, using it to clear her mind. Listening to true crime podcasts passed the time, and Eva was soon pulling into her driveway. The lights were on in the front room, the sound of the television filtering into her ears as she unlocked the door.

A black Spaniel rushed to greet her, and Eva bent to scratch behind his ears. "Hi, Franklin." His tail thudded against the wall, and he followed Eva closely when she stepped into the living room. "Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart. How was your day?" Her mother was in her favorite position—in front of the television, with Jeopardy! Eva pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Same old, same old." It wasn't an overly enthusiastic response, but she didn't find teaching high schoolers to be particularly stimulating. She liked the hours, though—not many other jobs would allow her to be home by four. "How was yours? How's your pain today?"

"So-so."

Eva searched her face, knowing her mother had a tendency to downplay her condition.

"I had my PT with Jennifer today which went well."

"Good. Did she give you some more exercises to do?"

"Yes."

"And are you going to do them?"

Her mother glanced at Eva from her wheelchair, twinkle in her eye. "Yes, nurse."

"If I was your nurse, I'd be a hell of a lot sterner with you than your current ones are. They let you get away with too much."

"And you worry about me too much."

"Someone's got to."

"What happened to your shirt?" Her mother frowned, plucking at the stain with her fingers.

"I spilled coffee on it. It'll come out." Eva would make sure of it. "Are you hungry, or can dinner wait until after I've been for a run?"

"I can wait. Or I can start it without you."

"And set the house on fire?"

Her mother huffed. "I managed without you living here for seventeen years, you know."

"Yes, and I have no idea how you survived. Besides, I like to cook."

"But you do so much for me already."

Eva squeezed her mother's shoulder gently. "You know I don't mind. How about we cook together tonight?"

"Okay."

"I'll be back soon—do not start without me." Eva gave her one last squeeze before jogging up the stairs, swapping her pencil skirt and stained blouse for leggings, a sports bra and a loose-fitting top.

Back downstairs, she pulled on her trusty running shoes, lacing them with Franklin peering at her hopefully. "Come on."

Eva reached for his harness, and she slipped it onto his wriggling frame with practiced ease. Her earbuds sat on the table by the front door, and, once they were in and connected to her phone, her carefully curated running playlist sounding in her ears, Eva stepped out the front door with Franklin at her side.

She shivered as the cool air hit her skin, but Eva knew she'd soon be grateful for it. Once they were at the end of the street Eva broke into a light jog, enjoying the wind on her face. Eva pushed herself faster, until her lungs were burning. Running had always been her release, the sound of her feet pounding on the sidewalk bringing her a sense of calm nothing else could.

Wary of staying out too long, she turned back after fifteen minutes. Her mother was still by the television when she returned, but soon joined Eva in the kitchen, the wheels of her wheelchair squeaking on the linoleum.

"What do you want?" Eva poked her head into the refrigerator. She needed to go shopping—the shelves were getting bare. "Salmon pasta?"

"Sure."

Eva passed her mother the bag of fusilli and tried not to be obvious about keeping an eye on her when she moved out of her chair to stand at the counter, checking how steady she was on her feet.

"I'm not fragile, you know. I'm not at the point where I can't stand yet."

Clearly, Eva hadn't been subtle, and she averted her gaze, concentrating on preparing the salmon. "And hopefully you never will be." Her mother's multiple sclerosis had worsened in the two years since Eva had come to help look after her, but the doctors were optimistic about her long-term prognosis.

Something her mother found hard to share.

And Eva understood it. The two of them were similar, particularly when it came to their independence, and Eva, too, would hate becoming reliant on another person. Her mother had vehemently resisted the idea of Eva moving back in—but they shared their stubbornness, too, and Eva had given her little choice in the matter.

Moving from Washington D.C. to the suburbs of Chicago—giving up her dream job and her girlfriend in the process—had never been part of her grand plan, but Eva didn't regret it.

She'd missed her mother when she'd been across the country. Missed nights like this, a pan sizzling on the stove, her mother chattering away about her day while Eva stirred with a wooden spoon.

"Angela has a neurologist appointment on Thursday so she's coming over tomorrow instead," her mother said when they sat to eat. "You can stay late at school if you like."

"Okay. Are you going out somewhere?"

"No, there's a new Netflix show we want to watch."

Eva shook her head. She worried about her mother spending too much time indoors, growing more reclusive as she deteriorated. Joining an MS support group was supposed to help, not encourage it, though she was glad her mother was making friends.

"Will you remind me how to set it up again before you go to bed?"

"I've shown you a million times, Mom."

"I know, but I always forget."

"Want me to write you some instructions? Step by step, like I give my students when they're struggling with a problem?" Eva said, laughing as her mother's eyes narrowed into a signature Thomas glare. "I'll take that as a no."

"As you should. Anyway, you can't get on my case about not getting out more. When was the last time you went somewhere other than work?"

"I got those new toys for Franklin at the weekend."

"I meant with another person, Eva."

Great. This again.

"You've been here for two years, now, and as far as I'm aware, have only spent time with me. When's the last time you went on a date?"

"Mother—"

"And what about friends, Eva? You used to be out every night."

"When I was a teenager. Things are different now."

"Still. I don't need a babysitter twenty-four-seven. You need a life, Eva." She had her best no-nonsense voice on, and Eva blinked at her across the table, forgetting all about her half-eaten pasta.

This was not the dinner time conversation she'd been expecting.

To be honest, it wasn't one she'd ever been expecting—her mother wasn't usually this pushy.

Eva knew she shouldn't have let her mother and Angela watch *Love Is Blind*.

"I know you don't. But I'm happy with the way things are, Mom. I don't need more than I already have."

"But aren't you lonely? How long has it been since Victoria?"

Her mother knew exactly how long it had been since her last breakup, considering it was the distance when Eva had moved to Chicago that had been their demise.

It was the second time in one day Eva had thought of Victoria, and it made her lip curl. Instead of answering, Eva turned the question on her mother. "And what about you? It's been thirty years since Dad left." And never came back. Was bringing it up a low blow? Yes, but Eva wanted to end this conversation as quickly as possible. "Aren't you lonely?"

"That's different."

Eva raised an eyebrow, and her mother sighed.

"It is, and besides, I have friends. People to talk to."

"And I have work." Sure, teaching teenagers about the wonders of biology wasn't the same as venting to a friend over cocktails, but it worked for her. "I'm fine with the way things are, Mom." Eva reached across the table to pat the back of her hand, trying to ease the frown on her mother's face. "I am. So can we drop this please?"

"Fine."

She didn't look particularly happy about it, though.

Somehow, Eva doubted she'd heard the last of it.

Chapter 3

IF EVA HAD BEEN IN charge of the school schedule, she'd strike off homeroom completely. The fifteen minutes she spent taking attendance and making announcements could be put to much better use—or easily incorporated into the first class of the day, which was how they'd used to do things when she was in high school.

Unfortunately, her opinions on the timetable would never be sought after. At least she had a decent mix of kids in front of her—twelve sophomores, all of whom she'd taught the year before and knew exactly how she liked things.

When the bell rang, they all scrambled to gather their belongings, ready to disperse across the school for a day of learning.

"Could you wait behind, Carly?" Eva called over the sound of books being shoved into bags. "I'd like a word."

"Ooh, you're in trouble."

"That isn't a helpful comment, Sean," Eva said, and Carly laughed when his cheeks turned pink. "Would you like to be in trouble?"

"No, ma'am." Sean ducked his head and slouched to the door, and Eva waited until it had closed behind him before turning her attention to the young woman at the front of the room.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?" Eva said, folding her arms across her chest and watching Carly scowl down at the floor. "Your whereabouts after school tonight, for example?" Silence. Eva sighed. "It's the second day of the semester, Carly. Detention already?"

“Didn’t you have like, twenty kids in detention last night?” Carly fired back, glancing away from the floor to offer Eva a look of defiance.

Eva pinned her with a glare—an attitude wasn’t something she tolerated, which Carly knew all too well.

“Sorry. Still got my back up, I guess.”

“What did you do?” The e-mail asking Eva to have a quiet word hadn’t given her any specifics, but for a weeks’ worth of detentions, it must have been bad.

“Told Mr. Mayhew to shut the eff up.”

Eva pressed her fingers to her temples. “I know you have an issue with him.” And most men, in truth. After spending ten years of her life living under the thumb of a physically and emotionally abusive father, Eva didn’t blame Carly. But Greenfield High had rules—rules that meant disrespecting members of staff had severe consequences. “But you can’t go around saying things like that.”

“He wasn’t supposed to hear me. Got goddamn bat ears, doesn’t he?”

“Carly, you’re a sophomore now. They won’t be tolerant of your behavior for much longer.” The only reason she hadn’t been expelled already was because Eva kept going to bat for her. As something of an expert on shitty fathers—though nowhere near to the same extent as the things Eva had read in Carly’s file—Eva had something of a soft spot for Carly, a desire to protect her and see her succeed. If Eva could offer Carly a safe space, a comforting presence in a world that had been so cruel, make a difference in someone’s life, then this job was worth it.

“I know. I’ll try and be better.”

“Good.”

Carly turned to leave, but Eva stopped her after a quick glance at the clock. They still had two minutes before the first class of the day officially started.

“Ah, ah, not so fast. Why’d you do it?”

“Because he was annoying me. Asked me a question and I didn’t know the answer. Apparently, that was unacceptable, so...” Carly shrugged, staring at her shoe as she scuffed it along the floor, and Eva suspected there was more to the story.

“How was your summer?”

Chemistry

“Fine.” A pause, Carly shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She bit at her bottom lip, something weighing on her mind, and Eva waited, hoping Carly trusted her enough to know she could speak freely. “My mom moved her new boyfriend in.”

Ah, there it was. The reason for the sullenness and attitude problem. Not that Eva could blame her. Carly clung to routine and consistency and having a new man inside the home couldn’t be easy for her.

“What’s he like?”

Another shrug. “He’s okay, I guess.” Well, it wasn’t exactly a glowing review. “Better than my sperm donor.” Her face creased into a scowl. “But I wish he wasn’t always around.”

Eva’s protective streak sparked to life. “Is he making your life difficult?”

Carly shook her head.

“Are you still seeing the school counselor?”

“Twice a week.”

“And they know what’s going on at home?”

Carly rolled her eyes skyward. “I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t keep something like that from them.”

“Good.” Eva made a mental note to follow up with the counselor anyway—if she didn’t report her concerns and something bad happened later down the line, she’d never be able to forgive herself. “And you know you can come to me about anything, yes?”

Carly offered Eva a rare smile. “I know.”

“Let me write you a note to let your next teacher know why you’re running late.” Eva scrawled one quickly, handing it over as the bell rang. “Take care, Carly.”

Carly hurried out of the room, and Eva watched her go.

She’d been Eva’s brightest student the previous year, persevering despite the bad hand she’d been dealt, and Eva wasn’t going to let her slip because she no longer taught her. She’d just have to make more effort to keep up with her progress.

* * *

Lily’s first week flew by.

Aside from one or two kids who decided to test her limits, she’d had few problems. When the bell rang at the end of Friday last period, Lily watched

her students scramble for the exits before leaving her room, planning to grab a coffee to take with her to the mandatory department meeting starting in five minutes.

When she pushed open the door of the teacher's lounge to be faced with Eva's back, Lily nearly reversed out the room. Aside from brief glimpses of her in the hall, Lily hadn't seen Eva since their lunch duty on Monday. She didn't know if that was normal, or if Eva was avoiding Lily in particular, but considering her aversion for human interaction, Lily wouldn't be surprised if it was the former.

Eva didn't notice her until she'd finished stirring her coffee, turning around with her mug between her palms. Lily could usually tell a lot about a person from the mug they chose, but Eva's—plain black—didn't tell her much at all.

Lily supposed, considering her blank expression and the coolness of her gaze, that made a lot of sense.

Lily didn't realize she was staring, or blocking the exit, until Eva paused in front of her, arching a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Do you make it a habit to stand in doorways? Do you want to splash this coffee on me, too?"

"Oh. Sorry." Lily shuffled out of the way, and Eva stormed past her without another word. "Always a pleasure," Lily said once the door had shut behind her. She hurried to pour her own coffee, not wanting to be late for her first proper meeting.

Alisha wasn't there when Lily shouldered open the door of her room, notebook tucked under one arm and mug held in her other hand. Andrew, Brandon and Mei sat together on one end of the front row, and Eva sat alone at the other, laptop open as she typed furiously.

Mei smiled warmly, and Lily slipped into the seat beside her.

"Hey, newbie. You made it to the end of the week—congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Hate it here yet?"

"I've had a good week."

"Give it time."

"What have I told you about scaring her off?" Alisha said, overhearing their conversation as she entered the room. Lily was surprised when she dropped into the center seat of the row, instead of sitting behind her desk. "I promise it'll be a quick one today."

Chemistry

Lily grabbed her pen, ready to take notes.

“First and foremost, I’ve been told to remind you all about the training opportunities the school runs. They’re on the staff portal and can be accessed any time. Also, you all need to familiarize yourself with the special education needs profiles of every student you teach, so you know the best way to support them. If you think something needs to be added, please bring it to my attention. Same if you have any other concerns about a student. In addition, we’ve had a number of students express the desire to use gender-diverse pronouns. This is a gentle reminder to take care when addressing your classes, and to check if anyone you teach would prefer to be addressed with the gender-diverse pronouns of their choice. There’s a list of students on the staff portal.”

No one else seemed to be writing anything, but Lily didn’t let it deter her. She’d rather be prepared.

“We need to work out a schedule for the STEM and science clubs starting in two weeks’ time. STEM won’t be each week, but science will be every Wednesday. Does anyone want to volunteer for the first session?”

“I will.”

If anyone else was surprised by Eva’s offer, they didn’t show it. Maybe she wanted to get it out of the way.

“Okay.” Alisha made a note on a piece of paper.

“I’ll do the one after,” Mei said. “I thought of some fun things for them to do over the summer.”

“I can do a week.” It wasn’t something Lily had done before, but she wanted to throw herself into her role at this school with both feet. “Would I be able to run my ideas by you first, though?”

“Of course you can.” Alisha’s smile was reassuring.

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Mei said, chewing on the end of her pen. “Your predecessor made the poor kids copy out of a textbook on chemistry weeks.”

“I can think of something more fun than that.”

“Not too fun,” Alisha said. “I don’t want them doing anything dangerous. Or messy.”

“You made a giant mess one time,” Mei muttered under her breath, and Lily decided she was going to get the story about that later.

Alisha swiftly got them back on track, filling in the rest of the schedule with everyone else's names. "That's all the official business we needed to get through. Is there anything else anyone wanted to add? Any issues, behavioral or otherwise?" She paused. No one answered. "Okay, well if anything comes up you know where to find me. I think we'll leave it there—I told you it would be a short meeting."

They gathered their things, and Lily wasn't surprised when Eva was the first to leave.

"Has Mei told you about our unofficial Friday tradition, Lily?" Alisha asked, moving to the front of the room to slip her laptop into her bag.

"After-work drinks? She did, but I've already agreed to go to my mom's for dinner tonight. I'll join you next week, though."

"All right, have a good weekend."

"You too." Lily waved good-bye to Alisha and the others. "I'll see you all on Monday."

Returning to her own room, Lily was about to pack away her things when she noticed a missed call on her phone. Lily swallowed when she read the name. Being so busy with the new job and putting the finishing touches on her new home had meant she hadn't had much time to dwell on the past, and the woman she'd left behind in Miami.

Now it all came flooding back in a rush of memories, her heart feeling like it was caught in a vice. She and Sophie hadn't spoken in nearly two months—what was she doing calling her now?

And more importantly—was curiosity enough for Lily to call her back?

To hell with it. Lily lifted the phone to her ear. It might be important.

"Lily." Sophie saying her name didn't fill her with the same warmth it used to. "I thought you were ignoring me."

"Thought about it." Lily dropped into the chair behind her desk and worried at her bottom lip. "What do you want?"

"You moved."

Not an accusation, exactly, but there was an undertone to Sophie's voice that made Lily bristle. "Yeah, I did."

"You loved that apartment."

Lily closed her eyes and leaned her head back, trying not to remember the shape of Sophie's face, the way her brow crinkled when she frowned. "Yeah." It had been her first place, and she'd made it her own, and now

she had to start all over again. “But I couldn’t stay there. Not after...” Lily trailed off, still struggling to think about the demise of their relationship, the new “friend” Sophie had made at work that she insisted Lily was crazy to be jealous of. “How do you even know?”

“I ran into Jessica yesterday. She told me you quit your job and sold your place. I—I’m sorry, Lily.” It wasn’t the first apology Lily had heard, but it was the first time Sophie had actually sounded contrite. “I didn’t—I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Lily scoffed, even as she was blinking back tears. “If you didn’t want to hurt me, you wouldn’t have done what you did.”

“I know. I fucked up, okay? I really am sorry.”

“If you’re expecting my forgiveness, you’re not going to get it.”

“I don’t. I just...I just wanted to know you were okay. And I know I don’t have any right to know, and I shouldn’t have called, but I—I miss you.”

“Don’t,” Lily said, voice sharp as a tack. “You made your bed, Sophie. You have to lie in it.” Lily glanced at the time—she really ought to be going, or she’d be late for dinner. “I’m fine, and I’m happy where I am now.”

Happy to be away from Sophie. Away from any painful memories. A fresh start was exactly what Lily needed. “Please don’t call me again.”

Lily hung up before Sophie could reply, her breaths coming quick and fast. Closing her eyes, Lily concentrated on the ticking of the clock and tried to calm herself down. She hated that another person could have this effect on her—someone she trusted, someone who had promised, on late nights tangled up in the sheets, that they’d be together forever.

But she refused to let Sophie have any power over her anymore. Lily shoved her things into her bag and headed for the car. Eva’s classroom door caught her eye as she stepped into the hall, and Lily wondered what Eva would do in her situation.

Not let Sophie walk all over her, for one. Eva wouldn’t entertain her in the slightest, and maybe Lily could do with taking a page out of Eva’s book. Determined, Lily pulled out her phone and blocked Sophie’s number, just in case she did call again, and tried to push all thoughts of her ex from her mind as she slid behind the wheel of her car.

The forty-five-minute drive gave her time to clear her head, and Lily felt better once she’d parked in the drive behind her sister’s car.

Pulling open the door to her childhood home, Lily was greeted by the smell of cooking. She followed the sound of quiet voices into the kitchen. Her mom stood at the stove stirring a pot, and Daisy sat at the table with baby Emma cradled in her arms.

Her mom dropped her wooden spoon in favor of wrapping Lily in a hug. "Hi, sweetheart. How are you? How's the new house? Did your first week go okay?"

"Jesus Christ, Mom. Give her a chance to sit before you start the inquisition." Daisy rolled her eyes, and Lily kissed her sister's cheek.

"I'm excited to see her, is that a crime?"

"You saw her like five days ago," Daisy said, and Lily grabbed a glass of water before settling into the chair next to her. She waved at Emma, who was watching her with wide blue eyes. "You're never this excited to see me."

"I'm always equally excited to see both of you."

"How come you never show it?" Daisy winked at Lily, enjoying watching their mom get more flustered.

"Enough." Their mom pointed at Daisy threateningly with her wooden spoon. "I'm still waiting for an answer, Lily."

"I'm fine, the house is fine, and work is—"

"—fine?" Daisy said, and Lily elbowed her in the side.

"Work is great, I'm enjoying it."

"Good. Your colleagues are nice?"

Lily thought of Eva's cold indifference and was glad she was the exception and not the norm. "Most of them. I think I'm going to fit in well there."

"You look happy," Daisy said, once their mom had turned away to tend to the food.

"Yeah, I am." Lily finally felt like she was where she belonged, fulfilled, professionally, in a way she hadn't before. "How are you, anyway?"

"I'd be better if this one"—she poked Emma's nose—"would sleep through the night. But otherwise, I'm good. I joined a mommie's group so I can have some adult conversation during the day. Would you mind holding her for a sec? I need to pee."

"Sure." Emma was placed carefully into her arms. She stared at Lily with her fist in her mouth. "What's for dinner, Mom?"

“Chicken casserole. It’ll be ready when your father gets home, which should be any minute.”

“Is the garage still doing okay?” Neither Lily nor Daisy had ever had a penchant for the family business, but she had fond memories of helping out at the weekends.

“Business is booming.”

Daisy rejoined them and set the table. “Have you told Lily about the new mechanic yet? She’s hot.”

“After what happened the last time you tried to set me up, I think I’ll keep my distance.”

“Okay, that was an anomaly. Izzy seemed perfectly normal—how were we supposed to know she was a stalker?” Daisy said, and Lily shook her head. “Anyway, that was years ago. My matchmaking skills have improved.”

“Have they?”

“Yes. I’ve set up two of my friends in the last few months.”

“And neither of them has been murdered yet?”

Daisy smacked her on the back of the head.

“Ow! I’m holding your daughter here, you know, you should be more careful.”

“Please, she’s fine. Aren’t you, my little angel?” Daisy leaned in and blew a raspberry against Emma’s cheek. “Your auntie Lily wouldn’t dare drop you. I’d never let her hear the end of it. And we’ve gotten off-track—we were talking about the hot mechanic.”

“No, you were talking about the hot mechanic, and I was—”

Daisy spoke right over her. “She’s called Anna. She’s thirty. I know you like older women—”

“Two years is hardly an older woman, Daisy.”

“Still.”

“I don’t need a date.” Lily still felt raw from what had happened with Sophie. There was no way she was ready to put herself back out there yet.

“I beg to differ. You know what they say about the best way to get over someone.” Daisy wiggled her eyebrows, and Lily shook her head.

“I am over her.”

Daisy didn’t look convinced. “Sure you are.”

“Oh, girls.” Their mom came to stand between them, resting a hand on their shoulders. “It’s so nice having you both home. I was starting to miss the constant bickering.”

“You love our constant bickering,” Daisy said, sitting beside Lily. “It keeps you young. You got any plans for the weekend, Lily?”

“I don’t want to meet the mechanic.”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “That’s not why I was asking. Alex doesn’t get back from his business trip until Sunday, so do you wanna keep me company tomorrow?”

“You mean help you look after the baby? Yeah, sure.” It wasn’t like Lily had anything better to do.

The front door opened, heavy footsteps sounding on the wooden floor a moment later, and their father appeared in the kitchen doorway, his face streaked with grease. “Well if it isn’t all my favorite women in the same room.”

“Flatterer,” her mom said, fond smile on her face. Lily loved that after thirty-five years together they still looked besotted by one another.

“That’s me. Hi Daisy, Lily.” He bent to kiss their cheeks. “Have I got time to shower before dinner?”

“As long as you’re quick.”

“I always am.” He trudged toward the stairs, and Lily handed Emma over to Daisy so she could settle her in her carrier while they ate. Lily helped her mom plate their food, then sat between her mom and her sister. Her dad soon joined them, and the night flew by, Lily reveling in the familiarity of being home.

* * *

“Do you want wheat or rye bread?” Eva glanced at the bakery selection with her hands on her hips. Receiving no answer from her mother, Eva nudged the back of her mother’s chair. “Mom?”

“Hmm?”

Eva turned to look at her, finding her attention was elsewhere, fixed on something further down the aisle. “Wheat or rye? What are you looki—” Eva froze when she followed the path of her mother’s gaze.

Lily Cross stood a few feet away, looking like a deer in the headlights when her eyes met Eva’s.

Lily's thumb was trapped by the tiny fingers of the baby strapped to her chest. At only a few weeks old, there was no way she could be Lily's. Her niece, maybe, based on the similarities between Lily and the woman who was pushing a cart next to her, chattering away and seemingly oblivious to Lily's sudden silence.

"Do you know that woman?" Eva's mother said, cutting through her thoughts. "She keeps looking over here and I don't recognize her."

"We work together," Eva said, her words curt, and she shoved a loaf of rye bread into the shopping basket, tired of waiting for an answer.

"You do?" Her mother looked elated, and Eva smothered a groan. "Let's go and say hello."

"Let's not." Eva grabbed the handles of her chair, keeping her in place, when her mother tried to wheel away.

"Why?"

Eva sighed, regretting the decision to take her mother to the grocery store with her. She thought it would be good for her mother to get out of the house—now Eva wished she'd left her at home. "Because I don't want to."

"Very well."

Eva steered them back the way they came to avoid Lily—and to ensure her mother couldn't involve herself in Eva's business—but they ran into her on the next aisle, and the next, the woman damn near inescapable.

It was the first time Eva had ever seen someone from work—student or otherwise—off-campus. The reason she hadn't chosen a school closer to home had been to avoid a situation like this, a run-in with someone while Eva was out minding her own business.

Especially Lily.

Eva couldn't pinpoint what, exactly, it was about the other woman that grated on her nerves, but she'd been avoiding her all week. Successfully. But there Lily was, at the other end of the coffee aisle, laughing at something her sister said.

Did she live nearby? Did her sister? Was this going to become a regularity? Running into Lily at the grocery store, or at the pharmacy, or at the gym?

Eva hoped not.

Her skin itched with the feeling of being watched. Eva wondered, as Lily's sister glanced over at her, what Lily was saying. Was she telling her all about the demon biology teacher at Greenfield? Was she trying to work out why someone so heartless would spend their weekend wheeling a woman around a grocery store?

"Eva!" Her mother sounded annoyed, and Eva suspected it wasn't the first time she'd tried to get her attention.

"Not nice being ignored, is it?" Eva winced when her mother rolled over her foot in response. "What did you say?"

"I was asking if you would get me a pack of those caramel lattes." Her mother pointed to one of the top shelves. "But you seemed too busy staring at that young lady over there to hear me."

"Will you lower your voice?" Eva glanced toward Lily, but she appeared to be well out of earshot.

"I'm just saying. You seem awfully distracted."

Eva ignored her in favor of leaning on her toes to reach for the coffee her mother wanted.

"She's pretty."

Eva nearly brought the whole display down on top of her. "What?"

Her mother blinked innocently at her as Eva dropped the coffee into the cart. "Don't you think so?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"Looks a bit like Victoria."

Eva sighed, because she'd been trying hard not to remember that. Though the more she saw of Lily, the less she saw the similarities. Physically, yes, but everything else? The bright-eyed innocence and boundless enthusiasm? They couldn't be more different.

"If you squint, I suppose." Eva glanced at her shopping list to avoid her mother's probing gaze. "I think that's everything, unless you thought of anything else?"

Eva was relieved when her mother shook her head. It meant they could go to the checkout, and her unexpected Saturday morning torture would come to an end.

Lily ended up on the checkout next to them.

Eva ground her teeth.

Chemistry

Was the cashier being purposefully slow? Were they aware Eva was in a hurry?

It felt like it took an age for them to scan everything, and Eva willed the worker packing their bags to go as fast as humanly possible. She relaxed once they were outside. It was a beautiful day, and Eva wasn't going to let her mother get away with spending the rest of it indoors.

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CHEMISTRY

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