

7 DAYS A WEEK

A NOVEL

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For Mayra and Aanya, the best little sisters anyone could ask for.

And for Gaurika, my sister by heart, who believed this story deserved to live in the world.

Playlist



Was It Real – Ben Rodrigues

Antichrist – The 1975

Homing – Yoke Lore

Love Me Not – Ravyn Lenae

Line Without a Hook – Ricky Montgomery

Good To Be – Mark Ambor

Mystery Of Love – Sufjan Stevens

Attention – Kevian Kraemer

Sky Is The Limit – Mark Ambor

Prologue



I was in the wrong room.

And I didn't realise it until it was too late to quietly sneak out without drawing attention to myself.

I don't know why I stayed. Maybe because my head was still foggy from the last few months—the breakup memories swirling like static, appetite barely returning, sleep always thin. At that moment, I only cared about walking the hallways of my dream university: the London School of Economics.

It was quiet here. Fewer people. A bit more serious-looking. I flipped through my pamphlet, waiting for the guest speaker.

"Wrong room?" a voice asked.

I blinked, startled. "Sorry?"

"You're holding a pamphlet for Economics and Business, but this is orientation for the Interdisciplinary Humanities and Critical Theory programme."

"Oh," I said. Then, "crap."

He laughed, the kind of laugh that made it impossible not to smile back. "Stay. You might like it. Or at least the company."

Contents



Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	13
Chapter 4.....	19
Chapter 5.....	23
Chapter 6.....	30
Chapter 7.....	39
Chapter 8.....	46
Chapter 9.....	52
Chapter 10.....	59
Chapter 11.....	65
Chapter 12.....	72
Chapter 13.....	78
Chapter 14.....	84
Chapter 15.....	92
Chapter 16.....	99
Chapter 17.....	107
Chapter 18.....	118
Chapter 19.....	124
Chapter 20.....	132

Chapter 21	138
Chapter 22	146
Chapter 23	152
Chapter 24	158
Chapter 25	164
Chapter 26	170
Epilogue	176
Acknowledgement	178

Chapter 1



Noah

I saw her sitting there, a confused but beautiful stranger. She looked like the type who'd be clever and popular. And, of course, she was clever — she was thinking of applying to LSE.

I noticed the pamphlet in her hands. Economics and Business.

For a moment, I didn't want to tell her she was in the wrong room. *What if she leaves?* But it was the only way to start a conversation.

She looked flustered when I told her this was the Interdisciplinary Humanities and Critical Theory programme. But she stayed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Lily," she said. Calm. Gentle. Like the name was made for her.

"As beautiful as a lily," I blurted. Then, grinning: "That's my favourite flower now."

I think she blushed.

Orientation hadn't even properly started, but she was already the highlight of my day.

As we stepped out of the room, I asked, "So, are you thinking of applying here?"

She glanced around the campus buildings. "Maybe. I'm not sure yet. I thought I wanted Economics and Business, but this course seemed... interesting. Intense."

I grinned. "Or maybe you just felt the irresistible charm of my presence."

She hugged her folder closer. There was something in her posture — not shy, exactly, but heavy.

"I've been sketching all day just to stay present," she admitted. "Helps with... stuff."

"Stuff?" I echoed gently.

"You know. Overthinking. Existing. Everything."

"Doodling to survive. Respect," I said.

She hesitated, then showed me the margins of her folder. Tiny sketches — shapes, vines, a flower curling on the page.

"They're beautiful," I told her. "Oh, I'm Noah, by the way."

"Lily," she repeated.

I lifted my phone slightly. "Can I...?"

She nodded, took it, and saved her number as *Lily – wrong room girl*.

"I'm staying at King's Cross, just until the interviews are over," she said.

"No way. I live there too. Maybe we'll bump into each other again."

"Maybe," she said softly.

Even though I didn't want to, we parted ways.

The campus was quieter than I expected for the first day of orientation. Maybe the serious vibe of LSE had pressed the chatter out of the air. Around me, a handful of students shuffled past, their footsteps muffled by thick carpet and the

dull hum of overhead lights. Outside, the grey London sky threatened rain, the drizzle making the stone buildings glisten like glass.

I knew I wanted to apply here. I knew I'd do whatever it took to get in.

Later that night, I found myself staring at her contact. Should I text? What would I even say? In the end, I went with the simplest option.

Hey.

And then I waited, every notification sounding louder than usual.

When her reply finally came, I tried not to respond too quickly. I failed miserably.

While texting her, I couldn't get her face out of my head. Those green eyes. That laugh.

I wanted to call her. Would that be too much? Too soon? I didn't care. I needed to hear her voice again.

She answered on the second ring.

"Hey," she said.

That one word — it sounded perfect in her voice.

"You sound tired," I said.

"I am," she admitted. "But it's a good tired. My brain's been overstimulated all day."

"I get that. New places do that to you. Especially when you wander into the wrong room."

She laughed. A laugh you'd want to bottle and carry around in your pocket.

We talked for a while, as if we'd known each other longer than a day. Orientation. Campus. Music. Her sketches.

Then the air shifted.

"I've been a little off lately," she said quietly. "Mentally, physically. There was someone before. Four years. High school sweethearts. It ended a few months ago."

"Damn. That's... long."

"Yeah."

I could hear it in her voice — the ache of someone still stitching themselves back together.

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

She exhaled. "It's okay. I think I needed to say it out loud. The only problem is I'll be looking for a piece of him in every guy I meet now."

"No," I teased gently. "Now you've met me, you'll look for *me* in every guy. I've set the bar."

She laughed again.

I asked if she'd eaten.

"Not really," she admitted. "I can't keep food in. Not on purpose. It just... doesn't stay."

"Have you struggled with that before?" I asked, careful.

"Yeah. It used to be worse. My ex helped a lot, but after the breakup it came back."

"I don't want to say something cliché like 'you'll be fine,'" I said. "But I do want you to know I'm here."

A pause. Then: "Thank you, Noah."

"Have you at least been drinking water?"

She laughed softly. "Barely."

"Alright then. Maybe start with something light. A smoothie? Yoghurt? Don't think of it as calories or punishment. Just kindness to your body."

"I could try a smoothie," she said, surprised at herself.

"That's it. Just a start. Not easy. But maybe less hard, with company."

Silence stretched — not awkward, but warm.

"No one's ever said that to me," she whispered.

"What?"

"That it's okay not to force a full meal. That it's okay to just try."

"It's more than okay," I said. "It's necessary."

"You're kind, Noah," she said. "I wasn't expecting that."

"I haven't always been," I admitted.

And I told her about my dad. How he left, suddenly, no explanation. How I'd been angry all the time, until therapy taught me I didn't have to live in that anger forever.

She didn't interrupt. She just breathed with me on the other end, holding my words like I'd held hers.

"I guess we're both in recovery," I said finally.

"Yeah," she whispered. "That makes me feel less alone."

"You're not," I said. "Not tonight."

Another pause.

"What are you looking at right now?" she asked suddenly.

"My ceiling. There's a water stain shaped like a duck."

She laughed. "Mine looks like a screaming face. It's terrifying."

"Want me to send you a photo of my duck?"

"Please do."

I sent it. She replied instantly: *Omg it actually does look like a duck. An angry duck.*

"See? It's got character," I said.

We both laughed, and the heaviness from before softened.

"Thanks for calling," she said.

"Thanks for answering."

Neither of us wanted to hang up.

"We should sleep now. It was lovely talking to you, Lily."

"Lovely," she echoed.

"Lovely's our word now," I said.

We finally said goodnight, after nearly three hours.

I didn't know what this was yet. But for the first time in months, I didn't feel like I was drifting. For the first time, something — no, *someone* — felt like an anchor.

Chapter 2



Lily

I've always hated phone calls. They make me anxious — like I need to rehearse every word before saying it, like I've been shoved onto a stage I didn't agree to step on.

It started in school, when calls usually meant confrontation. "Why didn't you submit this?" "We need to talk." My hands would start shaking before I even hit *accept*.

Texts gave me time. Time to think, to edit, to control. Calls demanded immediacy. No backspace.

Maybe that's why I'm bad at confrontations. The silence after a question feels like a spotlight. That's when I crumble. That's when I blurt things I don't mean, or worse — nothing at all.

I still remember one call in Year Eleven. A friend rang out of the blue, her voice flat. "Did you spread a rumour about me?"

I blinked at the screen. "What?" I asked, even though I'd heard her clearly.

She repeated it, naming the rumour this time. Petty, stupid. But I hadn't said anything. I swore I hadn't. She kept pushing, as if nothing I said could ever be enough.

"Did you or did you not tell your boyfriend?" she asked at last.

My stomach dropped. I had. Just once, in passing. So I admitted it. "Yes, maybe I did. But he's my boyfriend and I tell

him everything. Unlike you. Maybe that's why you two are having problems."

A pause. A sharp exhale. Then she hung up.

I stared at the screen, my hands shaking. And it sank in — calls weren't conversations. They were traps.

So when Noah rang me out of nowhere, every nerve screamed: *Don't pick up. Just text him. Pretend you missed it.*

But by the second ring, I answered. My voice came out steady, even. "Hey."

That surprised me more than the call itself.

What followed wasn't awkward. It wasn't filler. It was... disarming. He made it easy, like he was exploring without trespassing.

He asked about my ex, about how I'd been lately, about my family. He listened. Properly listened. I found myself telling him things I hadn't said in years. About staying in a relationship that chipped away at me. About believing I could change him when really, all I did was lose myself.

Noah didn't judge. He just stayed quiet when quiet was needed.

I even told him about food. How after the breakup I stopped eating properly. Not on purpose — just out of numbness.

He got quiet, but not in a way that made me regret saying it. "I'm sorry, Lily," he said gently. Then he suggested smoothies. Yoghurt. Something light. Something kind. Not a fix, just a start.

It didn't feel like he was trying to rescue me. He just cared.

Then he told me about his dad. How he left without warning. How therapy had been the only thing that stopped him burning everything around him.

I didn't interrupt. I held it, like he'd held my words.

We talked for hours, slipping between heavy truths and lighter things. Childhood films, favourite songs, silly little facts. I told him I rewatched *The Parent Trap* whenever I felt overwhelmed. He laughed and said, "You've got to watch *Before Sunrise*. It reminds me of you."

No one had ever said something like that to me.

"I haven't seen it," I admitted.

"I'll email you a list," he said, already typing. "You're in charge of reviews. Brutally honest ones."

I laughed. "You trust me with a lot."

"I just know you'll take it seriously," he replied. And he was right.

When the call ended, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Not smiling. Not crying. Just present.

That was dangerous for me. Because I know myself. When I feel seen, I attach.

It's always been like that. Years ago, I grew close with a girl in my class after she complimented a sketch of mine. That night, I read the entire poetry collection her comment reminded her of. I made her a playlist. Remembered her favourite snack, flower, even her dog's birthday. I poured myself in.

And when she drifted away, no fights, just silence... it broke me more than a falling out would have.

I don't do casual. I care too much, too quickly. And often, people don't care back.

Right now, I'm vulnerable. I know it. Which is why I told myself to be careful — even if, for the first time in a long time, someone made me feel like I wasn't broken.

When I finally checked my phone, Dina had called me seven times. Typical Dina — dramatic, loyal, sometimes possessive.

It was nearly 4 a.m. when I saw her messages:

YOU'RE IN LONDON AND YOU'RE NOT STAYING WITH ME??????

I ignored it and fell asleep.

The next morning, I rang her. She picked up instantly.

"Lily. What the hell?"

"I wanted to surprise you," I laughed. "I swear, I was going to tell you once I'd got into at least one uni."

"That's not an excuse. I've missed you for months."

"I know. I missed you too. Let's meet today. I've got my King's College interview at noon, done by half one. Lunch after?"

"Yes, obviously."

When we met, she hugged me like she was checking I was really there. We ordered hot chocolate, pasta, fried chicken. Halfway through her rant about school fashion disasters, I interrupted: "So... I met someone yesterday."

Her fork froze. "What?"

"At orientation. I went into the wrong classroom. Ended up next to this guy, Noah. We talked all day and... he called me."

Dina dropped her fork. "He called you? Last night?"

"Yeah. That's why I missed your calls."

She narrowed her eyes in mock betrayal. "Abandoned for a boy. Tragic."

"Oh, stop. It's not like that. We just... clicked. He made the course sound interesting. I'm even considering switching."

Dina smirked. "You're changing your major because of a boy?"

"No," I said. But we both knew it wasn't just about the course.

"You're so gone," she said, grinning.

Later that day, back at the hotel, I accepted Noah's Instagram request. His message popped up almost instantly.

Hey.

I typed back: *Hi.*

Seconds later, he was ringing me again.

We spoke for hours. Then he texted: *Call me when you wake up.*

So I did. Past midnight. The city hushed outside. Clothes half-packed, suitcase open.

"No dreams?" he asked when I answered.

"None I remember. You?"

"Just thoughts. About my dad."

I stayed quiet, letting him speak.

He talked about anger. About missing his dad. About not knowing what he'd say if he ever saw him again.

"That's not stupid," I told him. "I'd be angry too."

Then I admitted something: "I'm scared of being forgettable. Like I give all of myself and it's still not enough."

He didn't jump in to fix it. He just let it sit. Then said, "I remember everything you've told me. So if that means anything... you're unforgettable to me."

And for the first time in a long time, I believed it.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I told him softly.

"That's a bummer. I was hoping I'd run into you again."

"Manchester's not the moon."

"Still feels far."

"I'll text you when I get there."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Just before goodbye, he added, "I'm glad you walked into the wrong class. I hope you apply to LSE."

Me too, I thought.

Chapter 3



Noah

I didn't expect to miss her this quickly.

It had barely been a few hours since we hung up, and the silence already felt louder.

She was gone by the time I woke up. I checked my phone instinctively. No new texts — just our last call log staring back at me, almost three hours long. I couldn't remember every word we said, but I remembered the feeling: light, like she'd peeled something heavy off my chest.

She made it easy to talk about things I usually bury. My dad. The anger that still lives somewhere in me. The stupid part that still wants him to be proud of me. And Lily listened — not with pity, not with judgment, just presence.

I tapped on her profile picture again. She'd only been gone a few hours, but I found myself scrolling back as if her posts would explain why she was lodged in my head already.

Her highlights were mostly trips — Switzerland, Italy, India. Same smile in all of them: wide, real, unfiltered. I replayed one reel twice, the one of her dancing in the rain, laughing, either unaware she was being filmed or simply not caring. That was Lily — she looked like she belonged wherever she was.

I screenshotted it and sent it to Ryan.

Me: *Bro, I met someone.*

Ryan: ?? Who? What happened?

Me: *(sends screenshot)* This is her.

Ryan: *She's cute. What's the story?*

So I told him. The wrong classroom. The conversation. The call. The way I typed "hey" after staring at her name for ten minutes. The way she said "hi" like she already knew me.

"She's not like anyone I've met before," I typed. Then deleted it. Too much.

Me: *I don't know, man. I just... liked talking to her.*

Ryan: *Wait. You talked for how long?*

Me: *About three hours the first night, then two hours yesterday. Then I called her again after her nap.*

Ryan: *Mate. That's not a crush. That's a situationship with extra steps.*

I grinned at my screen like an idiot.

Me: *She's going back to Manchester today.*

Ryan: *So?*

Me: *So I kind of don't want her to.*

Ryan: *Oh yeah. You're so gone.*

I didn't answer right away. He was right.

Ryan: *You've probably rewatched her story 14 times.*

Me: *17. Get it right.*

Ryan: *Jesus. You're going to start annotating her captions next.*

Me: *Already have a theory about her lowercase obsession.*

Ryan: *You're so gone.*

I laughed.

Ryan: *Write her a poem. Girls love that romantic sad-boy stuff.*

Me: *You write the poem. I'll take the credit.*

Ryan: *Deal. Title: "Ode to the Girl Who Accidentally Walked into the Right Room and My Heart."*

Me: *You're banned from texting for 24 hours.*

Ryan didn't stop. He never did.

Ryan: *If you're this obsessed, just skip the poem and get her name tattooed.*

Me: *Chill. It's been one day.*

Ryan: *Yeah, and you already have screenshot folders. One week in and you'll be at the parlour.*

Me: *If I ever do, you're coming with me.*

Ryan: *Absolutely not. If you get a girl's name tattooed after one week, I'm legally allowed to disown you.*

I smiled, but the silence in my room grew louder once we stopped texting. I scrolled to Lily's very first post. A blurry picture from four years ago. Shorter hair, same smile. Probably dating that guy back then. I wondered why they broke up.

There was a whole version of her that had lived lifetimes before I showed up.

And still, here I was, already thinking about her like she was part of mine.

My phone buzzed. Her name lit up the screen.

"Hey," she said softly. "Just reached London back. My parents were relieved I survived. Guess they thought the city might eat me alive."

I smiled, picturing her telling them about her trip, maybe even about me.

“Haha, you’re such a drama queen. Did they call a search party?”

“Almost. They think London’s a jungle.”

“They’re not wrong. But you survived, so you’re officially a city warrior now.”

“A warrior who’s exhausted and hungry.”

I told her to eat, then let her go before I really did show up and force-feed her.

A few minutes later, I texted:

Me: *Next time, don’t wait for London to nearly eat you alive before texting me, okay?*

Lily: *Next time, maybe you’ll be the reason I’m in London again.*

I stared at that message longer than I’ll admit. My heart skipped. She really didn’t play fair.

Not long after, another text:

Lily: *Also... found a bakery near my house that sells the croissants you love.*

Me: *You’re saying this like it’s not life-altering news.*

Lily: *Next time you’re in Manchester, I’ll take you. But only if you behave.*

Me: *You’re assuming I know how.*

Then she sent a photo: messy hair, oversized hoodie, holding up a croissant in triumph. No filters. No posing. Just her.

I saved it instantly.

Me (to Ryan): *She literally just sent me this. How am I supposed to live a normal life now?*

Ryan: *Bro. It's a croissant. Chill.*

Me: *It's not the croissant. It's HER holding it. Big difference.*

Ryan: *You're two steps from printing it out and framing it.*

Me: *I'm not that crazy.*

Ryan: *You saved it, didn't you?*

Me: *Shut up.*

Ryan didn't stop.

Ryan: *You've entered the delusional but adorable phase. So, are we at the playlist-making stage yet, or still pretending this is chill?*

Me: *I sent her one song. That's not a playlist.*

Ryan: *You sent her Hozier. That's emotional warfare, bro.*

Me: *It fit the mood.*

Ryan: *You're the mood now. You're a walking Pinterest board caption.*

Me: *...shut up.*

Ryan: *Just say you're in love and I'll stop.*

Me: *It's not love. It's just... interest.*

Ryan: *Romantic interest. With soul. And rain. And long calls.*

Me: *Ryan. Stop.*

Ryan: *Fine. But if you start journaling about her, I'm staging an intervention.*

I closed our chat but found myself back on her photo. Croissant trophy, messy hair, sleepy eyes, smudge on her

cheek. She looked like sunlight, like she didn't care who saw her unpolished.

And I did.

I wasn't supposed to catch feelings this fast. But here I was, walking around with a dumb, obvious, grinning secret.

The last time I felt this, it ended badly. But Lily didn't feel like that. She wasn't playing games. She was just her.

Sometimes you don't need years to know someone. Sometimes you just know.

I didn't know how she took her coffee, if she snored, if she cried at movies. But I knew her laugh made the world easier. I knew her voice lingered in my head longer than songs.

Maybe Ryan was right. Maybe I was one playlist away from becoming a Pinterest quote.

But I didn't want to pull away. Not yet.

Chapter 4



Lily

I had barely dropped my bag when Mum rushed out of the kitchen, wrapping me in a hug like I'd returned from war instead of a university orientation.

"Oh thank God," she said. "You didn't call all day, Lily. What if something had happened?"

"I texted," I mumbled.

"Once. At noon. That doesn't count."

Dad appeared, coffee in hand, pretending not to eavesdrop.

"So? No tube accidents? No kidnappings?"

"Not yet," I said. "Give it a few days."

He laughed, offering me tea like a prize for survival.

The house smelled like butter and garlic. My brother was upstairs, thudding a football against the wall. Home.

I sat at the table while Mum chopped vegetables, sneaking glances like I might disappear again. I told them about the campus, the confusing map, the architecture. But I didn't mention the wrong classroom. Or Noah. Not yet.

Later, upstairs, I collapsed onto my bed. My tote bag spilled onto the floor: orientation booklet, half-eaten granola bar. The room still smelled faintly of strawberry perfume, but I felt different. Like the day had shifted something.

I didn't hesitate. I called Noah.

"Hey," I said softly.

"Just reached London back," he said. "My parents were so relieved to find me in one piece. Guess they thought London might eat me alive."

"They're not wrong," I said. "Mum practically stitched a tracker into my hoodie."

He laughed. "Drama queen. Did they call a search party?"

His voice loosened something in my chest.

"Almost. They think London's a jungle."

"It is. But you survived. You're officially a city warrior now."

"A warrior who's exhausted and hungry."

He told me to eat, threatened to come over and force-feed me. I laughed, then hung up.

Minutes later, a text:

Noah: *Next time, maybe don't wait for London to nearly eat you alive before texting me, okay?*

Me: *Next time, maybe you'll be the reason I'm in London again.*

I stared at the screen, overthinking. Did he take it the way I meant it?

I put on my shoes and walked to the bakery I'd passed a hundred times. Today, I noticed the croissants behind the foggy glass. I bought one. Not because I was starving, but because it reminded me of him. The way his face lit up talking about "good croissants" like it was holy.

Back home, I texted him:

Me: *Also... found a bakery near my house that sells the croissants you were obsessing over.*

Noah: *You're saying this like it's not a life-altering discovery.*

Me: *Next time you're in Manchester, I'll take you. But only if you behave.*

Noah: *You're assuming I know how.*

I hesitated, then snapped a picture. Me, messy hair, hoodie, croissant in hand like a trophy. No filters. Just real.

I sent it.

Then, still buzzing, I called Dina.

"Tell me everything," she said.

"You already know."

"Say it like a rom-com protagonist."

So I did. I told her about Noah, about the croissant photo.

"Was it warm and buttery and dramatic?" she asked.

"Noah or the croissant?"

"Exactly."

We laughed.

She teased me, then paused. "But... I don't know. He seems intense. And you already talk like he matters too much."

"I don't," I said, too quickly.

She gave me space. "Okay. Just don't let him become the whole story."

I sighed. "I can't stop thinking about him."

"You don't need to call it anything yet. Just feel it."

Later, curled in bed, I texted Noah:

Me: *I'm crashing. Talk tomorrow?*

Noah: *Sweet dreams, city warrior.*

A smile spread across my face before I could stop it.

Chapter 5



Noah

Ever since Lily went back to Manchester, we hadn't really stopped talking.

It started as one call. Then another. Then somehow we were talking every night. Or, more accurately, every morning. 11:30 p.m. became our unofficial start time. 4 a.m. became our unofficial bedtime. For her, at least.

She'd wake up early, run on four hours of sleep, and still sound like a functioning human. I, on the other hand, would wake up at 1 p.m. to five texts and exactly one missed call.

And like clockwork, the first thing I'd do — even before brushing — was call her back. Then I'd brush with her on speaker, shower with her voice playing from the bathroom shelf, only hanging up when someone knocked on my door and said, "Lunch."

We didn't call it anything. Not love, not dating. But it filled the silence in my days, and I wasn't complaining.

She once told me I had terrible taste in music, so I took it as a challenge. From that night on, I made it a thing — sending her emails with songs she had to listen to, and the occasional indie film I thought she'd love. I never texted them. Only emailed. It made it feel like something official. Like an assignment. Subject lines were always the same: *For your ears and your soul.*

Sometimes I'd send her three at once, sometimes just one with a long, annoying explanation of why I thought she'd like it, and what she had to pay attention to.

Eventually, she started rating them out of ten. I kept a whole spreadsheet. I never told her.

One night, sometime after 2 a.m., I asked her, "What are your intentions with me, Lil?"

She laughed a little. Went quiet. I could hear her shifting around under her blanket.

"It's okay if I call you that, right?" I added. "Lil?"

"Yeah," she said softly.

"I just want someone to talk to. And I think you're a great friend."

She agreed. Said she felt the same way. But it hung strangely between us — like a thread neither of us was pulling at yet.

The next night, I asked again. I was only half-joking, but she took it differently this time.

"Oh, just friends, right?" she said, like she was reminding me of something I'd forgotten.

It stung more than I expected.

We talked about other things after that — music, what we'd eaten that day, the absurdity of the way British people say *aluminium*. I almost convinced myself I was overthinking it.

But somewhere around 3:30 a.m., I heard her yawn and say she should probably sleep. I stayed quiet for a second and then said, "Lil... I really want to date you."

There was a pause. A long one.

Then she said, "I want to, too."

Another pause.

And then, almost like we were reading from the same script, we both said, "But it might get complicated."

We laughed after that. Nervously, awkwardly. Like we'd just named something that had been hovering in the room the whole time.

The next night felt easier. The pressure of not knowing was gone. But we still didn't define anything. It was like holding a snow globe, something fragile and perfect and doomed to melt if we looked too closely.

That was the night the game started.

We were mid-conversation, nearly 4 a.m., when I said, "Okay, I need to sleep. Bye."

"Bye," she replied.

"Later, alligator," I said quickly.

She gasped. "You said it first!"

"Exactly," I grinned. "Which means I won."

"No! I said bye before you. That means I get to say 'later, alligator' first."

"Lil," I said with mock seriousness, "the game doesn't count unless I say bye first."

"What?!" she cried. "That's not a rule!"

"It is now," I said smugly. "Also, you interrupted me. I was in the middle of talking. That's cheating."

“You’re actually so annoying,” she mumbled, but I could hear her smiling.

The next night, we played again. And again. And somehow I always won. Even when I lost.

“You know I said it first,” she said once.

“There was lag,” I replied.

“Lag?”

“Network lag. Technicality. Still counts as my win.”

By the third day, I said, “Okay, fine. I’m making a rulebook. A proper one.”

“Please do,” she said. “So I can point at it next time you cheat.”

I actually wrote it out.

A full page. *Game Title: The Later Alligator Protocol.*

I added clauses like:

- Section 1.1: Only valid if Noah says “bye” first.
- Section 2.3: Interrupting Noah nullifies the round.
- Section 3.0: In the event of a tie, Noah is declared winner by default.
- Section 3.2: Noah can never lose.

I emailed it to her. No subject line. Just the rulebook attached.

Five minutes later, she texted: *This is absurd. And very legally weak. Also, you misspelled alligator twice.*

But that night, she let me win anyway.

And the night after that.

We hadn't figured anything out. We still didn't know what we were to each other. But we had a game. And a rhythm. And a reason to stay on the line just a little longer.

And that, somehow, was enough.

Some nights, she'd disappear mid-call. Not hang up. Just go quiet. And I'd lie there, phone still on, listening to her ceiling fan whirring, wondering if she'd fallen asleep. Sometimes she had. Sometimes she was just lying there, thinking too much all at once.

I got used to those silences. They felt realer than the talking.

I'd say, "You okay?"

She'd whisper, "Yeah. Just tired."

But it was never just tired. I stopped asking after a while. Just stayed on the line. Let the silence stretch until she was ready to fill it again.

One night, after a long pause, she said, "Do you think it's bad we're talking this much?"

"Why would it be bad?"

"I don't know," she said. "Feels like we skipped a few chapters."

I thought about it. Then said, "Maybe we just dog-eared the pages we'll come back to later."

She smiled. I could hear it.

We still hadn't met again. Not since orientation. Not since the day she left London and I stood outside the gates pretending I didn't care.

She once asked me if I remembered what she was wearing that day.

“Black cardigan,” I said. “White tank top. Gold hoops. A grey bag with the strap twisted.”

She laughed. “Okay, stalker.”

But I remembered more. The way she hugged me like it was an afterthought. How she looked down at her phone straight after. How her perfume clung to my jacket for days.

I remembered thinking: *This girl just ruined the rest of my summer.*

And now, here we were. Ruining each other’s sleep cycles. Sending 2 a.m. playlists. Pretending to be “just friends” and failing spectacularly.

A few days after the Later Alligator game began, I texted her a song – not by email this time. Just a late-night text.

The lyrics went: *You said forever, now I drive alone past your street.*

She replied with one word: *Oof.*

Then: *But it’s not that sad if you’re not alone.*

I don’t know why, but that one hit differently.

Not that sad if you’re not alone.

For the first time in weeks, I let myself think: maybe we were building something. Quietly. On our own time. Without needing a label yet.

One night, around 4:10 a.m., I asked if she believed in soulmates.

“I believe in timing,” she said.

"And what about us?"

Silence. Then: "I think you're someone I'm meant to know."

It stayed with me.

Meant to know.

I wanted to ask: *For how long? How deeply?*

But I didn't. Because I had the next night. And the night after that.

For now, that was enough.

"Okay," I said at last. "Get some sleep. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Later, alligator," she whispered.

I smiled. "In a while, crocodile."

And I hung up.

For three seconds.

Then I called her back.

She picked up. "Yeah?"

I was already out of breath. "I don't care."

"About what?"

"I don't care how complicated it is, or if it's the wrong time, or if we're in different cities, or if we've only known each other for two weeks. I don't care. I want to date you. You, Lily. I want to try. I want to take you out, send you stupid emails, fight about who wins the alligator game — and then kiss you after."

She laughed. Just a little. Like she was trying not to.

"I'm serious," I said. "I'll make it work. I promise."

And for once, she didn't argue.

She just said, softly: "Okay."

Chapter 6



Lily

Ever since I came back to Manchester, we hadn't really stopped talking.

It started as one call. Then another. Then somehow we were talking every night. Or, more accurately, every morning. 11:30 p.m. became our unofficial start time. 4 a.m. became our unofficial bedtime. For me, at least.

I'd wake up early, scroll through my camera roll, stare at the ceiling, take a long shower, and still feel like something was missing. A sound, a name, a voice.

Him.

He'd call back the moment he woke up, usually around 1 p.m., brushing his teeth while talking to me, playing music in the background while he showered. We didn't call it anything. Not love, not dating. But it filled something. Something hollow I didn't know I had until he started showing up in it.

Some days, we wouldn't even say real things. We'd just read each other memes. Gossip about people we'd never met. Or send each other links to strange documentaries we'd half-watch, only to pause five minutes in and talk over the rest.

He started sending me songs. Just one at first, a dreamy, aching track that made me look out my window like I was in a coming-of-age film. Then another. And then a list of movies. All sent by email. Always with the subject line in all caps:

MOVIE FOR LILY

SONG YOU'LL LOVE

NEW FAVOURITE, PROMISE

He never emailed anything else. Just links to Spotify or Prime or Apple TV. I'd tease him for being so dramatic about it, but I never stopped opening them.

One night, it must've been 3 a.m., he randomly said, "Later, alligator," right before hanging up.

I frowned at my screen. "Wait. You didn't say bye."

The next night, I beat him to it. "Bye," I grinned. "Later, alligator."

He laughed. "No no, that doesn't count. You can only say later alligator if I say bye first."

"What?" I said. "That's not how it works!"

"It's in the rulebook," he said smugly. "I wrote one."

"What rulebook?"

"Check your email."

He had, in fact, written one. A whole document. Numbered, formatted, ridiculous. "If Noah says 'bye,' Lily has exactly three seconds to say 'later, alligator.' If Lily says 'bye,' Noah wins automatically."

"You made this up to win!"

"Obviously. I don't lose."

"What if I win?"

"You won't. But if you do, I'll just say you glitched. Or that I was in the middle of talking, so technically, that's cheating."

It became our game. Not just a thing to say, but something I actually looked forward to. Because for those three seconds, we weren't tired or awkward or wondering what this was. We were just two people trying to outsmart each other. Like kids. Stupid, happy kids.

And then one night, after a long pause in the middle of a conversation about nothing, he asked:

"What are your intentions with me, Lil? It's okay if I call you that, right?"

I froze.

He continued, voice softening, as though trying not to scare me away:

"I just want someone to talk to and I think you're a great friend."

My heart tugged at that. I echoed the last part back.

"Same."

That should've been the end of it. But the next night, when we were back in our usual rhythm of telling each other weird facts about the Roman Empire and rating childhood snacks, he circled back.

"So, what are your intentions with me?" he asked again, almost jokingly.

I smirked. "Oh, just friends, right?"

The line went quiet. Not for long. Just long enough to register a shift.

He didn't say much after that. Not at first. But I could tell, something had changed. Something careful inside him had been shaken loose.

It was nearly 3:30 a.m. when he said it.

"I really want to date you."

His voice was barely above a whisper, but it landed like thunder in my chest.

I think I paused. Maybe I didn't. Maybe I jumped in right after. I don't even remember what I was feeling because it was all feelings at once.

"Me too."

We both went quiet. For the first time in weeks, words didn't pour out. We sat in it. This soft, uncertain maybe.

And then, at the same time, we said it:

"I just think it might get complicated."

It was messy. Timing was off. Distance was real. We had no idea what we were doing or where this was going. But there was something, something magnetic, something neither of us could name and that kept pulling us back into each other.

Still, I expected the call to end after that. I started to take a deep breath, prepping for the usual:

"Bye."

I waited, but he didn't say it.

The call cut.

Not a second later, it lit back up.

He was calling again.

I picked up, confused. "Noah?"

"I don't care," he said, rushed, like he hadn't given himself permission to hesitate. "I don't care how complicated it is. I want to date you. I'm going to make it work."

I didn't say anything. I just smiled.

He added, a little breathless:

"We'll figure it out, Lil. We will. I just... I don't want to stop before it starts."

"Come back to London, Lil, I want to take you on a date and properly ask you to be my girlfriend. Till then we're just friends. You deserve to be asked out properly," he said again.

I had no words. I wanted to date him. So I reassured him, told him I would visit very soon.

The call ended, and my screen went black, but everything inside me was glowing.

I sat there, staring at the darkened screen like it was still showing his face. My ears were still ringing with his voice, those words. The promise. The care. The restraint. I should've slept. But instead, I opened WhatsApp and texted the only person who had watched this unfold in real-time.

BABE, HE LIKES ME!!!!!!

I stared at the message, not even waiting for a reply. My heart was pacing laps around my ribcage. Every single night of talking to him, every song he'd sent, every time I tried to hold back. What was the point? He liked me. He wanted me. Not vaguely. Not in a confusing maybe-sort-of way. But in a proper, let-me-take-you-out way.

Still no reply from Dina. Obviously. It was nearly 4:30 a.m.

I collapsed into my pillow, grinning into the darkness. The kind of grin that makes your cheeks ache. The kind that keeps you up even when you're exhausted.

The next morning — or a few hours later — my phone buzzed with Dina's reply.

I think you both should let each other sleep...

I laughed into my blanket, curled up like a child. But soon enough she was flooding me with voice notes and *OMG TELL ME EVERYTHING RIGHT NOWs*.

So I called her.

I told her everything. About the songs and the films. How he'd send them at 1 a.m. and ask me, seriously ask me, "Did you finish watching? What did you think? What was your favourite scene?"

I never had answers. Not because I didn't want to. But because I could never finish them in one go.

"Oops, I'm so sorry, I can never finish films. I warned you," I'd text him.

And he'd reply, "Lil, one day I'll sit you down and we'll finish all the half-done films of your life."

I told Dina how that made me feel — like I was someone worth following up with. Someone whose thoughts mattered. It sounds silly, but he remembered everything. The films I half-watched. The lines I skipped. The dreams I only whispered once.

Then I told her about the game.

"It started one night when he casually said, 'Later, alligator,' just before cutting the call. I laughed and asked what that was

supposed to mean. ‘The game begins,’ he said, like some mysterious narrator. Whoever says ‘bye’ first, the other has to race and say ‘Later, alligator.’ Whoever says it first wins. I argued, technically whoever says bye first gets to say ‘later alligator,’ but Noah disagreed. He said it only works if he says bye first.”

I told her how I’d protest every single time, and he’d just say, “I was in the middle of talking. That’s cheating,” or “You paused too long. I win.” It was so stupid. So incredibly stupid. And yet it made my heart flutter in a way nothing else did.

I even told her about the rulebook and how it was stacked in his favour — but I didn’t really mind.

And then I told her about the night we confessed. How he asked me what my intentions were, gently, like he was scared of what I’d say but still hoping I’d say the right thing. How I froze. The next night, how I laughed it off with, “Oh, just friends, right?” like an idiot — and how I regretted it the second I said it.

But he didn’t pull away. He didn’t vanish or pretend it didn’t sting. He stayed. He stayed through the awkward silence and the weird back-and-forth. We kept talking. All the way until 3:30 a.m., when he finally said it: he wanted to date me.

And then he said the words that stuck. *Come back to London, Lil. I want to take you on a date and properly ask you to be my girlfriend.*

I told her how my whole chest ached after that. How I held my phone like it was sacred. How I whispered, “Okay,” into the dark, like somehow it would reach him.

I told her everything — the game, the late-night confession, the way he said he wanted to ask me out properly. Every word,

every little detail. I was breathless, smiling so hard my cheeks hurt.

There was a pause on the other end. Then Dina said softly, "Babe, I love you. And this is so cute. But... are you sure?"

My smile wavered.

"Like, are you sure you want to do this? You don't think it's too fast?"

I could hear her sitting up in bed, half-concerned, half-sleepy, but fully my best friend.

"You don't have to be anything if you're not ready," she added. "Seriously."

I sank deeper into my blanket, phone warm against my cheek. Dina wasn't doubting me. She was just looking out for me. Maybe I needed that reminder.

"I know," I said quietly. "I'm not rushing. We're still just talking. But I want this, Dee. I really want this."

She sighed. "Okay. If you're happy, I'm happy. But I swear to God, Lily, if he hurts you —"

"You'll fly down and kill him," I finished with a tiny laugh.

"Exactly. And I'll bring my heels."

"I'll let you know if I need backup."

"You'd better. Now go eat, you romantic idiot."

But I didn't. Not straight away. I just lay there, heart full and head spinning, replaying his voice:

Come back to London, Lil. I want to take you on a date and properly ask you to be my girlfriend.

And in the quiet dark of my room, I whispered into the silence, "Okay."

After that, I padded to the kitchen. The house was still, the kind of stillness that only comes in the early hours. The fridge light spilled out as I opened it, washing the room in pale blue. I stood there barefoot, staring at leftover containers, not really hungry but not ready to climb back upstairs either.

I poured a glass of water and leaned against the counter, phone in hand. His name was still on the screen, the last call glowing in my history. For a moment, I let myself imagine it — what it would be like if he were here now, leaning next to me, laughing about how messy my fridge was. It was silly, domestic, too soon. But the thought made me smile into the quiet.

Then I switched off the light, padded back upstairs, and curled into my blanket.

Chapter 7



Noah

We had often talked about our exes. I asked her what she wished her ex had done differently. I wanted to remember every word, so I'd never hurt her the same way.

She told me softly, almost like a confession, that she just wanted to feel safe with someone. That it would've been nice if her ex had made her feel heard instead of judged, like her thoughts weren't "too much." She said love shouldn't feel like walking on eggshells.

I typed it all into my notes app.

And while she spoke, I think I fell for her a little more.

It was strange how we could jump between heartbreak and humour like it was nothing. One moment she was telling me how she never cried in front of him because she didn't want to "ruin the vibe," and the next we were arguing over the correct way to eat Oreos. (She's wrong, by the way — you twist, lick, and then dunk. No debate.)

I told her she deserved someone who'd pause his whole day just to listen to her overthink.

She giggled, asked if I was describing myself, and called me sweet.

She didn't realise how dangerous that word was coming from her.

That night, the night we confessed, didn't even begin like a confession.

It started with her yawning loudly and declaring, "I'm going to sleep, you insomniac."

And me replying, "Yeah right. See you in twenty minutes."

Which turned out to be accurate.

Twenty-three minutes later, she texted: *Okay, I'm bored.*

We ended up talking about how weird the word *crust* sounds. Then somehow that turned into a debate about whether ghosts wear clothes. Then she asked what I'd name my future dog. I said *Egg*. She groaned and said, "I hate how much I love that."

That was us. Silly. Unhinged. Always ready to switch gears without warning.

It was sometime around 3:30 a.m. when the air shifted. A pause — heavier than silence. And then I told her I wanted to date her.

Best night ever, I thought afterwards.

I smiled so wide it hurt.

But I didn't text again. Not because I didn't want to. But because I wanted her to sleep. She had a big day ahead and I didn't want my excitement to steal her rest. So I just stayed up, staring at her contact photo, replaying our old texts, listening to the playlist I'd made for her but never sent.

Every time my phone lit up, I hoped it wasn't her. Because that would mean she was still asleep, like she deserved to be.

At 7:46 a.m., Ryan texted:

RYAN: *yo?? tell me everything. what happened with Lily?*

I stared for a second, then typed:

ME: *I told her I liked her.*

He rang me instantly.

“YOU WHAT?!” he screamed as soon as I picked up.

“I told her,” I said again, smiling like an idiot.

“Oh my God. Did she say yes? Did she say yes?”

I told him everything — the ghost debate, the dog named Egg, the silence that didn’t feel empty, and the *I do too*.

He screamed again.

“We’re celebrating,” he said.

“It’s 8 a.m.,” I reminded him.

“Perfect. Breakfast. My treat. You just bagged your dream girl — that’s worth eggs and pancakes.”

He hung up before I could argue.

I just sat there, hoodie still on from the night before, staring at the sunlight now pouring through my window. My chest felt like it had been cracked open, but in the best way.

This is how a good thing begins, I thought.

Then he rang again. “Noah. I’m really happy for you, man.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

Then, of course, he ruined it. “You owe me dinner. For all the times I kept you sane when you were spiralling.”

“Fair. Pick a place.”

He said we’d discuss it over breakfast.

I texted Mum, said I was going out, then showered and dressed. But even while getting ready, my mind kept circling back to Lily. To the girl I used to call at midnight just to say *I'm bored*, and somehow end up speaking to until the sun came up.

The girl who admitted she could never finish a film, yet always let me send her endless recommendations anyway.

The girl who turned *Later, alligator* into a whole rulebook and had me giggling into my pillow like a twelve-year-old.

And now? Now she knew I liked her. And she liked me back.

God, I was screwed. Happily, utterly screwed.

I texted her *good morning*. I knew she'd be confused — I'd never been awake before noon since we started talking.

I got to our usual breakfast spot before Ryan. My body was exhausted, but my mind was buzzing. I stirred my coffee for no reason other than keeping my hands busy.

Ryan burst in, winded and wide-eyed. He spotted me and nearly leapt to the table.

"YOU," he said, pointing. "You told her?"

I grinned. "I told her."

"YOU TOLD HER?" He slammed his bag down. "Like told-told? Like I-like-you told?"

I nodded. He let out a scream-laugh hybrid before collapsing into the chair opposite me.

"Jesus Christ, Noah. You met her last week. It's still March."

"I know."

"It's literally been seven days."

"Technically eight. We met on a Tuesday."

He narrowed his eyes, ripped open a sugar packet. "You're clinically insane."

"You say that like it's bad."

"Did she say it back?"

I paused for effect. "She did. She said she liked me too. And then I told her I want to ask her out properly, in person, when she's back in London."

He just stared. "You Hallmark movie piece of shit."

"Right?" I laughed, tearing toast into bits. "I stayed up all night. Didn't call or text her though. Wanted her to sleep."

He pointed with the sugar packet. "That's boyfriend behaviour."

"Shut up."

"No, seriously. I don't think I've seen you like this since..." He didn't finish, and I appreciated that. I didn't want to think about the *since*.

Instead, I watched the morning traffic blur past outside the café. "It's weird, Ry. We go from talking about childhood trauma to sending each other cursed memes in like... two minutes."

"She's your kind of unhinged. I get it."

"You think I'm rushing it?"

He shrugged. "It's fast, yeah. But not scary-fast. Just... interesting-fast. And you seem sure. Properly sure."

"I am."

Ryan nodded. "Okay then. Let's celebrate. You're paying."

"Why am I paying?"

"Because you're in love and I'm broke. That's how this works."

We cracked up and ordered another round of coffee. Sunlight pressed warm against my back through the window. I liked it.

I didn't know what the next week or month would look like, but I knew this feeling wasn't fleeting. For now, that was enough.

While Ryan waited for his second coffee to cool, he started moaning about a girl in his building sending mixed signals. I half-listened until my phone buzzed.

LILY: *YOU'RE AWAKE?? in the morning??? like willingly???*

I couldn't help grinning.

"Ryan, hold that thought. She texted."

He leaned over, trying to peek. "What'd she say?"

"She's just surprised I'm awake."

"Because you're not a morning person."

"Exactly." I typed:

NOAH: *Miracles happen when you sleep by 5 a.m. And I wanted to say good morning to you.*

She replied instantly.

LILY: *You're unreal. Stop being this sweet or I'll explode. Also I'm not even up properly. Slept like two hours ago. Woke up to pee and saw your text.*

I laughed. "She woke up to pee and saw my text."

"Romantic," Ryan muttered.

I kept typing.

NOAH: *Go back to sleep, Lil. I'll bother you later. PS: dreaming about me is encouraged.*

She sent back an eye-roll emoji and a *goodnight again*, with a half-asleep selfie that made me pause. Hair messy, cheek squashed against the pillow, one eye barely open.

It hit me again. This girl. This wonderfully chaotic, thoughtful, sleepy-eyed girl. She was real. And for some reason, she liked me back.

"She looks sleepy," Ryan guessed, watching my expression.

"She looks like she's becoming my favourite part of the day."

Ryan groaned. "You're disgusting. But I love that for you."

When Ryan went to pay (yes, he agreed), I lingered by the café window, coffee cooling in my hands. Outside, the street was alive in its usual way — buses rattling past, a group of students laughing too loudly, an older man struggling with a newspaper in the wind. Ordinary London chaos.

And yet it felt different. Like the city was somehow softer because Lily existed in it too, even from miles away.

I pulled out my phone again, scrolled up through our chats. The duck-stain ceiling photo. Her sketches. The line where she said, *Not that sad if you're not alone*.

I didn't know what this was becoming. But standing there, sunlight spilling through the glass, I knew one thing clearly: I didn't want it to end.

Chapter 8



Lily

I'd officially woken up twice today. Once before sunrise to call Dina, and now again, this time for real, feeling like my body had finally caught up to the emotional earthquake from the night before. I replied to Noah's *good morning* text, my fingers still slightly trembling from everything I had just told Dina. Then I sat with the phone in my lap and whispered to myself, *Alright. I've told her everything. Now I'll call him.*

I tapped his contact, brought the phone to my ear, and waited.

One ring. Two. Three.

No answer.

I sighed, a little disappointed but not upset. Maybe he was busy. Maybe still with Ryan. Maybe doing something ordinary — brushing his teeth, queuing for coffee. Or maybe, and this thought made me smile, maybe he was still replaying the fact that we liked each other. That made two of us.

I stood in front of my wardrobe, brushing hair out of my face with one hand and scrolling through my camera roll with the other. The group chat with my school friends was already buzzing. Our almost-college lunch was today. We'd all been pretending not to be emotional about it. Saying things like, *last shawarma before law school!* or *if I cry over fries, it's not the potatoes' fault.*

I wanted to look nice. I wanted to look like someone who'd just been told she was liked back.

I pulled out a sage green dress, soft cotton, backless with tiny pearl-like buttons along the spine. It clung gently at the waist and flared out slightly at the hem, brushing just past mid-thigh. Simple, but effortlessly pretty.

Then I held up a second option: a cream skirt with faint floral embroidery and a pale yellow crop top with tie-up straps. The top dipped a little at the front, more than I usually wore, but I liked how it made me feel — like sunlight.

I clicked pictures in both, blurred the background slightly, and kept my face neutral with just the hint of a smile. Then I typed:

Help me pick one, baby.

And sent both pictures to Noah.

I tossed my phone onto the bed and went to do my eyeliner — the sharp, winged kind I could only manage on days when I wasn't running late.

By the time I was done curling my hair into loose waves, the kind I saved for special occasions, I checked my phone again. His reply was waiting.

NOAH: *Say that again, Lil.*

I smiled instantly, heart tripping.

ME: *Baby?*

NOAH: *Ohhh my God, I love it when you say that. Also: the dress. 100%. You're not even real.*

I grinned, typing back quickly:

ME: *Dress it is then. I'll send pictures after lunch. Try not to fall in love with me more than you already are.*

I slipped on the sage green dress, zipped it up, and looked in the mirror. I didn't look like someone heading to a farewell lunch. I looked like someone with a secret. A beautiful one.

By late afternoon, I was at the café with my friends. The place we'd claimed as ours. Same garlic bread. Same scratched-up tables with our initials carved into them. Same playlist where *Dandelions* always seemed to play on repeat.

But the air was different. We were all about to scatter — one to Australia, one to India, me to London. Still, we laughed the same way, passed chips around like currency, told stories we'd told a hundred times.

I kept checking my phone under the table. Not texting, just glancing. Hoping.

Then, mid-story about our maths teacher who once said *orgasm* instead of *organism*, my phone buzzed.

NOAH: *You looked so good I had to stand up and pace like a Victorian man in love.*

I nearly dropped my phone into the ketchup bowl.

Meera clocked my expression. "You're smiling like you've got a secret."

"I always smile like this," I said, too quickly.

"Not like that," she teased. "That's... romantic. What happened?"

"Nothing. Just a meme."

She didn't believe me, but thankfully the conversation shifted. I tucked my phone away and pressed my thighs together under the table to stop myself from kicking with excitement.

Another message lit up.

NOAH: *Baby, the dress is criminal. Like I should call the Met. But also, please wear it all the time and let me suffer.*

I wanted to scream. Instead, I smiled into my Coke and nodded along to another story, pretending I was listening.

By the time I got home, sunset was spilling through the open windows. I kicked off my shoes at the door, padded straight to my room, and threw my bag on the bed.

The house was quiet. Mum was still at work. The breeze carried in the faint sound of someone down the street practising violin — notes drifting in and out, a little sharp, a little sweet. It felt like the soundtrack to the secret I was carrying.

I changed into my softest T-shirt, plugged in my phone, and opened my laptop. My LSE personal statement was still sitting open, half-highlighted from the night before.

It felt surreal — two different lives running in parallel. One with Noah, where I said things like *baby* and laughed when he called himself a Victorian man. Another with words like *critical theory*, *intersectional justice*, *interdisciplinary humanities*.

I didn't know how to fit both into one body.

But maybe that was the point. Maybe theory wasn't just essays and citations. It was about people, about connection. And maybe that was why I wanted it so badly. Because I'd always been drawn to people — the messy, imperfect, beautiful ways we try to love each other.

Behind me, my phone buzzed.

NOAH: *When are you free next? I want to hear your voice again.*

I smiled and typed back:

ME: *I'm free now. Don't mind the messy hair and old tee.*

NOAH: *Never. I'm calling.*

Seconds later, his face filled my screen. Messy curls, hoodie I'd seen before, and that smile — the one that made me feel like he saw something beautiful even in bad lighting.

"You wore the dress," he said immediately.

"I did. You told me to."

He leaned back, smirking. "Unfair, really. Power move."

I laughed, tucking hair behind my ear. "You're so dramatic."

"You say that like it's news. You looked amazing, Lil."

Silence stretched — soft, safe.

"What'd you do today?" I asked.

"Breakfast with Ryan. Walked about. Went to a bookshop, didn't buy anything."

"Self-control. Impressive."

"I'm saving space," he said. "For your recommendations."

I groaned. "You're the corniest man alive."

"And yet, you still call me baby."

My face flushed. "Don't remind me."

"No — remind me every day."

I rolled my eyes, grinning.

"How's the statement going?" he asked.

"Painfully. Slowly. I'm scared it sounds fake."

"You're not fake, Lil. Even when you're unsure, you're honest. That's what'll make you brilliant at this course — not that you know everything, but that you want to."

My throat caught. It wasn't even a compliment. He said it like a fact.

"I wish we were already there," I admitted.

"At LSE?"

"Yeah. But also just... in the same place."

He nodded. "We'll get there."

His smile softened. "Can I tell you something daft?"

"Always."

"I've been listening to *Out of My League* ever since you sent me that picture in the dress. It's cheesy but... kind of perfect."

"You really are a Victorian man in love," I laughed. "Good God, Noah."

He chuckled. "Alright, alright. I'll stop."

"No, you won't."

"You're right. I won't."

Chapter 9



Noah

It had only been three days, but the “new” feeling hadn’t worn off. Not even a little. I kept thinking it would settle, that my brain would stop replaying the way she’d said *baby* like she was testing the word and decided she liked the taste of it – but nope. I was still in full Victorian-man-in-love mode.

This morning had started with good news. My LSE application had been reviewed, and I’d been called for an interview next week. A couple of hours later, Lily texted to say she’d got hers too, just on a different date. Mine was first. Hers was the day after.

I didn’t even care they weren’t on the same day. I just liked that we’d both be there.

She was already talking about making a trip out of it – trains, cafés, maybe even that bookshop in Camden she’d been obsessed with since Year Eight. And that was when I saw it: an ad shoved between an overpriced toaster and a questionable “learn coding in a day” course.

Couples Pottery Classes – Weekend Package – 8 Months – 40% Off Today Only.

It was like the universe had handed me a marketing email and whispered, *Do it, coward.*

I clicked immediately, scrolling through pictures of smiling people in aprons, hands covered in clay. Some of them looked

like they'd been married for decades. Some looked like they'd just met on a dating app. And all of them looked like they'd made at least one terrible-looking mug they'd treasure forever.

The thing was, even if LSE didn't take her, she'd still be in London. She'd only applied to unis here. Which meant this wasn't just a cute date idea. This was... us. Eight months of us, every weekend.

I opened our chat.

Noah: I've found our thing.

Lily: Our thing? That sounds ominous.

Noah: Not ominous. Fun. Potentially life-changing. Definitely messy.

Lily: Oh God. Please tell me this doesn't involve running a marathon or joining a cult.

Noah: No cults. No marathons. Think... art. Hands-on. Romantic in a "this could either be adorable or a disaster" kind of way.

Lily: ...okay, you're being weird. Just tell me.

Noah: Couples pottery class.

She didn't reply immediately. I stared at the screen, imagining her reading it, eyebrows lifting, maybe laughing in that way she does where she tips her head back slightly.

Lily: ...couples pottery class??

Noah: Yes. Weekends. Eight months. Discount if I book today.

Lily: Eight months?? That's a commitment.

Noah: I know. That's the point.

I hesitated for a second, then typed exactly what I was thinking.

Noah: Pleaseeee, Lil. I wanna see you every single day. Weekdays in class, weekends in pottery. Even if LSE doesn't work out, you're still moving to London. You only applied here. So... we'll be in the same city anyway. Might as well make terrible mugs together.

This time, she replied faster.

Lily: You're ridiculous.

Noah: And?

Lily: ...and it sounds kind of perfect.

I grinned so wide my jaw hurt.

Noah: Perfect. I'll book it.

I didn't even care that my bank account would take a hit. In my head, I could already see it — her hair tied back in some messy knot, her hands covered in clay, both of us pretending we weren't turning every vase into something vaguely resembling a bread roll. Eight months of that? I couldn't think of anything better.

Then came her text: *Only if you agree to buy me coffee before every class. And I mean good coffee, not the watery machine one.*

"Deal," I texted back. *Every single class, I'm buying you coffee. But you're buying me pastries, because I'm not doing ceramics on an empty stomach.*

Fine, she replied, but if you pick something with raisins, I'm cancelling the whole thing.

We went back and forth like that — coffee versus pastries, oat milk versus regular milk, the ethics of pineapple danishes — until I sent her a screenshot of the pottery class checkout page.

I'm booking it now. Eight months, starting next month. We're gonna be unstoppable.

And maybe I was grinning like an idiot at my phone, but whatever. If it meant eight months of sitting next to her, covered in clay and pretending I knew what I was doing, I'd happily spend a lifetime's worth of caffeine and pottery money on her.

After I booked it, I tried to focus on something productive. Like, you know, the interview that could decide my entire future. But instead of thinking about critical theory or the impact of globalisation, my brain kept showing me flashes of Lily in that sage green dress, Lily sipping coffee before pottery class, Lily rolling her eyes when I inevitably got clay on my face.

I opened my interview prep notes and stared at the first question: *Why LSE?*

My answer was fine. Too fine. Generic. The kind of thing you could copy from a brochure.

So I scrapped it and started again, this time thinking about how she'd be there, somewhere in the same city, whether it was LSE or somewhere else. How, if this all worked out, London wouldn't just be about lectures and libraries — it would be about her too.

About weekends where we'd roam the Southbank or get lost in bookshops. About catching the Tube after class to meet her, still wearing my student ID on a lanyard like a complete nerd, because I wouldn't want to waste a single minute.

By the time I'd finished rewriting, my answer didn't sound like something from a prospectus anymore. It sounded like me.

Me, wanting to be in a place where my mind would grow and my heart could stay tethered to hers.

The morning of the interview, I dressed like I had my life together — blazer, crisp shirt, hair behaving for once. I took the Tube to Holborn, hands deep in my coat pockets, rehearsing answers in my head but mostly thinking about her. The air had that sharp London chill, the kind that makes your breath visible, and I imagined her walking beside me, our steps matching.

When I finally stood outside the LSE campus, I had to pause. This wasn't just a university anymore; it was the place where I could picture weekends with her on the Southbank, late-night library study sessions that turned into takeaway dinners, running into her between lectures. I wasn't here just to impress an admissions panel. I was here to make this city, this campus, part of our story.

Inside, I signed in and followed the arrows toward the interview room, my student ID still in my pocket like some sort of talisman. My heart was hammering, but not from nerves. It was the thought that if this went well, I'd be walking these halls with her for real.

The panel was three people. One smiled warmly, the other two had that unreadable academic look that made me overthink every pause. They asked why I wanted to study here, and for once I didn't give the polished answer I'd rehearsed. I talked about curiosity, about wanting to question everything instead of memorising answers. I mentioned how London felt like the centre of conversations that mattered. They nodded a lot.

Then came the curveballs: "What's a book that's changed how you see the world?" "Do you think it's more important to be

persuasive or to be correct?" The kind of questions where there's no right answer — just *your* answer.

I left the room feeling lighter, like I'd actually had a conversation rather than an interrogation.

The second I stepped outside, I pulled out my phone and called her.

"Hey," she answered, voice still a little sleepy.

"Just giving you a heads-up for tomorrow," I said. "They'll definitely ask why LSE, but also something weird like your favourite book or a time you changed your mind about something. Oh, and they really watch how you think out loud. So don't panic if you don't have a perfect answer."

She laughed softly. "Noted."

There was a pause, the kind that felt like it could tip either way, back into safe, casual territory or toward something more.

"Listen," I said, "after you're done tomorrow... want to meet up? We could get coffee. Or... not coffee. A proper date."

I could almost hear her smile through the line. "A date, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, grinning at the pavement. "I'll even let you pick where we go. Just promise me you won't run off after your interview. I want the rest of the day with you."

I ended the call and slipped my phone back into my pocket, my mind still replaying the way her voice lifted when she promised she'd see me after. The air felt lighter somehow, like London was conspiring with me.

As I walked out of campus, the wind tugged at my blazer and carried the faint scent of coffee from somewhere nearby. Then, just past the corner, I saw it — a little flower shop tucked

between a newsstand and a bakery. In the front window, a vase of white lilies leaned toward the glass as if they were looking right at me.

I stopped, smiling to myself. Tomorrow, after her interview, I knew exactly where I was taking her first.

That evening, instead of heading straight home, I wandered down to Camden. The stalls were still open, the smell of cinnamon and fried food mixing with the cold night air. A busker was strumming Oasis by the canal, proper earnest, like he thought he *was* Liam Gallagher. I filmed a clip, sent it to Lily with my own terrible singing over the top.

Her reply came in seconds: *You're unbearable. I love it.*

I pocketed my phone, grinning, and stood watching the water. People rushed past — tourists, students, couples. Ordinary London chaos. But tonight it felt different. Like every sharp edge of the city had softened, just because she was in it too.

Chapter 10



Lily

I woke up earlier than I needed to. The interview wasn't until late morning, but my mind was already rehearsing answers while I brushed my teeth. I didn't have to wonder what it would be like at LSE, Noah had called me last night to give me a heads up.

He had his interview the day before and sounded almost proud of how it went. "They'll ask why you want to study the course, and what you think you'll gain from it," he'd said. "Be specific. And smile at the panel, even if you're nervous. Oh, and there was this one question about what I'd contribute to the student community – you'll probably get something like that too."

He had told me all this in that calm, steady tone of his, like he was making sure I had every possible advantage. Then, before hanging up, he'd asked, "So, after your interview... meet me? We could walk around, maybe find a café. You can tell me how it went, and I can tell you how amazing you did. Also..." – he'd paused here – "I want to officially take you on that date I promised."

I had said yes before he even finished the sentence.

Somewhere in the middle of that conversation, I'd asked him about the pottery classes again, wondering why he'd signed us up for something so... couple-y. He'd laughed. "I thought it would be fun. And once we agreed on the whole 'only date

if we're in the same city' thing, I figured this could be our thing. Besides, it's non-refundable, so now you're stuck with me for the entire term."

That thought made me smile even now as I sat across from Dina at breakfast. She was scrolling through her phone while I mentally ran through my answers one last time.

"Big day," she said without looking up.

"Yeah. And after that, I'm meeting Noah. So I'll come home, get ready, and then leave again," I told her.

She smirked. "A date?"

"A date," I admitted.

The interview itself was... surprisingly not terrifying. My palms still got clammy, but the panel smiled when I walked in, and their questions were exactly the ones Noah had predicted. It felt good to talk about the course, to imagine myself in lecture halls and libraries, and to mention the kind of community work I'd been doing. I left the building with my heart racing, but in that way where you know you didn't completely mess it up.

I messaged Noah as soon as I stepped out: *Done. Where should we meet?*

He replied almost instantly: *Come to the station near Southbank. I'll be there in fifteen.*

Back at Dina's flat, I swapped my interview outfit for something softer. A light blue top with short sleeves and a skirt that moved when I walked. It felt like the right mix between casual and date-worthy. I added my favorite silver necklace and a small spritz of perfume before leaving again.

When I reached the station, Noah was already waiting. He was leaning against a railing, phone in hand, and when he looked up and spotted me, he smiled in that way that made me forget the noise around us.

“You look amazing,” he said, and then, “How was it?”

I told him everything as we began walking toward the river. He listened, hands in his pockets, occasionally glancing at me as if he was mentally recording every word.

We found a small café tucked into a side street. Warm light spilling onto the pavement, the scent of coffee and fresh pastries floating in the air. Inside, we ordered cappuccinos and a plate of almond croissants to share. I liked the way he broke one in half for me without asking, sliding it across the plate with a small grin.

We stayed there for almost an hour, talking about nothing in particular. The conversation drifted from my interview to how he thought the Southbank book market had “the most unnecessary but beautiful” books he’d ever seen.

I teased him about still wearing his student ID on a lanyard yesterday after his interview. He pretended to be offended.

After coffee, we walked along the river, stopping every now and then to look at street performers or peer into shop windows. The sky was painted in that soft, early-evening light, and the air smelled faintly of rain even though it hadn’t fallen yet.

At one point, I asked him if he thought we’d still do pottery classes once the term got busy. He shrugged. “Yeah. I think we’ll need them more, actually.”

We reached a small flower stall near the bridge. He paused, glanced at me, and then walked over to the display. I thought he was just looking... until he turned back holding a bouquet of lilies.

"For you," he said simply, handing them over.

He held the bouquet out with this half-smile, like he wasn't sure if he was being too much or just enough. The truth was, it was exactly enough. I pressed the flowers to my chest, inhaled their sweetness, and felt something shift in me. No one had ever remembered something I loved so carefully before.

They were white, fresh, and somehow felt heavier than I expected. I looked at him over the flowers, caught somewhere between wanting to say thank you and wanting to say something bigger.

Instead, I smiled. "They're beautiful."

"So are you," he replied, and for a moment, neither of us needed to say anything else.

We didn't head straight to the Tube. Neither of us said it, but we both lingered, unwilling to let the evening collapse so soon. The street was alive with the hum of London. People rushing home, neon signs flickering to life, the faint smell of roasted chestnuts.

Then, we heard it: a violinist on the corner, his case open, bow moving clumsily at first, then steadying into a tune that curled around the night air. It was soft, imperfect, but oddly hopeful. Noah looked at me.

"Shall we?" he asked.

We stopped. He dropped a coin into the violinist's case. The musician looked up, smiling gratefully, and the melody bloomed fuller, as if he'd been waiting for someone to notice.

I didn't say it aloud, but I knew, even in that moment: *this will be our song*. The one that belonged to nobody else, the one I'd play back in my head when I thought of him. And maybe, just maybe, one day I'd use it in the background of an Instagram story when I soft-launched him to the world.

We moved on, and near the Southbank book market, Noah stopped again. Most stalls were closing, but a few lingered. He scanned quickly, then picked up a small paperback with a plain, pale-blue cover. He dusted it off and held it out to me.

"For you," he said simply.

I raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

"Open it."

I did. The title wasn't *The Little Prince* or any worn classic I expected. Instead, bold on the cover, it read: *Be My Girlfriend*.

My lips parted. For a second, I thought it was a joke, until I saw the way his eyes softened as he watched me read.

I looked up. "Are you serious?"

"As serious as a guy buying out a questionable street book just to ask," he grinned. "So... will you?"

I couldn't stop my smile if I tried. "Yes."

The word tumbled out before I could dress it in hesitation or irony. Just yes.

He exhaled like he'd been holding that breath for hours, then took the book from my hands, wrote something quickly on the first page with a pen from his pocket, and passed it back.

To Lily: the girl who makes lilies feel ordinary. — Noah.

I bit my lip, holding the bouquet tighter against my chest.

We walked on, a little quieter now, though it wasn't uncomfortable. It was the kind of quiet where every step felt heavier, every glance lingered longer. At the Tube station, we stopped, neither of us ready to part.

"Text me when you get back, okay?" he said.

"I will," I promised, tucking the lilies closer to me like they were fragile.

On the train, the bouquet rested across my lap. I unlocked my phone and typed quickly to Dina:

On my way back. The date was... amazing. You won't believe half of it. I'll tell you everything once I'm home.

Her reply came instantly:

If you don't, I'm locking you out of the apartment.

I hovered over the message and smiled to myself. My reflection in the window stared back at me, eyes shining, cheeks still a little flushed. I looked like someone who had just stepped out of a moment she would never forget.

Later, at Dina's flat, after telling Noah I had reached home, I set the lilies carefully into a vase. Their scent filled the small kitchen, delicate yet insistent. For a second, I stood there just looking at them, replaying every step of the afternoon, the sound of Noah's laugh, the way he had said "for your future library."

It felt like something had begun, even if I didn't yet have the words for it.

Chapter 11



Noah

I had been restless all morning. Pacing, pretending to read, even trying to nap, but my body refused to settle. Today wasn't just any day. It was the day I would finally take Lily on a proper date. I kept telling myself to relax, that it was just two friends hanging out, but my own reflection betrayed me. I'd already changed outfits three times, each one somehow too casual or too stiff.

The problem was that I wasn't just picking clothes. I was picking an impression. Every shirt seemed to say something about me, and suddenly I cared far too much about what she would read into it. Did I want to look effortless, or should I show I had actually put in thought? Would she notice if I wore the watch she once said she liked?

I ended up sitting on my bed with two shirts balled in my fists, groaning at myself. This was ridiculous.

But then again, wasn't it fair? I wasn't nervous because I doubted her. I was nervous because she mattered.

By the time I reached the station where we had agreed to meet, my heart was already racing. I spotted her almost instantly. She was standing with her phone in hand, hair catching the light in a way that made me forget how to move for a second. I wondered if she could see how hard I was trying not to look like I had been waiting for her all my life.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my voice casual. But inside, every nerve was on fire.

She smiled, that soft, slightly shy one she sometimes gave me, and just like that I felt lighter.

The walk to the café was easy. Too easy, maybe. I had rehearsed conversations in my head, topics to bring up if there were awkward silences, but none of them were needed. With Lily, silence never felt heavy, and words always found us without force.

At the café, we ordered cappuccinos. I teased her about the way she stirred too long before drinking, and she nudged me under the table with her foot. We ended up sharing a single croissant, and I caught myself watching her brush crumbs off her lips with the back of her hand. Something about it felt intimate, as if even the smallest gesture of hers had weight.

As we left, walking along the streets, I spotted a flower stand. Without giving myself time to overthink it, I bought lilies. My hands trembled slightly as I held them out to her.

“For you,” I said, hoping my voice didn’t crack.

Her eyes lit up, and for a second I swore I saw something more than surprise there. Gratitude, maybe. Or something I dared not name yet.

We kept walking, drifting toward the river. Street performers dotted the pavement, filling the air with laughter, music, and movement. A guitarist strummed a familiar tune, a group of dancers spun in sync, children clapped along. It felt like the city itself was alive just for us.

Then we heard it. A violinist playing a melody that seemed to cut right through the noise of the street and land softly in my

chest. Lily slowed down, eyes fixed on the man as if nothing else existed. I stopped too, listening.

The song, God, it was beautiful. The kind of music you wanted to claim as your own. I thought, just for a wild second, about going up to the violinist, pressing a few bills into his hand, and telling him to dedicate it to her. To us. To this moment that already felt carved into memory.

But then the doubt came. Too soon, I told myself. She might laugh, or worse, think I was rushing her. So I stayed quiet, only watching the way her expression softened, how she tilted her head slightly as if letting every note sink in.

We walked again after that, my fingers brushing the spine of the book I hadn't bought yet but already knew I would. I had passed a bookstore earlier and something had clicked in my head. Flowers were one thing, but words... words were ours. She and I had built something out of late-night conversations, out of lines borrowed from films, out of songs sent through emails. A book felt right.

Inside the store, my eyes landed on it quickly. The title wasn't perfect, but I knew what I could make it mean. I traced the letters with my thumb, imagining her reaction.

This was how I would ask her. Not in a grand speech or some carefully orchestrated confession. Just a book, handed from my hands to hers, carrying a question I had been dying to ask since the first night we stayed up till 4 a.m. together.

As we walked out, I kept rehearsing it in my head. Not the words themselves, but the courage it would take to hand it over.

Would she understand what I meant? Would she think it was silly? Would she think I was silly?

But then she laughed at something, something small, maybe a joke I made that wasn't even that funny, and I thought, if I didn't ask her now, when would I?

I wanted her. Not just as my late-night call or my favorite distraction. I wanted her to be mine, and for me to be hers.

So I gave her the book. My heart pounded so hard I thought she might hear it.

And as she took it, eyes scanning the cover, I felt the world narrow down to this single instant.

I didn't need to say anything more. The book said it for me: *Be my girlfriend.*

When she finally looked up from the book, her eyes wide and shimmering, I almost forgot how to breathe. Her lips parted, caught between laughter and disbelief, and I thought: *this is it, Noah, no turning back now.*

"You're asking me... to be your girlfriend?" she whispered, the words hesitant but soft, as if she was afraid the moment would vanish if she spoke too loudly.

I nodded, trying to stay calm, but inside my chest something had already burst into fireworks. "Yeah," I said, voice steadier than I felt. "Properly. Not just over late-night calls or silly texts. I want this to be real."

For a heartbeat she just stared at me, as though she was replaying every moment we'd shared up until now: every call, every laugh, every whispered goodnight. Then the corners of her mouth lifted into the kind of smile I knew I'd carry with me forever.

"Yes," she said.

And I swear, nothing in the world had ever sounded sweeter.

I didn't even hear the bustle of the street anymore. The violinist's notes carried faintly across the bridge, children laughed somewhere behind us, but all I could focus on was her, Lily, standing beside me, saying yes as though it had always been the only possible answer.

Inside, my thoughts tumbled over each other like waves. *She said yes. She actually said yes. You didn't scare her off. You didn't mess this up. She's yours now, and you're hers.* I wanted to shout it, to grab strangers by the shoulders and tell them, to write it across the London skyline: *she said yes.*

We kept talking after that, slipping back into the rhythm that was so uniquely ours, bouncing from something serious to something completely ridiculous in a heartbeat.

"Are you sure you know what you're signing up for?" I teased, trying to cover how giddy I felt. "I'm terrible at sharing food. And I'm definitely going to annoy you by recommending ten movies at once."

She laughed, leaning closer. "You already do that."

"Right," I grinned, "but now it'll be official."

At some point during the date, I'd taken her phone, partly because I wanted to keep her attention, partly because I couldn't resist teasing her. Every time she asked what time it was, I glanced at the screen, locked eyes with her, and said, "It's Lily o'clock."

She'd rolled her eyes the first time, laughed the second, and by the fourth she just shook her head, cheeks flushed pink, muttering, "You're impossible."

But I kept saying it anyway, because it was true. With her, time bent, folded in on itself. Hours disappeared like minutes. I could've sworn we'd only just sat down at the café, and suddenly the sky was bruising into twilight.

When we reached the station, my chest grew tight. I didn't want to let her go. The idea of her walking away down the platform, of the day ending, felt wrong, as though some invisible cord that had pulled us together all this time would snap if I looked away.

I handed back her phone reluctantly. "Text me when you get home, okay?" I said, even though what I really wanted was to ask her not to leave at all.

"I will," she promised.

I hesitated, then added, softly, "It's always Lily o'clock for me."

Her eyes flickered with something tender, and for a second I thought she might hug me again, or maybe kiss me. But instead she just smiled that quiet, devastating smile that made my knees weak, and nodded.

"Bye, Noah."

"Bye, Lil," I managed, though every part of me screamed not to say it.

I watched until she disappeared past the turnstile, and only then forced myself to walk away.

The second I was out of sight, I pulled my phone out, thumbs flying.

Me to Ryan: *Mate, I'm calling you. Don't even bother texting back. Pick up when I ring.*

I stared at the message, heart hammering, then added another, because I couldn't keep it in.

Me to Ryan: *She said yes.*

For a moment I just stood there, grinning like an idiot at my screen. I didn't care that people were brushing past me, muttering about blocking the exit. I'd just had the best date of my life, the girl I couldn't stop thinking about was now my girlfriend, and the whole city suddenly felt brighter, warmer, alive.

I hit call, ready to tell Ryan everything, every single detail, because I couldn't keep it bottled up another second.

Chapter 12



Lily

Dina's room was always a little chaotic but in the most comforting way. A blanket draped half off the bed, books stacked where they shouldn't be, a string of fairy lights that gave off more mood than actual light. I'd kicked off my shoes the second I walked in and collapsed onto the couch, while Dina lay sprawled across her bed, chin propped on her hand, staring at me with that expectant look she always wore when she knew I was hiding something good.

"Well?" she demanded. "Don't just sit there looking like a lovesick poet. Tell me everything."

I pressed a pillow over my face and groaned into it. "It was... I don't know. Perfect. And terrifying. And perfect again."

Dina laughed, rolling onto her stomach. "That's vague. Spill, Lil."

So I did. I told her how Noah had shown up at the station, how nervous but put-together he looked, how we wandered into a café and ended up sharing a croissant because apparently neither of us can make decisions when faced with too many pastry options. I told her how he surprised me with lilies, my name folded into the petals like he'd thought it through a hundred times. I told her about the violinist on the street corner, the way Noah hesitated like he wanted to dedicate the song but didn't, and how I secretly wished he had.

Dina's eyes grew rounder with each detail. She was eating it all up, like I'd just recited a fairy tale written exclusively for her.

"And then," I continued, my cheeks heating, "he gave me this book. Just this small, simple book. And when I opened it... the title said it all. He asked me to be his girlfriend."

Her jaw dropped. "Shut. Up."

I hugged the pillow tighter, fighting the ridiculous grin stretching across my face. "I'm serious. He actually did. And I said yes."

Dina squealed, clutching her blanket like it was the only thing tethering her to reality. "Lil! Oh my god. That's insane. That's... ugh you're literally living in a Netflix original."

I laughed, but softly, because part of me was still caught in the haze of it all. The sound of the violin, the way his voice trembled slightly when he asked, the quiet seriousness in his eyes. It still didn't feel real.

Dina threw a pillow at me. "You're smiling like an idiot, Lil. Like, I can't even take you seriously right now. You're actually glowing. I hate you."

I tried to hide my face again but she grabbed the pillow from me and sat up, pointing at me like a detective cornering her suspect. "Wait. Tell me you didn't just accept with a smile and that was it. There's more, isn't there?"

I chewed my lip, the memory still too fresh, too fragile, like holding glass in my hands. "Well... after I said yes, he took the book back from me for a second. I thought he was just nervous and wanted to hold it again, but he opened the first page and

wrote something inside. He didn't even let me peek until he was done."

Dina's gasp was dramatic enough to deserve an Oscar. "Stop. You're lying. He wrote in it? What did it say?"

I clutched the imaginary book to my chest, remembering the quick slant of his handwriting, the way his hand shook just a little as he signed his name. "It wasn't long. Just a line. Something like 'For Lily, because it's always been you.' And then his initials."

Dina groaned, falling back onto the bed like she'd been mortally wounded. "Oh my god, that's *so disgustingly cute*. I can't even look at you right now. He's smooth. Like dangerously smooth. You're in trouble."

I laughed helplessly, because she wasn't wrong. My head had been replaying that exact moment over and over, like it wanted to brand it into me.

"Lil," Dina said, suddenly peeking at me with a sly grin, "be honest. Did you cry? Like even a little?"

I threw a pillow back at her, hard enough to make her squeal. "I did *not* cry. Maybe my eyes stung, but that doesn't count."

"That's crying." She stuck her tongue out. "You're so gone for him. Completely whipped."

I didn't even try to deny it.

"So let me get this straight," she said. "He gave you a book, asked you to be his girlfriend *through it*, and then snatched it out of your hands just to write a note? That's..." she made a dramatic gasping noise, "actually so disgustingly adorable."

I buried my face in her pillow, muffling my laugh. "Stop. You're making it sound like some cheesy Wattpad story."

"It is a cheesy Wattpad story. And you're living it."

I groaned, kicking at her blanket half-heartedly, but I couldn't stop smiling. My cheeks actually hurt. Every time I replayed the moment in my head, his hand reaching for the book, his scribbled handwriting, the way he looked at me while asking, it was like my whole body turned into static.

"You really like him," Dina said softly this time, her teasing tone fading into something gentler.

I peeked up at her. "Yeah. I really do."

For a moment we just lay there, me on the couch and her on the bed, the silence between us filled with the weight of what I'd admitted. Then she tossed a pillow at me. "Fine, but don't go disappearing into your lovesick bubble. I still expect you to gossip with me about everyone else's tragic love lives."

I laughed, catching the pillow. "Deal."

Later, when Dina went to get us snacks, I grabbed my phone. My fingers hovered over the screen for longer than I'd like to admit, but eventually I typed:

I had such a good time today. I'm still smiling like an idiot. Thank you, Noah. Can't wait for what's next.

I stared at the words, chewed my lip, and then added another line.

I won't be able to call tonight, staying over at Dina's and going back to Manchester tomorrow. But I'm really, really excited.

I hit send before I could chicken out. My heart was already racing when I saw the three dots appear. Then disappear. Then reappear.

Dina walked back in right as my phone buzzed. She caught my expression instantly. "You're grinning at your phone like a lunatic, aren't you?"

I threw a cushion at her, but I was already unlocking the screen.

Glad you had a good time, Lil. Today was perfect. Sleep well, I'll talk to you tomorrow.

My chest tightened in the best way. I locked my phone and held it to my heart, rolling over so Dina wouldn't see how much I was glowing.

"It's official," she said, climbing onto the bed. "You're gone. Absolutely gone."

And I didn't even bother denying it.

Dina suddenly shot up, eyes wide. "Wait. Didn't you say he signed you up for some couples' pottery class?"

I nodded, laughing at her expression. "Yeah. He told me the other day. It's some weekend course, apparently. He just... signed us up, no questions asked."

Her jaw dropped. "That is so unfair. Noah is literally raising the bar for every other boyfriend on the planet. Jonathan is going to hear about this."

I grinned. "Jonathan's doomed."

"No seriously," Dina scrambled for her phone. "Send me the link. I want to drag Jonathan into this too. Imagine the four of us, making mugs and bowls like some kind of rom-com montage."

"You'd actually do it?" I asked, half teasing.

"Of course I would," she said. "And Jonathan will pretend to hate it but secretly he'll love it. Plus, I want you and me to be in the same class. That way, when you and Noah are being all disgustingly cute, I can at least roll my eyes in person instead of over the phone."

I shoved a pillow at her, laughing. "You're unbearable."

"And you're glowing," she said smugly, flopping back onto her bed.

Chapter 13



Noah

Ryan's name lit up on my screen just as I walked out of the station. I'd texted him after seeing Lily off, telling him I needed to call. He didn't even wait for me to ring, just beat me to it, like he knew I was bursting.

I picked up, sat down on the nearest bench outside the station, and let the cool evening air wash over me. For a second, I just sat there with the phone pressed to my ear, not saying anything. I think Ryan could hear the smile in my silence, because his first words were, "Alright, spit it out. You've been grinning like an idiot through the texts. How was it?"

"She looked stunning," I said quietly. My voice didn't even sound like mine. "She wore this... top and skirt, nothing flashy, but I swear I couldn't stop staring. I don't even remember the color properly because I was too busy looking at her face."

Ryan laughed. "Classic. You're gone, mate. Absolutely gone."

I smiled despite myself, rubbing the back of my neck. "We met at the station, and I was nervous. Really nervous. I bought her lilies and the way she looked at them... it felt like I'd just handed her the whole world. And then the violinist started playing this song, something soft and classical. For a second I wanted to dedicate it to her, but I thought maybe it was too soon, you know? Didn't want to overwhelm her."

Ryan hummed in agreement, but I could tell he was listening closely.

"I gave her the book during the date," I continued. My throat felt tight but in the best way. "It wasn't just any book. I wrote her a note inside, after I asked her to be my girlfriend. I wanted it to be something she could keep forever, something more than just words I said out loud."

"You're kidding," Ryan said, though he didn't sound surprised. "That's ridiculously thoughtful."

"I was terrified, man," I admitted, leaning back against the bench. "What if she said no? What if she thought it was too much? But then she smiled, and she said yes. I don't think I've ever felt that kind of happiness before. It was like everything I'd been waiting for just... clicked."

For a moment neither of us spoke. I kept replaying her expression in my head, the way she looked at me when I asked her. Like she actually saw me.

"I didn't even want to say goodbye at the station," I confessed. "But I told her to text me when she got back. During the date, every time she asked me the time, I'd say it was Lily o'clock. She kept rolling her eyes at me, but I think she secretly liked it. Before she left, I told her it's always Lily o'clock for me. She laughed, but I meant it."

Ryan let out a low whistle. "You've really lost it."

"Maybe," I said, grinning like an idiot in the middle of the street. "But it feels... good. Scary, but good."

I could hear Ryan shifting on the other end, his tone softening in a way it rarely did. "You know, I kind of want that too. To

find someone who makes me sound like this, all mushy and mad. Someone who makes me go this crazy over a girl."

I smiled at the ground, kicking at the pavement lightly. "You will. And when you do, you'll know. You won't question it for a second."

"Yeah," he said, but his tone was wistful. "If it's anything like what you're describing, I want it. I really do."

His words lingered between us, and I smiled at the thought. For once, I wasn't just telling him about a dream or a maybe. This was real. Lily was real. And for the first time in a long time, so was the happiness humming in my chest.

Ryan's words echoed long after we hung up. I just sat there on the bench, staring at the flow of people coming in and out of the station. London moved on as if nothing had happened, as if it wasn't the night I'd finally asked Lily to be mine. But inside me, everything was different. I felt like someone had turned the world upright after years of walking sideways.

I leaned back, phone still in my hand, and closed my eyes. I started thinking about the date and then my call with Ryan. It was ridiculous, really, how vividly every single moment replayed itself in my head. The way she brushed her hair behind her ear while she looked at the lilies. The little smile she tried to hide when I cracked some lame joke. The warmth of her laugh, God, that laugh. It felt like it had been stitched into me.

When Ryan said I'd lost it, he wasn't wrong. I had. I was done for. And I wasn't even embarrassed about it.

I kept thinking about how her hand brushed mine when we walked through the square. It wasn't planned, not even held,

just the back of her hand grazing against my knuckles for the briefest second. But the contact had sent this bolt through me, like every nerve in my body was suddenly aware she was right there. It was such a small thing, but I clung to it. Because if just that little touch felt like that, what would it be like when she actually reached for me?

I told Ryan about it, too. About how her skirt shifted slightly in the breeze and she kept pressing it down absentmindedly, about how her cheeks went pink when she laughed too hard, about how she tilted her head when I handed her the book like she was trying to memorise me in that exact second. I probably sounded like a lunatic, listing details that no one else would notice, but Ryan didn't stop me. He let me ramble, the way only a best friend could.

"I couldn't stop looking at her," I told him, my voice low. "It was like the rest of the world faded. I wasn't listening to the violin anymore. I wasn't even aware of the people walking around us. It was just her. And it scared me, how much it felt like she was all I needed."

Ryan whistled again, and I could practically see his expression on the other end, half amusement, half disbelief. "You're really gone. Properly gone."

"Yeah," I admitted. "And I don't want to come back from it."

He laughed, but it wasn't mocking. It was soft, almost proud. "Mate, I swear, I've never heard you like this. You sound like you're... lighter. Like you're not carrying all that heavy stuff for once."

He wasn't wrong. I did feel lighter. I'd been carrying this knot in my chest for weeks, wondering if I was reading too much into her late-night calls, her laughter, the way she never

seemed to get tired of talking to me. Wondering if I was the only one who felt this pull. But tonight, she'd said yes. She'd looked at me like I wasn't imagining it, like she'd been waiting for me too.

I must've sat on that bench for over an hour, just thinking. People came and went, taxis pulled up, announcements echoed from inside the station. But I stayed there, staring up at the London sky, which was turning from dusky blue to full night. It was odd how calm I felt. I thought I'd be buzzing, shaking with nerves or joy, but instead it was this deep, steady happiness. Like I'd found a rhythm I hadn't realised I was searching for.

When I finally started walking home, I rang Ryan back, because one call hadn't been enough.

"You again," he teased when he answered.

"I forgot to tell you something," I said quickly. My voice sounded urgent, even to me. "When I wrote the note in the book, I almost crossed it out. I sat there with the pen hovering over the page, wondering if it was too much. I kept thinking: what if she thinks it's childish? What if she thinks I'm moving too fast? But I couldn't not do it. And when she read it, Ryan... she smiled like I'd given her a secret. Like she knew what it meant. That look... it was worth all the risk."

Ryan was quiet for a moment before replying. "I hope you never forget how you feel right now. Because this is it, isn't it? This is the real thing."

I swallowed hard. "I think it is."

We stayed on the phone for longer than I meant to, wandering from Lily back to nonsense, the way we always did. But

everything I said somehow circled back to her. How I didn't want to fall asleep because I'd rather just keep replaying the evening. How I was already counting down to seeing her again. How, for the first time, the city didn't feel too big or too lonely.

By the time I finally reached my flat, I leaned against the door after closing it, grinning like a fool in the dark hallway. I knew Ryan was right, this was it. And I couldn't wait for tomorrow, for the texts, for the calls, for everything that would come next.

That night, lying in bed, I couldn't stop hearing Ryan's last words in my head: *I want someone who makes me go this crazy over a girl too*. He said it wistfully, almost envious, but also like he believed it would happen.

I hoped it would. Because if everyone got to feel even a fraction of what I felt tonight, the world would be a softer place.

And as I drifted off to sleep, one thought carried me into dreams: for the first time in my life, I wasn't waiting for something to happen. It already had.

Chapter 14



Lily

Time had flown by so quickly, it almost felt like a trick my mind was playing on me. The calendar insisted weeks had passed, yet my heart kept tugging me back to that evening in London, to our first date. I could still see it so vividly when I closed my eyes: the way the evening light had softened around us, the way my stomach had knotted and fluttered all at once, the way his eyes seemed to make a place for me to belong. How could that have only been a few weeks ago?

I had come back to Manchester the day after our date, suitcase dragging behind me as though it knew better than I did how heavy the leaving felt. My mum picked me up from the station and kept asking how my weekend had been, and I had to work so hard to keep the blush out of my cheeks. “Fine,” I had said, as if “fine” could possibly cover what had happened between Noah and me.

Now here I was, sitting cross-legged on my bed with my laptop open in front of me, heart hammering against my ribs. Decision day. The day when all the applications, all the sleepless nights, all the overthinking, would finally give me an answer.

The laptop fan whirred faintly, louder than usual in the silence of my room. I realised I was holding my breath, my finger hovering over the trackpad like it carried the weight of my entire future.

Mum had hovered at my door half an hour earlier. “Want me to sit with you, love?” she had asked, but I shook my head. This felt like something I needed to do alone. Or not entirely alone. I had Noah. He was waiting for me to text.

I pulled my blanket tighter around me though it wasn’t cold. My fingers trembled as I typed in my password. My Gmail loaded slowly, as if it was aware of the weight of this moment and wanted to tease me. I chewed my lip until I tasted blood, then forced myself to stop.

One by one, the subject lines appeared. My breath caught. There they were. King’s College London. University College London. The London School of Economics.

My chest squeezed so tightly it was almost painful. I opened King’s first.

“Dear Miss Spencer, congratulations...”

I let out a little shriek and clapped my hand over my mouth. My heart leaped higher, like it was trying to fly straight out of me. KCL had said yes.

Next was UCL. My mouse hovered over the email like it might explode if I clicked too quickly. I whispered, “Please, please, please,” under my breath.

Another yes.

My vision blurred for a second. Tears pricked at the edges of my eyes.

Then the big one. The one that really mattered. LSE.

The email loaded slower than any email I had ever seen in my life. My whole body tilted forward toward the screen, as if by

sheer will I could make it appear faster. Then the words jumped into place.

"Dear Miss Spencer, we are pleased to offer you admission..."

The glow of the screen lit up my whole face, making my room look strange and unfamiliar, as though I had stepped into some new life already.

And then, I screamed. Properly screamed. My voice cracked as it tore out of me. Mum shouted up the stairs, "What's happened?" and I yelled back, "I got in!"

But my fingers were already racing across the keyboard. I had to tell Noah.

I didn't bother with a text. I pressed call. He answered on the second ring, voice breathless. "Lily?"

"I got in," I gasped, as if the words themselves were too big to hold in my chest. "Noah, I got into KCL, UCL, and LSE."

He laughed, this wide, uncontainable laugh that made me laugh too. "Of course you did. I knew you would."

"I can't believe it's real," I whispered. "It feels like a dream."

"Check again," he teased. "Maybe it says 'just kidding' at the bottom."

I giggled so hard I nearly fell sideways on my bed. "Don't you dare."

Then I asked, "What about you? Did you hear back?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice shifting a little softer. "I got into Bristol. Edinburgh. And... LSE."

I let out a sigh that felt like relief, joy, love, all tangled together. "Noah," I said, so softly it barely came out.

"We're doing this together," he said. "We're really doing this."

"I feel like I could cry again," I admitted.

"Don't cry yet," he said. "We still have to officially accept."

We promised each other then, without hesitation, that we would accept LSE's offer. That was our choice. Our future.

The moment the acceptance letters sank in, I bolted downstairs with my laptop still open in my hands. Mum was in the kitchen, and Dad was flipping through the evening paper.

"I got in," I blurted, barely able to breathe, "KCL, UCL... and LSE."

Mum froze with the kettle in her hand, then let out a squeal that startled even the neighbours, I'm sure. She set the kettle down, rushing over to hug me so tightly I thought I might actually suffocate. Dad rose slower, a smile stretching across his face, the kind of proud smile he rarely showed unless it really meant something.

"That's my girl," he said, pulling me into one of his warm, steady hugs. "LSE. Just like you wanted. You really did it."

Mum's eyes were glassy, her voice catching as she stroked my hair. "You're going to London properly this time. My little girl at the London School of Economics." She laughed through her tears, trying to wipe them away with the back of her hand.

For a second, I wanted to freeze the room: the steam rising from the forgotten kettle, Mum's trembling hands, Dad's steady pride. Because this was what it meant to them too. Not just a line on my CV, but a future opening up.

Next on the list to inform was Dina. Of course, I couldn't hold it in much longer. I pulled out my phone and called Dina, my voice almost breaking from the adrenaline.

"Guess who just got into KCL, UCL, and LSE?" I asked before she could even say hello.

She screamed so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear. "No way! Lily, are you joking? You actually got all three?"

"I did. I'm still shaking."

"And Noah?" she asked immediately, with that mischievous lilt she always used when it came to him.

"He got into a few, plus LSE."

Her squeal grew even louder. "This is insane. You both, at LSE, together. It's like the universe actually ships you two. Fate really is on your side."

I laughed, my cheeks burning even though she couldn't see me. "Don't start with that."

"I'm serious," she said. "I need details. Every single one. Also, congratulations, you absolute star. I'm so proud of you."

That night, Noah and I stayed on the phone for hours. I lay flat on my back, staring at the ceiling in the dark, grinning like a fool. We talked about everything. What our halls might look like. Whether we would cook or just live on takeout. If we'd sit together in lectures.

"I'm moving to London in two weeks," I told him at one point. "Most of my things are already packed. It doesn't feel real yet."

"That's perfect," he said. "Because our first pottery class starts in a little more than a month. You'll be settled in by then."

I laughed. "You're really not letting me forget about that pottery class, are you?"

"Of course not," he said, mock serious. "It's the most important event of our university lives."

"Not the lectures? Not the exams?"

"No. The pottery class. That's where the true bonding happens."

We ended up playing the Later, alligator game until both of us were giggling too much to continue. "Later, alligator," he said.

"In a while, crocodile."

"After supper, you little pupper."

"Soon, raccoon."

"Not too soon, baboon."

I laughed so hard I snorted, and he said, "That's going in the memory book."

"What memory book?"

"The one I'm writing in my head about all the ridiculous things you do."

"You're insufferable," I said, smiling into the phone.

I could hear his laugh break through the tinny speaker of my phone, muffled but warm, like he was right there on my pillow beside me. Then the conversation took a quieter turn. He asked, gently, "Did you and your ex ever talk about the future?"

I hesitated. "Yes," I said finally. "Since he was Indian, he wanted to get married in India. Big wedding, family everywhere. And then he said we'd have a smaller reception in Italy."

There was a pause, then Noah's voice, lighter but certain. "Maybe we can get married in Italy and go to India for our honeymoon. Or the other way around."

I froze for a heartbeat, staring at the ceiling with my mouth parted, like maybe I had misheard him. But I hadn't. He had said it.

"Noah," I whispered, warmth rushing through me like sunlight.

"What?" he said innocently. "I'm just saying. Hypothetically."

But I could hear it in his voice. It wasn't entirely hypothetical.

I hugged my pillow so tightly I thought it might burst. The thought that he could see a future with me, that he was already dreaming of places we could belong together. It made my chest ache in the most wonderful way.

"Hypothetically," I said, "Italy sounds perfect."

I pressed the phone harder against my ear, as though I could climb through the wires and keep the exact sound of his voice saying those words forever.

We both fell quiet for a moment, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was full, rich, brimming with possibilities neither of us wanted to disturb.

That night stretched longer than I thought possible. Even as my eyes drooped with exhaustion, I couldn't bear to hang up. He felt the same. We talked about stupid things, about who would get lost on campus first, about whether we'd spend more time in the library or in coffee shops, about what it would feel like to sit side by side in our first lecture.

Eventually, I whispered, "I should sleep."

"Yeah," he said, though he didn't sound convinced either.

"Later, alligator," I murmured.

"Not too soon, baboon," he replied, and I fell asleep smiling, phone still warm against my ear.

My eyelids were heavy, the phone slipping in my hand. His voice blurred in and out, soft and low, the last thing keeping me awake. Even when the call finally ended, his words seemed to hum in the quiet like an aftertaste.

Chapter 15



Noah

The day the emails arrived felt like it had been written in the calendar of my head for months, but when I actually woke up that morning it was strangely ordinary. The blinds in my room hadn't been pulled properly, so sunlight sliced across the desk in thin golden stripes. My phone was on the nightstand, vibrating now and then with random group chat notifications, but I ignored it. For once, I wasn't awake at the sound of Lily's morning text.

Instead, I just lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to the distant hum of London traffic. It was one of those mornings where even the air felt heavier. My mum was already up; I could hear faint clattering in the kitchen. Toast popping, kettle boiling. Life going on like usual, even though today was the kind of day where everything might change.

By the time I dragged myself out of bed, my stomach was in knots. I'd told myself I wouldn't check my emails until later, but my laptop was already on my desk, screen glowing faintly in sleep mode, as if daring me to just lift the lid. I sat down, rubbed my palms against my joggers, and opened it.

The page loaded too slowly. I hated the way the Wi-Fi always picked the most important times to lag. My heart thudded so hard I could almost hear it. Then one by one, the subject lines appeared.

King's College London: Congratulations.

Durham University: Congratulations.

Warwick: Congratulations.

And then, the one that mattered most: **London School of Economics: Congratulations.**

I just sat there staring, like the words weren't real. I clicked into each one, reread them, made sure there wasn't some hidden rejection at the bottom. But no. They were all offers. And LSE — the one Lily and I had promised each other would be the one we'd take if we both got in.

For a moment, happiness punched through me so hard I laughed out loud, a disbelieving kind of laugh that sounded more like a breath escaping. But then, almost immediately, the ache set in. My dad wasn't here to see this.

I thought about how he would have reacted. How he would have ruffled my hair and said, "That's my boy." How he would have bragged about it to everyone in earshot, calling up relatives, dropping it into conversations with strangers at the supermarket. The image was so clear it was almost painful. I leaned back in my chair, pressing my palms against my eyes. For a second I let myself feel that hollow space where he should have been.

But then I opened my phone. There was only one person I wanted to tell first.

As soon as I opened her chat, my phone rang. It was her. I answered. She screamed first, then told me the colleges she got into. I was relieved to hear LSE in that list.

Then I told her the colleges that accepted me. I swear i heard a sigh of relief from her end. It was adorable.

"Noah. We did it."

I leaned forward on the desk, the phone warm against my ear. "We actually did it, Lil. LSE. Both of us."

Her laugh rang in my ear, the kind that made me want to close my eyes and just listen forever. "It feels unreal. Like, I knew it was coming today, but still..."

We sat there grinning at each other through the line, both too overwhelmed to form proper sentences at first. Then we started talking at the same time, interrupting each other, laughing again. It felt like that first rush of spring air when you step outside after being stuck inside all winter.

"My parents and Dina will scream when they hear this."

I laughed. "Ryan's going to lose his mind when he hears. He's been betting on me missing LSE. I cannot wait to rub this in his face."

"Call me later. Call him right now. Break the news to him, and ask him where he got in." she teased

"No way, you're my priority."

Her voice softened when I said that, and for a second the excitement quieted into something else, something warmer. She then went to inform her parents and I rushed to the kitchen to tell my mum.

Mum was at the counter buttering toast when I walked in, trying to act casual, but I must have been grinning like an idiot. She turned around immediately, eyebrows raised.

"Well? Don't keep me waiting."

I held up my phone like a trophy. "LSE. I got in."

Her face lit up in a way I'll never forget. She put the knife down and rushed over, pulling me into a hug so tight I could barely breathe.

"Oh, Noah, I knew you would. I knew it. He would've been so proud." Her voice wavered on the last sentence, and we both knew exactly who she meant. For a moment, the kitchen was heavy with it: Dad's absence. But then she kissed my cheek and wiped her eyes quickly, refusing to let sadness steal the day.

"We're celebrating tonight. No arguments. I'll cook your favourite dinner."

"Pasta bake?"

"Of course pasta bake." She smiled and swatted my arm, then turned back to her toast like she hadn't just made me feel both ten feet tall and painfully small in the same second.

Then I told Ryan...

He picked up on the second ring, sounding half-asleep.

"What? It's barely —"

"I got into LSE."

There was a pause. Then a noise so loud I yanked the phone away from my ear.

"NO WAY. You absolute legend. I owe your mum fifty quid now."

I laughed. "What are you on about?"

"She bet you'd get into LSE. I said you'd mess up the personal statement. She was right, obviously."

"You actually made a bet with my mum?"

"Don't worry about the details. Mate, this is huge. We need to celebrate. Tonight. No excuses."

"Not tonight bro. Tomorrow? I promised mum I'd spend tonight with her."

I could picture him already bouncing around his room like he'd been the one accepted. That was Ryan: louder than necessary, loyal to the bone.

Then his voice turned mock-serious. "Wait. Did Lily get in too?"

"Yeah. She did."

"Ah. Of course. Now you're just showing off. Both of you at LSE. God help the rest of us."

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop smiling.

That night, Lily and I called again. We kept talking, bouncing between how our parents reacted, what the campus would look like, how we couldn't wait to walk down Kingsway as actual students. I stretched out on my bed, phone pressed against my ear, staring at the cracks in the ceiling, smiling like an idiot.

After a while, I asked, "So what's the plan, Lil? When are you moving?"

"In two weeks," she said. "Most of my stuff is already packed. It feels strange but also good, like the next chapter is waiting."

"That's perfect," I said quickly. "Because our first pottery class is in a little more than a month."

She groaned dramatically. "You remembered that?"

"Of course I remembered. Non-refundable, remember? You're stuck with me."

That made her laugh again, and I swear the sound went straight into my chest.

At some point we drifted into sillier territory, playing the Later, alligator game until we both cracked up, neither of us able to stop. It amazed me, how we could switch so effortlessly from talking about something as serious as college and life plans, to being absolute idiots on the phone. That balance was exactly why I didn't want to let her go.

There was a pause, and then I asked a question I had been holding back. "Hey, Lil... with your ex. Did you guys ever make plans? Like about the future?"

She hesitated. "Yeah. He wanted us to get married in India, then have a smaller reception in Italy."

For a second I felt a tightness in my chest, something sharp and unwelcome. But then I shook it off. "Well. Maybe we'll get married in Italy and go to India for our honeymoon. Or the other way around. I think we'd do it better."

She went quiet. Then she said softly, "You see a future with me."

"Of course I do."

I didn't mean to say it so quickly, but it was true, and I didn't want to take it back.

Her inhale was small, audible. "That makes me really happy."

We stayed like that, quiet but smiling, the line filled with nothing but our breaths.

Later that night, when the call finally ended, I couldn't sleep. I lay on my back staring at the ceiling, my phone on my chest still warm from the call. The city outside had gone still, but my

mind hadn't. I kept replaying her voice saying, "That makes me really happy."

For the first time in a long time, I felt like the future wasn't just a blur. It had a shape. And her face was in it.

Chapter 16



Lily

Time had begun to slip away faster than I could hold on to it. One moment, Noah and I had been on the phone, staring at our acceptance letters in disbelief, and the next I was counting down the days until I would leave Manchester behind. The two weeks in between blurred like watercolors running together, bright and soft and overwhelming all at once.

I tried to savour every part of it, though part of me was already in London.

The first few days I spent mostly at home, celebrating with my parents. My mum hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe when I told her about LSE, her eyes shining like she had been the one accepted. Dad patted me on the shoulder with a kind of quiet pride that felt heavier than words. We went out to dinner at my favourite Italian restaurant, and he even let me order wine, joking that if I was old enough to go to university, I was old enough to toast properly.

I kept glancing at them across the table, trying to memorise everything: the way Mum cut her lasagna too carefully, as if it might fall apart, the way Dad's laugh filled the room when I said something that wasn't even remotely funny. They had always believed in me, even when I doubted myself, and now I was about to leave them for a city that felt both familiar and unknown.

The next morning stretched longer than I thought it would. Mum sat across the table, her tea cooling while she told me about her first days at university. She said she had been so shy she could barely look at anyone in her class, but somehow ended up with friends for life because one girl offered her half a biscuit. I laughed, but I tucked it away inside me, the reminder that the smallest gestures could open doors.

Dad, on the other hand, treated breakfast like a mini-lecture. He pulled out his “adult life lessons” list: how to check expiry dates on groceries, the trick of rolling shirts instead of folding them, and the importance of always carrying extra change in London because “you never know when the card machine won’t work.” I teased him that I wasn’t moving to the 1980s, but he just ruffled my hair and said, “Some advice is timeless, Lil.”

Later that night, when I went to refill my water, I overheard Mum and Dad talking in low voices in the kitchen.

“She’s really grown up, hasn’t she?” Mum whispered.

“Yes,” Dad said, quieter than I’d ever heard him. “I just... I wish I could keep her here a little longer.”

There was a pause, then Mum’s voice, thick with pride: “She’s ready. And she’ll make us proud every single day.”

I didn’t step in. I just stood there for a second, heart swelling, before tiptoeing back to bed, clutching their words like a secret gift.

The next few days were spent with friends. We lingered in coffee shops, swapping stories about our plans, our nerves, the little details of packing. There was something bittersweet about it. Every conversation carried a weight, as if each laugh

and sip of coffee was a goodbye in disguise. My best friend from school, Anna, joked about how she was going to flood me with texts so I would never forget Manchester. I promised I would write back, though secretly I wondered how much time I would really have once London wrapped its arms around me.

At one café, Anna slid a tiny wrapped package across the table toward me. "Don't open it until you're in London," she warned, raising an eyebrow when I reached for it.

"What is it?" I grinned, shaking it lightly.

"Something to remind you that Manchester will always claim a piece of you," she said with mock solemnity.

Of course I opened it anyway. Inside was a small keychain with the word *MCR* engraved, the skyline etched faintly across the back. My throat tightened more than I wanted to admit.

We laughed about old things too, like the time James spilled milkshake all over my coursework and tried to dry it with a hair dryer, or the night Anna convinced us all to sneak into the cinema through the exit door and we got caught almost immediately. Everything felt both too normal and too precious, like we were aware that this might be the last time the group was exactly like this.

Later, when music spilled from someone's speaker, we danced on the pavement. We weren't graceful, but we didn't care. In that moment we were seventeen again, messy and alive, holding on to the familiar rhythm of us.

At night, though, everything was Noah.

We called every single evening without fail, sometimes until two or three in the morning. It was ridiculous, really, how

quickly it became part of my routine: brushing my teeth, curling into bed, and waiting for his name to flash across the screen. I had never felt so tethered to another person, not in a way that made me feel heavy, but in a way that felt like air in my lungs.

The calls had shifted from simply talking to playing. At first it was online Uno. I was almost embarrassingly good at it, always finding a way to sneak a win at the very last card. He groaned dramatically every time, saying the app must be biased in my favor. "You're cheating somehow, Lil, I know it," he'd insist, though I laughed so hard I could barely defend myself.

But Noah was clever. Within days, he found other games. Word puzzles, trivia apps, little strategy games he sent me links to. Somehow, he always managed to beat me at those, and he was insufferably smug about it. "See, I'm not completely useless," he teased one night when he won three times in a row. "You win Uno, I win at everything else. Balance in the universe restored."

Still, I secretly liked that he was the one teaching me new things, pulling me into worlds I would never have discovered on my own. It reminded me of how, even during the long nights of talking, he was always introducing me to something: songs, films, books- always leaving me with a piece of himself to hold onto.

One night, Uno got heated. Noah kept pulling draw-fours at the worst possible moments.

"You're cheating," I accused, throwing my hands up when he cornered me again.

"Lily, you just don't have the skill," he teased. "Uno is an art form. And I am the artist."

I rolled my eyes so hard he nearly fell off his chair laughing. But when I finally, finally managed to win, I jumped up on my bed in victory and he had to admit defeat. "Fine, you win this time. But tomorrow we're playing chess."

Another night, he started telling me a story about Ryan doing something ridiculous with a skateboard, but halfway through his sentences got slower, softer, until I realised he'd fallen asleep mid-call. I didn't hang up. Instead I lay there in the dark, listening to the quiet rhythm of his breathing. It was strangely comforting, like proof that even in silence, he was there.

There were also nights where my voice cracked, just a little, when I admitted I was scared about leaving Manchester, about starting over. "What if I don't fit in? What if I'm not good enough?"

He didn't laugh, didn't brush it off. "Lil," he said firmly, "you'll be fine. You're more than fine. You're going to walk into that lecture hall and make it yours. And even if you don't believe it yet, I believe it for both of us."

I closed my eyes, letting those words wrap around me. Somehow, even miles away, he managed to steady me.

Some nights, our conversations slipped into futures we weren't sure how to name.

He always mentioned subtly that he saw me in his future. I had always smiled into the dark, cheeks warm, heart pounding in disbelief. He always said it so casually, like it was the most natural thing in the world to imagine a forever with me. Those sentences stayed with me all night. I couldn't stop

picturing it. I would imagine the way his eyes might look when he said vows, the way his hand might feel in mine decades from now. It wasn't just a fantasy. It was a glimpse of the fact that he saw me in his future, too.

The days went by quickly. I spent hours packing, though my room never seemed to look emptier no matter how many bags I filled. I wrapped up books, folded clothes, tucked away memories I wasn't ready to let go of. Every time I taped a box shut, it felt like drawing a line between past and future.

Sometimes Mum would help, carefully labelling things. Sometimes I packed alone, phone propped up on the dresser as Noah kept me company, talking about nothing and everything. He made the work lighter, asking me to hold up clothes and debating which ones I'd actually wear in London. "That jumper is definitely coming with you," he'd say. "It's practically iconic now."

By the end of the first week, almost everything was ready.

The second week was slower, like the hush before a storm. I went for long walks in the neighbourhood, memorising streets I had known my whole life. I baked with Mum one afternoon, something we hadn't done in years, and she laughed when I accidentally spilled flour everywhere. Dad sat with me in the evenings, half-watching TV, half asking questions about London that I didn't always know the answers to.

With friends, the goodbyes grew heavier. We went out dancing one night, and I found myself staring at them across the crowded room, knowing everything was about to change. I wondered if we would ever be this close again, or if distance and time would turn us into memories.

But with Noah, there was no heaviness. Only excitement.

We played more games, made more plans, talked about our classes and how we would sit together in lectures. He teased me about getting lost on campus, and I teased him back about being too confident. We played “Later, alligator” every night before hanging up, the silly little ritual somehow sacred. It was ours, like so many other things now.

The night before moving, I couldn’t sleep. I lay awake staring at the ceiling, heart racing with a mixture of nerves and joy. Noah stayed with me on the phone, even though he had things to do the next day. He told me stories about his neighbourhood, random childhood memories, anything to keep me calm.

“You’ll be here so soon,” he said softly.

“I know.”

And for once, the distance between us didn’t feel so impossible.

The morning I left, the sky was pale and streaked with pink. I woke early, even though I had barely slept. My room looked strange with most of my things packed away, as if it already belonged to someone else. My suitcases lined the hallway, neat and heavy. Mum fussed around, checking if I had everything. Dad carried bags to the car, his movements slower than usual, like he was drawing out every step. I hugged them both tighter than I had in years.

Anna came over too, determined to be a part of the see-off. The three people I loved the most in this world were standing with me in the living room, and suddenly, the reality of it all crashed over me.

We hugged, all at once, and the laughter that usually came with moments like this didn’t show up this time. Instead, there were tears. Mine, Mum’s, even Dad’s though he tried to hide

them. Mum's hands shook as she smoothed down my hair. Dad cleared his throat too many times. Anna pressed her face into my shoulder and whispered, "I'm so proud of you." I felt the same pride for her, for all of us who were stepping into this new phase of life, but words got tangled up in my throat.

When I finally pulled away, wiping my eyes, I knew things would never be the same again. But maybe that was the point. Maybe this was how it was supposed to feel when life was really beginning.

"I'll call every day," I promised, though we all knew calls would never be the same as being here.

Mum kissed my forehead. "We know, love. But don't forget to live your life there. Don't just look back."

Dad's voice cracked when he said, "Make us proud, Lily."

As we loaded the car, I looked back at the house one last time. My room, my street, my Manchester. It felt strange to leave, but underneath the ache was a thrill I couldn't deny. Because ahead of me was London. Ahead of me was Noah. Ahead of me was everything I had been dreaming of.

I had imagined this day so many times, thought I would leave brimming with nothing but excitement. But as I sat in the car there, clinging to them, what I felt most of all was love. Love so sharp it ached; love so deep it made the leaving hurt as much as it made it matter.

And for the first time, I felt ready.

Chapter 17



Noah

The couple of weeks before Lily arrived stretched out in ways I couldn't quite name. They were short and long at the same time, like someone had folded time over itself. Every morning I woke up with this surge of anticipation and this little ache that she wasn't here yet.

I tried to fill my days. Some mornings I went for runs, partly to clear my head, partly because I liked the idea of arriving at university already feeling like I had some kind of routine. My mum fussed about my packing, stopping by my room to remind me about adapters or bedding or notebooks, and I let her. Sometimes I caught her looking at me with that soft, proud smile that made my chest twist.

But every time my acceptance letters lay on the desk, my eyes flicked toward them and I thought of my dad. He should have been here to see this. He should have been the one ruffling my hair, telling me I had done well, that I had made it. There were moments when the pride of getting in blurred into something sharper, almost grief, like success had come with the wrong audience.

At night, though, all that weight dissolved. Because night meant Lily.

We had built this strange, beautiful pattern. By the time the clock pushed past eleven, I was waiting for her message. Sometimes she'd beat me to it, a quick "ready for tonight?" text

that felt like a spark in my chest. Other times I'd send the first nudge, pretending to sound casual but grinning at the screen like an idiot.

Our calls stretched into the early hours. We talked about everything: the films we wanted to watch together, the classes we were nervous about, what snacks we would bring to campus, how much toothpaste to pack. It was the most ordinary and extraordinary thing in the world, being able to talk about nothing and everything with her.

And then came the UNO battles.

I swear she cheated.

"Noah," she'd laugh down the line, the kind of laugh that sounded like sunlight. "You're terrible at this."

"I'm not terrible. You're suspiciously good."

"Suspiciously good? That's just another way of saying you're bad at it."

"You're lucky I can't flip the table on this app. I'd do it just for effect."

She always won. Every round. I'd play with this stubborn determination, holding my cards like they were strategy itself, and then she'd drop a perfect combo and leave me staring at my screen. The first few nights, I groaned about it. But secretly, I liked hearing how proud she sounded.

Then I discovered another game in the app store. Something strategy-based, a little harder. I sent her the link.

"Bet you can't beat me here," I teased.

Challenge accepted.

She wasn't bad, but finally I had the upper hand. The first time I won, I leaned back in my chair with a grin so wide my cheeks hurt.

"Noooo," she groaned. "How did you do that?"

"Natural talent, Lil. Some of us are just gifted."

"You're insufferable."

"Correction: I'm victorious."

I could hear her muttering on the other end, but she was smiling too. Those nights were full of laughter and teasing, but beneath it, there was something steady and real, something that made my chest tighten. We were building memories even when separated by miles.

Sometimes, after the calls ended, I just lay there in the dark, staring at the ceiling. The house was quiet, everyone asleep, and all I could think about was how it would feel to finally see her again. Not just on a screen. Not just through words. But in front of me, close enough to touch. I pictured her smile, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the way her voice would sound without the slight distortion of the call. I pictured holding her, just holding her, and it felt like waiting for something more real than any dream.

During the days, I tried not to count down the hours. I met Ryan a few times, went to the shops with him, talked about uni. He teased me endlessly about Lily.

"Bet you're checking your phone every five seconds," he said one afternoon.

"I am not."

"You are. You're literally doing it right now."

I glanced down at my phone. Lily had sent a snap of her dog, captioned *she misses me already*. My lips twitched.

"See?" Ryan smirked. "Hopeless."

I shoved him, but he wasn't wrong.

The night before she was due to arrive, I barely slept. I was excited to meet her, sure, but I didn't sleep because Lily needed me. She was really sad about leaving the only city she'd ever called home. She didn't say she was upset, but it was evident through her voice. But I also knew she was excited for this new chapter. Not just to meet me, but also to start studying at her dream university, gaining knowledge, and making countless new memories with many new friends.

That night we cut the call sooner. She needed the rest. But I still didn't sleep. What if she needed me in the middle of the night? I was really tired and had a million things to do the next few days, but none of it mattered because my head was buzzing with one thing: tomorrow. Tomorrow I would see her. Tomorrow I would know if reality could match this thing we had spun between us.

I got to the station early. Too early. My nerves made it impossible to sit still, so I paced the platform, checked my phone a dozen times. Her train was a few minutes late, and those minutes felt like entire years. My heart hammered in my chest. What if it was awkward? What if she looked at me differently in person? What if this bubble burst?

And then the train pulled in.

The doors opened, and people spilled out, dragging suitcases, carrying bags, hugging relatives. My eyes scanned the crowd, fast, too fast, until I saw her.

Lily.

She spotted me almost instantly. Her face broke into the widest smile I had ever seen, and before I could even move, she was running.

I barely had time to open my arms before she crashed into me. She melted against me, burying her face in my shoulder, and everything I had worried about dissolved. She was here. Real. Solid. My arms wrapped around her instinctively, holding her like I'd been waiting my whole life to.

For a long moment, the world blurred. There was only her. The weight of her against me, the warmth, the way she trembled slightly like maybe she had been just as nervous. My throat tightened, and I whispered against her hair.

"You're finally here."

Her reply was muffled, but I felt the shape of it against my chest. "I missed you."

I held her tighter, afraid to let go. Because in that instant, I knew something simple and undeniable: whatever came next, however complicated university life would be, this was the thing I wanted to hold onto.

And for the first time in weeks, everything felt exactly right.

When she finally pulled back from my arms at the station, I swear I felt the weight of those two weeks just fall away. She was here. No more calls where I fell asleep to the sound of her voice. No more staring at my phone waiting for her to come online. Lily was standing right in front of me, her eyes bright, her hair a little messy from the travel, but to me she looked like the most beautiful person in London.

I had been carrying the bouquet of lilies like some awkward schoolboy hiding a secret, and when I finally remembered to hand them to her, she laughed softly.

"You didn't have to," she said, but her fingers tightened around the stems as if she never wanted to let go.

"Of course I did," I replied. The way she smiled then, it felt like I had given her the world. And for me, that was enough.

I insisted on taking her bags, though she argued half-heartedly. As we walked side by side out of the station, her suitcase wheels rattling softly against the pavement, I kept sneaking glances at her. The same girl I had been looking at through a pixelated screen for weeks was now here, close enough that the fabric of her sleeve brushed mine when our arms swung too close.

It felt surreal. I could hear the small sounds she made when she shifted her bag on her shoulder, see the way her hair moved in the breeze, and it was so different from the silence of a phone call. I kept thinking: she is here. Not somewhere across a continent, not behind glass and signals, but right here.

"Are you staring at me?" she asked suddenly, catching me mid-glance.

"Maybe," I said, not even bothering to deny it.

She laughed, that same laugh that always made me feel like I had won something. "You look nervous."

"Of course I am. This is... the first time I get to walk beside you like this. I don't want to mess it up."

"You won't," she said, bumping her shoulder into mine. "It's just us. Like always."

But it didn't feel like "just us." It felt like the world had tilted slightly, giving me a version of life where she was closer than I had thought possible.

We walked out into the bright afternoon, London's usual rush buzzing around us. I hailed a cab and slid in beside her, every second hyperaware of the fact that she was so close, that her shoulder brushed mine, that her perfume was mixing with the city air in a way I was certain I'd never forget.

At her hotel, I told her to go rest. She had just gotten off a train and looked exhausted, but she still tilted her head at me with that playful defiance. "Rest? When you're standing right here? Not happening."

I laughed and reached into my bag. "Well, in that case... I have something else for you."

Her brows furrowed. "What did you do?"

I pulled out the carefully folded box, my heart pounding. "Just... open it."

She lifted the lid slowly, and when she saw the dress, she gasped. It was a soft, pale blue, the kind of color that reminded me of morning skies. "Noah..."

"I thought we could go out tonight. Nothing fancy. Just dinner. But I wanted you to have something new, something that feels like a fresh beginning."

For a second, she didn't say anything. Then she whispered, "You're unbelievable."

I grinned. "Unbelievable in a good way, right?"

She shook her head, smiling so wide her cheeks turned pink. "The best way."

While she got ready, I paced outside her hotel room door like an idiot, checking my watch every two minutes. I kept imagining her slipping into the dress, brushing her hair, putting on a touch of lipstick, and the thought made my chest ache in the sweetest way. I must have looked ridiculous, but I could not sit still.

When the door finally opened, my jaw nearly dropped.

The dress fit her like it was made for her, the soft fabric flowing just right, the color making her eyes look impossibly bright. For a moment, all I could do was stare.

"You're staring," she teased, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah," I breathed. "I can't help it."

She rolled her eyes, but I caught the way her lips twitched like she was trying not to smile too hard.

We took another cab, this time toward a little Mediterranean restaurant I had found a week earlier. It was tucked into a quiet street, all warm yellow lights strung above the doorway and soft music drifting out. Inside, the air smelled of rosemary, garlic, and freshly baked bread. The tables were small, intimate, each one lit by a flickering candle.

I had spent days overthinking this dinner. I wanted it to feel special but not too much, comfortable but not casual to the point of forgettable.

"Did you pick this place?" she asked, glancing around at the rustic brick walls and the smell of garlic and rosemary floating through the air.

"Yeah. I might have Googled way too many restaurants and read an unhealthy number of reviews before booking it," I admitted.

She smirked. "So basically, you were trying to impress me."

"Obviously. Did it work?"

She tilted her head as if seriously considering it. "Hmm... the candlelight helps. But I'll need to taste the food before I decide."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Tough critic."

As soon as we sat down, the noise of the world faded. It felt like it was just us, cocooned in this golden light. She looked around, taking it all in, and then leaned closer. "You really planned this."

"Of course I did," I said. "I've had two weeks to think about nothing but you. What else would I do with that time?"

She shook her head, laughing under her breath. "You're impossible."

When the bread basket arrived, she tore into it with such enthusiasm that I couldn't stop grinning. "I don't know why you're smiling at me like that," she said through a mouthful of warm bread.

"Because this is perfect," I said simply. "You're here. And I don't have to imagine it anymore."

Her eyes softened, and for a second it felt like the entire restaurant disappeared, leaving just us at that little candlelit table.

I thought about how this was just the beginning. Just the first dinner of what I hoped would be countless more. The first

candlelit table, the first time we clinked glasses in celebration of something only we understood.

At one point, she caught me staring again. "What's going on in that head of yours?" she asked.

"Honestly?" I said, resting my chin on my hand. "That this feels like the kind of evening I'll remember forever. That you look beautiful. And that for the first time in weeks, I don't have to imagine you. You're right here."

Her eyes softened, and for a moment, neither of us spoke. The restaurant hummed around us, voices blending with the clatter of cutlery, but it all felt distant. What mattered was her hand brushing mine on the table, her smile flickering in the candlelight, the quiet certainty settling in my chest that I didn't just want this moment. I wanted every moment after it, too.

After dinner, neither of us wanted the night to end, so we walked. The streets were glowing with yellow lamplight, the city buzzing with weekend life. Every time we passed a group of people laughing or a bus rumbling by, I kept thinking: she's here, walking beside me, and the city suddenly feels alive in a way it never did before.

We stopped at a small gelato stand, the kind that looked like it belonged in some tucked-away corner of Italy. She chose pistachio, I picked hazelnut, and we shared bites like we had been doing this forever.

"This feels unreal," she whispered at one point, spooning a bit of her gelato into my cup.

"I know," I admitted. "I keep thinking I'll wake up back in my room with my phone buzzing at 2 a.m."

She smiled at that, leaning lightly against me as we walked, "Except this time, I'm here. No buzzing screen."

We ended up on a quiet bench near the Thames, the water catching reflections of the city lights. We didn't talk much at first, just sat there, letting the silence stretch comfortably between us. Then she said softly, "I don't want this night to end."

"Then it won't," I said, even though I knew time would keep moving. But in that moment, with her hand brushing against mine on the bench, it felt like we had managed to stop it, just for a little while.

When I dropped her back at her hotel, I pressed a paper ring into her palm before she could go. She looked down at it, then up at me, eyebrows raised in that half-teasing way of hers.

"A ring, Noah? Bold move."

"Just until I can afford a real one," I said, trying to sound casual, but my voice came out quieter than I meant.

She slipped it onto her finger anyway, smiling as if it were gold. "Fits perfectly."

And as she disappeared through the hotel doors, I caught myself thinking that maybe it did not matter what it was made of. Paper or gold, temporary or permanent, the point was she wore it. She chose to.

Maybe the smallest promises are the ones that last the longest.

Highlight of the day? Seeing her look drop dead gorgeous in that dress wearing a paper ring I made out of the wrapper of the straws of our drinks.

Stunning girl . . .

Chapter 18



Lily

The train hummed beneath me, steady and unchanging, as though the whole world had decided to smooth out its edges for this one morning. I had pressed my forehead against the cool glass, watching the English countryside rush past in muted greens and soft browns, all blurred together by the speed. My suitcase rested against my legs, half-filled with clothes and half-filled with nervous energy.

Every mile brought me closer to London, closer to him.

Noah.

It was strange: two weeks ago, I hadn't known if I could survive without hearing his voice, and now I knew I never wanted to go another day without it. The nights had been ours, carved out between time zones and family dinners and late-night study sessions. UNO matches that left him groaning in defeat and me laughing so hard I nearly woke my parents. And then, those small but maddeningly sweet things, like how he always asked if I had eaten, how he noticed if my tone shifted even slightly, how he slipped jokes into silences that might have been awkward with anyone else.

I had replayed the scene of our reunion a thousand times in my head: how he would stand there at the station, whether he would smile first or I would, whether I would cry like a fool the moment I saw him. Each version ended the same. Me

running into his arms, as though every step of the last few weeks had been leading me here.

The announcements over the intercom jolted me. London was minutes away now. I sat up straighter, smoothed down my skirt, checked my hair in the reflection of the window. My hands trembled as I gripped the handle of my suitcase. I wanted to look perfect, but mostly I wanted to feel ready.

And then the train slowed, screeching into the station, and my heart started beating so wildly I thought it might give me away to every stranger around me.

I stepped off the train, scanning the crowd. And there he was.

Noah stood a little apart from the bustle, a backpack slung casually over his shoulder, his eyes searching until they landed on me. The moment he saw me, his entire face softened, breaking into that smile that had undone me on our very first night of talking.

I didn't think. I just moved. My suitcase clattered against the platform as I let go of it and walked quickly. Then faster, straight into him.

And then I was home. His arms closed around me, warm and solid, and I buried my face against his chest.

"I missed you," I whispered, the words tumbling out, small but fierce.

"I missed you too, Lil," he murmured against my hair. I could feel the vibration of his voice in his chest, steadying me, grounding me. He didn't let go until I did, and even then his hand lingered at my waist as though to make sure I wouldn't drift too far.

When he pulled back, he was holding something behind him.
A bouquet.

Pink lilies.

My throat tightened. Of course.

"For you," he said simply, as though handing me lilies was the most natural thing in the world.

I held them close, the petals brushing my cheek. "They're beautiful," I said, but what I meant was *you remembered, you always remember, how could you possibly know me this well already?*

We walked out of the station together, his hand occasionally brushing mine, both of us stealing glances that felt like secrets. He hailed a cab, his movements easy, practiced, as if he had rehearsed this day too.

At the hotel, he carried my suitcase without protest, then unzipped his backpack and pulled out a small box. "This is for you," he said, holding it out with a mixture of confidence and nerves.

I frowned, curious, and opened it. Inside lay a white dress, folded neatly, its fabric catching the light with a quiet elegance.

My lips parted. "Noah . . ."

"I want you to wear it tonight," he said softly. "I have plans for us."

For a moment, I just stared at him, stunned by the thoughtfulness, the effort. I had expected maybe dinner, maybe a walk. Not this. Not a whole evening carefully designed for me.

“Okay,” I managed, smiling at him with something that felt both shy and wide open. “Give me a few minutes.”

In the bathroom, I slipped into the dress, smoothing the fabric down my sides. It fit as though it had been waiting for me. I looked at myself in the mirror and barely recognized the girl staring back: she looked a little older, a little softer, as though she belonged here in this moment.

When I stepped out, Noah was sitting on the edge of the bed, scrolling through his phone. He looked up, and the phone slipped slightly in his hand.

“You look. . .” He trailed off, shaking his head with a grin that reached his eyes. “Gorgeous.”

Heat rose to my cheeks. “You picked it,” I reminded him, trying to hide how much the compliment settled into me, warming every corner.

We called for another cab, and while we waited, he noticed me fidgeting with the bouquet. “Let me take a picture,” he said, already pulling out his phone.

I laughed. “Of me?”

“Of course. With the flowers. You look like you were made to hold them.”

I rolled my eyes, but I stood near the window, lifting the bouquet slightly. He clicked a few photos, directing me with gentle teasing: “Tilt your head a little. No, not like that. You’re overthinking it. Just. . . be you.”

And when I finally relaxed, his grin widened. “There. Perfect.”

The restaurant was Mediterranean, with low candlelight and soft music drifting between tables. It was intimate without being intimidating, romantic without feeling forced.

As we sat, Noah leaned forward slightly, watching my expression. "Do you like it?"

I looked around, then back at him. "The candlelight makes the place seem great," I said honestly, "but I'll properly review it after the food arrives."

He chuckled, shaking his head, "A proper critic."

When the drinks came, I noticed him fiddling with the straw wrapper, his fingers folding it with quiet concentration. It struck me then how he was always making something out of nothing: a joke out of silence, a paper ring out of a wrapper.

Dinner passed in easy conversation; laughter tucked between bites of food. He didn't stop asking if I liked everything, as though my happiness was the only measure that mattered.

Afterward, we walked through the streets, the city buzzing around us. We stopped for gelato, pistachio for me, hazelnut for him. "I'm not sharing," I warned, holding my cup protectively.

"Good," he replied with mock seriousness. "I wasn't planning to share mine either."

We laughed, the sound carrying into the night. We still ended up sharing.

Eventually, we found a bench near the Thames, the river glinting in the lamplight. We sat in silence, but it wasn't empty. It was full. My thoughts buzzed with everything I wanted to say, everything I didn't need to say because it was all there in

the way his arm brushed mine, in the way our feet pointed toward each other.

When he dropped me back at the hotel, he hesitated for a second before pulling something from his pocket. A paper ring. “This is just until I can afford a real one,” he said, sliding it gently onto my finger.

I blinked rapidly, suddenly overwhelmed. My throat burned with a rush of emotion I couldn’t quite contain.

“Noah . . .” My voice cracked. I didn’t even finish the sentence. I didn’t need to.

That night, after he left and I was alone in my room, I sat on the bed staring at the paper ring on my finger, the bouquet resting in a glass of water on the desk, the white dress still soft against my skin.

My phone buzzed. I opened Dina’s chat.

I typed fast, my fingers almost tripping over themselves:

Dina. He was waiting for me at the station with pink lilies. Pink lilies. And then he gave me a white dress to wear because he had planned this whole evening for us. We went to this candlelit restaurant, and he made a paper ring out of a straw wrapper. After gelato we sat near the Thames. And then he gave me the ring. I can’t even explain it. I don’t know how to breathe right now. I think I’m falling so hard.

I hit send, then lay back against the pillows, clutching the phone to my chest, my heart pounding in a rhythm that felt like his name.

Chapter 19



Noah

The weeks after Lily arrived in London blurred into a kind of golden rhythm. Life was no longer divided into nights on the phone and mornings of silence; instead, I could see her almost every day. We had settled into a pattern without ever saying we were doing it: meeting at Café Nero, the one near Holborn, a place that quickly became ours.

It was not fancy. The tables were always slightly sticky, the coffee machine hissed louder than it needed to, and the staff seemed to rotate so quickly I never recognized the same face twice. But the corner booth by the window was ours, and that was enough.

Every time we met there, I brought her lilies. Pink ones mostly, sometimes white if the florist had them. She laughed the first time I showed up with another bouquet, insisting I was wasting money, but then she pressed her nose against the petals like she could not resist them. So, I kept buying them. I told myself it was because lilies suited her, but really it was because I wanted her to remember me every time she placed them in water back at the hotel.

She would always pretend to be annoyed – “Noah, you do realize you can’t keep this up forever. My whole dorm is going to look like a greenhouse.”

And I would grin, leaning back in my chair: "Good. That's the plan. You surrounded by lilies, just like your name."

It became our joke. She would roll her eyes, but she never told me to stop.

Inside Café Nero, we carved out little rituals. She always ordered a strawberry matcha, and I always got a flat white, and without fail she reached across the table for the biscuit that came with my flat white.

"It tastes better when its stolen." she would say.

I had never even heard of strawberry matcha before she came along, and the first time she ordered it the barista had looked at her like she was asking for something strange. I think no one really preferred matcha over Café Nero's famous flat white. Lily had smiled anyway, leaning forward on the counter with that casual confidence of hers, as though the world would rearrange itself just to give her what she wanted.

By the time I joined her at the table with my flat white, she was already stirring the drink with the flimsy wooden stick they gave out, watching the pink syrup swirl into the pale green like it was a private show just for her.

"You know it looks radioactive, right?" I teased, sliding into the seat across from her.

She tilted her head, unbothered. "You say radioactive, I say art." She took the first sip, closing her eyes like she was tasting something rare and important. Then she opened them again and smiled. "It tastes like childhood and future at the same time."

I could not argue with her, partly because I did not understand what that meant and partly because I was distracted by the

pink foam on her lip. I reached out with my thumb before I thought better of it, brushing it away. She blinked at me, cheeks colouring just slightly, then looked down at her cup like she was hiding a smile.

It became her thing after that. Every single time, without fail — strawberry matcha. The baristas started to recognise her, their expressions caught somewhere between confusion and amusement, but they learned her order well enough. I sometimes wondered if she liked the drink as much as she said, or if she liked the act of claiming something strange and making it hers.

She would always poke fun at me for drinking something so plain.

“Flat white, Noah? Again? You’re like a seventy-year-old man who retired in a cardigan.”

“At least I am consistent,” I said.

“Consistently boring,” she shot back, sipping her bright pink-and-green latte like it was a trophy.

I never told her that I secretly liked the way the café smelled after she ordered it. The strawberry syrup left a faint sweetness in the air between us, and it clung to her hands when she passed me the paper cup to hold while she fixed her hair. The scent became tied to her in my mind, inseparable.

Sometimes, while she stirred the drink in that absentminded way she had, I would fold one of the café’s paper napkins into a ring. It was not as sturdy as the ones I made with real paper, but she always slid it onto her finger like it was precious. She wore those silly napkin rings all through our conversations,

fidgiting with them, twirling them around her knuckle, until the paper went soft and frayed. Then I would make another.

The staff must have thought we were ridiculous. Two students sitting in the same corner booth every few days, surrounded by lilies, sipping drinks, folding paper rings. But none of that mattered to me. What mattered was that she laughed in that café like nowhere else, freely, the sound bubbling up over the hiss of the machines. It was not just Café Nero that shaped those first weeks. Most evenings ended the same way, back in Lily's hotel room, surrounded by half-filled boxes and the faint sweetness of lilies in mismatched glass bottles. By now the desk had been cleared of its official papers and was buried under rolls of tape, open scissors, and labels. I had carried so many boxes down to the lobby that the staff barely looked up anymore.

Her mum kept sending parcels labelled "essentials," though the word made both of us laugh. One week it was a stack of heavy cookbooks. Another week it was a full set of measuring cups and an electric kettle. "As though I am going to host high tea in my single room," Lily muttered, holding the kettle up in disbelief before making space for it in a box. Every time she unwrapped something new, I could see how it weighed on her: more things to fit into a space already too small, more proof that her mum wanted to take care of her even from a distance.

So we packed. Not just once, not even twice, but almost every night for the next three weeks. It became its own rhythm. We would meet at Café Nero in the afternoons, then later that evening I would make my way to the hotel, where Lily and Dina were already knee-deep in another round of sorting, folding, and labelling.

The first evening I met Dina felt almost formal, like an introduction that carried weight. Lily had talked about her so much that I already knew her name and half her stories, but meeting her in person was different. She had this sharp presence, not unkind but steady, the sort of energy that filled a space without demanding it. When we shook hands, her grip was quick and firm, and I had the strange sensation that she was filing away details about me, weighing them against what Lily must have told her.

After that, it became normal. Dina and I would both show up, and Lily would immediately put us to work. Some nights Dina folded clothes into neat stacks while I wrestled with boxes, only to tape them shut too soon and get scolded by Lily for trapping the scarves or chargers inside. Other nights Dina handled the labelling with surgical precision while Lily and I bickered over whether her tote bags could be stuffed together or needed their own box. Lily's laughter threaded between us, smoothing out the differences in our styles, keeping the work light.

Her mum's parcels were a constant source of amusement. One evening it was a box of kitchen supplies, another time it was matching soap dispensers and a bathmat embroidered with flowers. Lily groaned and held it up like evidence against her mother. "She thinks I am moving into a house, not a dorm."

"At least you will be the only student with coordinated soap dispensers," I teased.

Dina, usually quiet, allowed the faintest smile to slip across her face. "She is not wrong. It will look nicer than whatever plastic bottle everyone else brings."

Lily narrowed her eyes at us like we were both conspiring against her, then tossed the bathmat onto the growing pile with exaggerated drama.

Over time, the evenings blurred into each other. Dina perched cross-legged on the bed, folding clothes so precisely it looked like origami, while I tried to carry too many boxes at once and nearly tripped over Lily's shoes. Lily moved between us constantly, hair falling into her face as she bent to dig through piles of notebooks or laughed when I inevitably made a mess of her system. Sometimes music played from her phone, soft background noise that Lily hummed along to without realising. Other times the room was filled only with the sound of tape tearing, zippers being pulled, and Dina occasionally clearing her throat when we got too caught up arguing about scarves.

In between all of it, I kept reminding Lily that our pottery classes were about to start soon. It had become my favourite subject to bring up, maybe because it gave me something to look forward to beyond the endless boxes. "Only a week left, Lil," I said one evening, carefully stacking her cookbooks into a carton. "You better be ready to get clay all over your hands."

She straightened up from the floor, a cardigan slung over her shoulder, and shot me a mock glare. "You say that like I am not going to be brilliant at it. Watch me, Noah, I will probably make something better than you on the first day."

I laughed. "You cannot even fold scarves, and you are talking about sculpting mugs."

She stuck her tongue out at me, playful, and for a moment the room felt lighter. These were the kinds of moments I looked forward to, the ones that made all the packing feel less like work and more like time spent with her.

But then Dina, who had been quietly folding a stack of shirts on the bed, looked up. "Actually," she said evenly, "my boyfriend and I signed up for that class too."

The words dropped into the room like a weight. My hands froze on the edge of the box. For a second, I forgot to breathe.

I turned toward her slowly. "Oh," I managed, trying to arrange my face into something polite. "That is... good."

Dina went back to folding as if she had only mentioned the weather. Her tone carried no edge, no accusation, but I could not stop the thought from crawling through my head: she only joined to keep an eye on me. As though she wanted to sit there across the clay wheel and make sure I was treating Lily right.

Before I could dwell too much on it, Lily clapped her hands together, eyes shining. "I already knew," she confessed, glancing between us. "I am the one who sent Dina the link. I thought it would be fun if we all did it together."

"Fun," I echoed, though it came out weaker than I intended.

She was glowing, so completely pleased with the idea that for a second I felt guilty for the pit forming in my stomach. "Can you imagine?" she went on, her hands gesturing animatedly. "The three of us, and maybe we can all sit near each other. It will be chaotic but so much fun."

Dina raised a brow. "I am not sure chaotic is the word I would use."

"Exactly," Lily said, undeterred. "You will be the organised one. Noah will be the messy one. And I will be the one making masterpieces."

I tried to smile, because her excitement was so genuine it felt wrong not to. But under the surface, the disappointment sat

heavy. The pottery class was supposed to be ours: her and me, a little pocket of time we carved out just for us. Now it would be something else entirely, with Dina watching from the next wheel, her presence shaping the space even when she said nothing.

Still, when Lily looked at me, her eyes bright and expectant, I forced my grin wider. "Fine," I said. "But I am still making the better mug."

She laughed, tossing the cardigan at me in mock challenge, and the tension in the room thinned just enough to keep me quiet.

Chapter 20



Lily

Café Nero became ours before I even realised it. Not because it was beautiful or quiet. It was neither, but because every time I walked past Holborn station, I knew that if I pushed open that door, Noah would be there waiting for me. The café itself was ordinary, sometimes irritatingly so. The tables wobbled, the chairs squeaked, the air was heavy with the smell of burnt milk and too-sweet syrup. Yet I loved it, because the corner booth by the window became our booth.

He always walked in with lilies, every single time. I told him not to. I told him he was wasting money. But then I would lean down and press my face into the petals anyway, pretending not to notice how the scent clung to my hair. He grinned every time, like he knew I was only half-serious when I scolded him.

“Noah,” I said one afternoon, setting the bouquet into an empty water glass. “You do realise you can’t keep this up forever. My whole dorm is going to look like a greenhouse.”

He leaned back, smug. “Good. That’s the plan. You surrounded by lilies, just like your name.”

I rolled my eyes, but a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Part of me wanted to tell him to stop. A much larger part of me never wanted him to.

We carved out tiny rituals there. I ordered strawberry matcha without fail, and he pretended to be scandalised every single

time. The first day, the barista had stared at me like I was insane, but I only smiled. It tasted like something that belonged to me, something that no one else would think to order.

When the drink came, pale green stirred through with syrupy pink, Noah wrinkled his nose. "You know it looks radioactive, right?"

I tilted the cup toward him. "You say radioactive, I say art." I took a sip, closing my eyes with exaggerated reverence. "It tastes like childhood and future at the same time."

He blinked, obviously baffled, and I bit back a laugh. "You don't get it, do you?"

"Nope. Not even a little," he admitted.

"That's why you're boring," I teased, stealing the biscuit that came with his flat white.

We had that argument almost every visit: my strawberry matcha against his flat white. He said my drink looked like poison. I said his tasted like cardboard. Neither of us ever switched orders. That was the point.

Sometimes, while I stirred the drink, I caught him folding the flimsy napkins into little rings. He always slid one across the table like he was giving me something precious, and I always slipped it onto my finger, twirling it until the paper softened and frayed. One afternoon, I told him, "You know, you're basically proposing to me every time you do this."

He choked on his coffee so violently that the people at the next table turned to stare. I laughed until my stomach hurt.

The staff probably thought we were ridiculous: two students camping out in the same corner booth, lilies on the table, one

of us sipping neon-coloured matcha while the other folded napkins into rings. But I didn't care. I laughed differently in that café. Lighter. As though the noise and the hiss of the coffee machine gave me permission to stop holding myself in.

That was Café Nero for me. Not fancy, not perfect, but ours.

Sometimes, when I walked past it alone, I caught myself slowing down just to look at the corner booth. If Noah wasn't sitting there, it looked strangely empty, like the café itself had lost some of its meaning. I realised then that it wasn't the lilies or the strawberry matcha or even the silly napkin rings that made it ours. It was him across from me, leaning back in his chair with that grin he thought was subtle but never was. Without him, it was just another café. With him, it felt like the beginning of a story I hadn't read yet but desperately wanted to keep turning the pages of.

The hotel room no longer looked like a hotel room. By the second week, it was more like a warehouse, every surface buried under boxes and bubble wrap and the steady chaos of moving. Yet somehow, I loved it. I loved it because every evening, when the door clicked open, it meant Noah was here, and then Dina was here too. My best friend and my boyfriend in the same room. It felt like two parts of my life I had always kept separate were finally meeting in the middle.

I watched them shake hands the first night, Dina steady and observant, Noah a little too polite like he was being tested. My chest felt warm. It mattered to me, more than I could say, that the people I loved most knew each other. From that night on, it stopped feeling formal. They came, we packed, and the evenings blurred together in the best way.

Dina sat cross-legged on the bed, folding clothes with the precision of a shop display, while Noah kept trying to carry more boxes than anyone should. He had this habit of sealing cartons too quickly, and I would scold him, laughing, "Noah, the chargers are still in there!" He would groan dramatically, peel the tape back, and start again. I teased him constantly, but secretly, I adored the way he kept showing up, uncomplaining, even when the work was dull. There was something grounding about watching him wrestle with cardboard and tape just for me.

Every new parcel from my mum turned into its own performance. First the cookbooks, then the measuring cups, then the matching soap dispensers. Noah held the bath mat up like it was treasure, Dina raised one eyebrow, and I groaned. "She thinks I am moving into a house, not a dorm." But underneath my complaints, I knew these parcels were little love letters from home.

Packing could have been exhausting, but it wasn't, not with the two of them beside me. I found myself humming sometimes, moving between the bed and the desk, half-organising, half-watching. I kept catching myself staring at Noah more than I should, marvelling at how natural he looked here. He didn't belong in this cramped hotel room, yet when he was in it, the whole space felt lighter, less temporary.

And always, without fail, the pottery class came up. One evening, while he was kneeling on the carpet wrestling with a roll of tape, he looked up at me and said, "I bet you'll be the first to break something in that studio."

I gasped in mock offence. "Excuse me, I have steady hands."

"You dropped your phone twice today," he shot back, grinning.

"That's different," I said, crossing my arms but smiling anyway. "Phones are slippery. Clay isn't."

He only laughed, shaking his head like he didn't believe me. The conversation went nowhere, but it stayed with me, this silly, playful back-and-forth that made the classes feel even closer. The more we packed, the more I thought about sitting across from him with clay spinning between us. I could almost picture his concentration, the crease in his brow, the inevitable mess. And the thought made me giddy.

One day he reminded me of the classes again. He's honestly so adorable. Every time he reminds me, I can't stop staring at him in utter awe because of how excited he looks.

That day Dina looked up from whatever duty she was on and said, "My boyfriend and I signed up for that class too."

I knew about this. Obviously. I looked at Noah in complete excitement. He looked at me in disbelief. I told him I already knew, and I was the one who sent her the link to register.

I was so excited I kept telling them about how much fun it would be if all of us got to sit close by and make fun of each other's pottery pieces.

That night, we finished packing everything into boxes. I texted Mum to say I'd call her before sleeping. After hugging Noah and Dina tight, I thanked them both for helping me so much.

Later, curled up in bed, I called Mum.

"In five days, my pottery classes start," I told her. "I signed up with my boyfriend. I met him during orientation week, and

we're in the same course. And in seven days, uni begins. I can't wait."

She looked thrilled. "Honey, I'm so happy you seem happy with this boy. Make sure I meet him when I visit you in London."

Then she added, almost as if she'd been holding it back, "You're glowing differently. I thought it was just excitement about London."

It was that, of course. But mostly, it was the excitement of being in London with *him*.

Chapter 21



Noah

The text came in the middle of the afternoon, short and strange:

Dina: "Can we meet? It's important. About Lily."

I stared at it until the screen dimmed. My first instinct was no. Dina and I weren't close. Whatever she wanted to say about Lily, she should say it to Lily directly. But then my thumb hovered, my chest tightening. If it was important enough for her to reach out to me, could I ignore it?

After ten minutes of indecision, I replied:

"Where?"

We chose a café near Russell Square. When I walked in, Dina was already there, her phone face down, her posture sharp like she'd been waiting for me longer than she admitted. I slid into the chair across from her, the scrape of it too loud in the cramped space.

"You came," she said. Not a thank you, just an observation.

"You said it was important," I answered.

She studied me for a beat before leaning back, arms folded.

"Lily talks about you a lot."

I wasn't sure if it was a compliment. "I'd hope so," I said lightly.

"She seems. . . happy." Her tone wrapped around the word, not quite skeptical, not quite approving. Somewhere in the middle.

Something in my gut twisted. "She is happy," I said, firmer this time.

A pause. Her eyes narrowed, thoughtful. "I just wonder if you see her clearly. She hides things. She always has."

I didn't know what to say to that. The silence stretched, filled only by the hiss of the espresso machine and the rattle of cups.

Finally I asked, "What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

That was when her expression shifted, settling into something careful, deliberate. She didn't answer right away. She let me sit in the discomfort first.

Only then did she say, softly, "I don't think she's over her ex."

I blinked at her; the words slow to settle. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Dina's eyes didn't waver. "You know Lily. She gives her whole heart too quickly. But she also holds onto things long after they're gone."

I hated how calm she sounded. Like she wasn't accusing, just stating a fact.

"She told me she was ready for something new," I said. My voice was steady, but I could feel the pulse beating hard in my jaw.

"And maybe she is," Dina replied. "But being ready doesn't erase what came before."

I let out a sharp breath, half-laugh, half-defence. "You're making it sound like she's lying to me."

“Not lying,” she said carefully, tilting her head. “Just... not telling you everything.”

The room seemed to shrink around us. I could hear the scrape of a spoon in someone else’s cup, the hiss of milk steaming. Normal sounds, but all too loud.

I leaned back, crossing my arms. “If you have something to say, Dina, just say it.”

For the first time, she hesitated. Her fingers brushed the edge of her phone like she was debating whether to pick it up. Then she said, almost gently, “She saw him. In Manchester. After orientation.”

My stomach lurched. “Saw who?”

“You already know who.”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t. My mind was racing too fast, colliding with itself.

“She sent me pictures,” Dina added, softer this time, like she pitied me. “I wasn’t even going to tell you. But if you’re serious about her... you deserve to know.”

The way she said it made my throat tighten. Serious. Was I serious about Lily? Yes. More than I’d ever been about anyone. Which was exactly why this felt like my chest was splitting open.

For a flicker of a moment, I wanted to accuse Dina, to say she was twisting things, but the look in her eyes stopped me. It wasn’t triumphant. It wasn’t smug. It was steady, unflinching, like she believed every word.

My heart sank. And I realised I was about to believe her too.

For a moment, I just stared at her. The words didn't seem to fit together in my head. *Lily. Her ex. Manchester.* Like puzzle pieces from different boxes forced into the same frame.

My first instinct was to laugh it off. Tell Dina she was imagining things, or worse, making them up. But the laugh never came. My throat was dry, my jaw locked.

Instead, I heard my mind rushing back through conversations with Lily. Tiny moments I hadn't thought twice about.

The pause before she answered when I once asked what she'd been doing that afternoon.

The way her voice dipped when we'd spoken about Manchester, like she was treading carefully around something unsaid.

That one night she ended the call early, saying she was tired, though she usually fought sleep just to talk a little longer.

I hadn't questioned any of it. Why would I? With her, everything had felt so easy, so open.

But now... now Dina's words were crawling back into those silences, filling them with shadows I didn't want to see.

"I don't believe you," I said, though the certainty wasn't there in my voice.

"You don't have to," Dina replied quietly. "I'm just telling you what I know."

That calmness of hers made it worse. If she were angry, dramatic, throwing accusations, it would've been easy to dismiss. But she wasn't. She was steady, like she'd rehearsed this truth so many times she no longer questioned it herself.

And that steadiness began to chip at me.

I clenched my hands beneath the table, nails pressing into my palms until it almost hurt. I thought of Lily's laugh, how it tumbled out of her like she couldn't hold it back. I thought of her eyes when she asked me if I was serious about us. All of it so real, so un-fake it made my chest ache.

But then I thought of how I barely knew her world in Manchester. The friends she kept there, the streets she walked every day, the life she had before me. She could've slotted him into any corner of it and I wouldn't have noticed.

I hated myself for thinking it. For even letting the possibility breathe. But it was too late. The seed had been planted, and it was already taking root.

I forced myself to meet Dina's eyes again, searching them for cracks, for some sign that she wanted this to hurt me. But all I found was that same composure, like she was the one carrying the burden of truth.

My heart sank. And for the first time, I wondered if I'd been foolish to believe Lily so easily.

Dina's hand moved slowly toward her phone, like she'd been waiting for me to ask. She tapped the screen a few times, then slid it across the table.

"I didn't want to," she said softly, "but. . . look."

I hesitated before picking it up. Part of me hoped it was a bluff, that she wouldn't actually have anything. But there it was, her chat window, her name at the top. Lily's messages lighting up the thread. Pictures, dated and stamped, from her week in Manchester. A café table. A street corner I didn't recognise. And then one with someone blurred in the background, broad shoulders, hair just familiar enough that my chest clenched.

I set the phone down like it burned.

“It doesn’t mean-” I started, but the words tangled. It *did* mean something. Or at least it looked like it did.

“She told me she just bumped into him,” Dina added, like she was trying to soften the blow. “But Noah. . . you know how those things go.”

My head felt too heavy for my neck. I leaned back, staring at the ceiling as if the answer might be hidden up there.

I wanted to say she was lying. That she had faked this, forged the screenshots, anything. But the details were too sharp: the timestamps, the way Lily’s phrasing matched her voice in my memory. If it was fake, it was flawless.

And yet.

Something in me tugged against it. Something in me whispered that Dina wasn’t as innocent as she looked, sitting there with her calm voice and her hands folded neatly around her coffee cup.

I thought back. The times Dina had inserted herself into conversations, steering them toward Lily’s past. The subtle digs she’d made that I’d brushed off as nothing. That night she asked if Lily and I were “really serious” yet, and the way her eyes lingered a moment too long on me before she laughed it away.

Could she have made this up? Twisted pieces into a story she wanted me to believe?

But then again . . . why would she? And how could she? She was Lily’s closest friend. She had no reason to sabotage her.

Unless she did.

The thought made me sick.

I rubbed my hands over my face, trying to scrub away the confusion, the ache in my chest. The more I pushed, the more trapped I felt. If I confronted Lily and it was true, she'd deny it. If it wasn't true, she'd still deny it. Either way, I'd never know for sure.

Dina watched me the whole time, quiet, patient, like she knew I was sinking and only she had the rope.

My heart sank lower than it had all evening. I couldn't tell if I was angry at Lily for betraying me, or angry at myself for believing Dina, or angry at Dina for making me believe her. Maybe all of it. Maybe more.

But one thing settled heavy in my chest: whatever I did next, it would break something.

The night air felt colder than it should have. I shoved my hands in my pockets as I walked, but nothing eased the heaviness pressing down on me.

London was buzzing as always, headlights and chatter filling the streets, yet I felt like I was moving in silence, cut off from everything around me. Every step pulled me deeper into my head.

I had always been careful with people. Careful about who I let close, careful about who I trusted. It wasn't that I didn't want to open up, it was just that when I did, when I handed someone a piece of myself, the thought of losing it was unbearable. And Lily... she hadn't just taken a piece. She had become the whole picture.

Now, with Dina's words echoing and those pictures burned into my mind, all I could think about was how easily it could

all fall apart. What if she lied to me now and I believed her? What if weeks from now, months from now, I found out something worse? The later it happened, the more it would destroy me.

Wasn't it smarter to cut the thread before it snapped on its own? To walk away before the ground gave way completely?

My chest tightened. I hated even considering it, but the thought stuck like a thorn, sharper every time I tried to pull it out.

I paused at a crossing, waiting for the light to change, the glow of red washing over me. I thought of Lily's laugh, her eyes, her voice when she whispered my name. I thought of how easily I could lose it all.

The light flicked green. I stepped forward, but the question stayed behind, lodged in me like a stone.

What hurt more, I wondered, trusting her and being wrong, or not trusting her at all?

Chapter 22



Lily

I had decided to stop by Dina's house one evening, half on impulse, half because I missed her. We hadn't really had time alone together in days, and I thought it would be nice to catch up before the semester swallowed me whole.

When I rang the bell, I expected Dina's footsteps, her familiar grin, maybe a playful complaint about me turning up without warning. Instead, the door opened to her mum.

"Oh, Lily," Charlotte said warmly, pulling me into a hug before I could even explain myself. "How lovely to see you."

"Hi, Charlotte," I smiled, stepping inside. "I hope it's not a bad time. I was just hoping to see Dina."

She shook her head. "She's out with Jonathan. You know, her boyfriend."

"Right," I said quickly, trying not to let my surprise show. Of course I knew about Jonathan, but Dina rarely talked about him with me. "That's nice."

"She'll be disappointed she missed you," Charlotte continued, leading me into the living room. The house smelled of cardamom and something rich baking in the oven. "Sit down for a little while. You've been in London for weeks now, and I hardly see you."

So I did. The sofa was soft and familiar, the kind of place that immediately made you relax. Charlotte poured me tea without asking, sliding the cup toward me as if I were another daughter in the house.

We talked about ordinary things like my course, how noisy London felt compared to Manchester, the chaos of moving into dorms. I told her about the never-ending stream of parcels my mum kept sending. "At this point I think she's trying to build me a second home inside my room," I said.

Charlotte laughed knowingly. "Mothers will always do that. We think if we send enough pieces of home along, then maybe you won't miss us too much."

I smiled into my cup, warmed by her words.

At one point she glanced toward Dina's room and shook her head affectionately. "She's always been so protective of her friends, you know. Even as a child. If she thought someone wasn't being treated right, she would storm in and decide for them. Always so certain she knew best."

I laughed, picturing Dina as a tiny general on a playground, scolding kids twice her size. "That sounds exactly like her."

Charlotte nodded. "Yes, but it comes from a good heart. She's stubborn, though. Once her mind is made up... well, you know how she is."

I sipped my tea, still smiling. To me, it sounded like the sweetest compliment, proof of how lucky I was to have a best friend who cared so fiercely. Between her and Noah, I felt cocooned, almost untouchable. Dina, with her sharp eyes and stubborn loyalty. Noah, with his endless patience and that grin he never quite managed to hide. They were nothing alike, yet

together they made me feel steady in a way I had never known before. Like whatever London threw at me, I wouldn't be facing it alone.

After a while, I stood, thanking Charlotte for the tea. She hugged me again before opening the door. "Tell Dina I'll come by another time," I said with a smile.

"Of course, darling. She'll be so sorry she missed you."

The air outside was cooler than I expected, the late evening sky streaked faintly with gold. I began walking back toward the bus stop, but I didn't feel ready to go straight to the hotel. The city felt too alive, too tempting. My steps slowed, then wandered.

Somewhere between side streets and little shopfronts, I spotted a craft store with big glass windows crowded by displays of brushes, canvases, and stacks of paints. I paused. The sight made me think instantly of pottery classes, of clay spinning beneath my fingers, of Noah sitting across from me with his sleeves rolled up and concentration etched into his face.

The thought pulled me inside.

The shop smelled faintly of wood and turpentine, a mix that reminded me of old classrooms. Rows of tools and paints lined the walls, and I found myself moving automatically toward the pottery section. Brushes for glazing, little carving knives, sponges. I picked them up one by one, imagining what it would be like to practise during the week, just the two of us in my dorm room, clay drying on our hands.

I couldn't keep it to myself. Before I even reached the counter, I pulled out my phone and called Noah.

He picked up on the second ring.

"Hi," I said, already smiling. "Guess where I am."

There was a pause. "Where?" His voice was quiet, almost too quiet.

"In a craft store. I found this whole section of pottery tools. I was thinking... what if I buy a few things? That way we can practise during the week, outside of class." I laughed softly, trying to make it sound light. "Can you imagine us sitting in my dorm room, clay everywhere, me trying not to ruin your masterpiece?"

Another pause. Then a faint exhale, like he was pulling in air but couldn't find words. "Yeah. That... sounds fun."

Something in his tone made me stop where I stood, a sponge still in my hand. "Noah?"

"I'm here," he said quickly, but the words felt strained, like they were forced out.

I leaned against the shelf, suddenly uneasy. "You sound tired. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he replied, almost too quickly. "Just a long day."

I frowned, tracing the edge of the sponge with my thumb. He wasn't fine. I could hear it. The Noah I knew, the one who teased me endlessly about my strawberry matcha, didn't sound like this. His voice was heavier, quieter, as though something was sitting on his chest.

"Do you want me to come over after?" I asked softly. "We don't have to do anything. Just sit. I don't like hearing you like this."

On the other end, silence stretched. Then he said, "No, Lily. Just... get what you want from the store. I'll see you tomorrow."

He hung up before I could answer.

I stood there for a long moment, phone still pressed to my ear, the busy quiet of the shop swirling around me. Something wasn't right. I felt it in my stomach, a knot tightening. But I forced myself to move, to pay for the brushes and knives and sponges. Tomorrow, I told myself. Tomorrow he'd tell me what was wrong.

I wanted to believe that.

The bag of pottery tools swung gently at my side as I walked back through the evening streets. London was glowing the way it only did at that hour, shop windows bright against the deepening blue sky, buses rumbling past, people rushing by in their own little worlds. I loved it here. Every step felt like I was living inside the dream I'd had for years.

But tonight the dream felt slightly altered. Noah's voice replayed in my head, that quiet strain I couldn't place. I hugged the paper bag tighter, telling myself it was nothing. He was probably tired, or stressed, or maybe I had imagined it altogether. Still, unease clung to me, a shadow that wouldn't let go.

By the time I reached the hotel, my arms ached from carrying the bag, but I still laid everything out carefully on the desk: the carving tools, the brushes, the little shaping knives. I sat cross-legged on the bed and stared at them, picturing him next to me, the way he'd laugh when I inevitably messed something up. That was the image I wanted to hold on to, the one that made all the doubts shrink.

I picked up my phone and opened my messages.

First, I texted Charlotte:

Thank you again for the tea and the chat earlier. It meant a lot. You made me feel so welcome.

Then I sent a quick one to Dina:

Just saw your mum. She's lovely. We had a little chat before I left.

I hesitated before opening Noah's chat. His name sat there on my screen, familiar and steady, but the echo of his voice from earlier kept me from typing anything. Instead, I put my phone down beside me, stretched out on the bed, and stared at the ceiling.

The lilies he'd given me last week were still in a glass by the window, their petals starting to soften at the edges. I told myself tomorrow would be better. Tomorrow, I'd hear his laugh again and wonder why I ever doubted.

But for the first time since coming to London, I fell asleep with more questions than answers.

Chapter 23



Noah

I felt bad for the way I had spoken to her last evening. Or rather, the way I hadn't spoken. Clipped answers, a flat tone, nothing like how I usually sounded when she called me. She had been excited, her voice bubbling as she told me about the pottery tools she'd picked up from a craft store, imagining us practicing together in her dorm during the week.

Normally I would have matched that excitement, teased her about how she'd probably ruin my carpet with clay or joked that her first mug would collapse before it even reached the kiln. But instead I had been distant, almost cold. I could hear the hesitation in her pauses, the way she was waiting for me to come alive on the line. And I didn't.

The guilt crept in now, sharp and heavy, but then I reminded myself: if Dina was right, if Lily really had met up with her ex in Manchester after the orientation week, then she didn't deserve the warmth. She didn't deserve my laughter, my effort, my excitement.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the acceptance letters still tacked to my desk. LSE. The dream. The future. And right beside that, the girl who was supposed to be my person in it. Only now I couldn't tell if she had been honest with me or if everything I'd built around her was balancing on lies.

The proof Dina showed me replayed in my mind. The screenshots, the dates, the timestamps. Her voice when she

said, *"I thought you should know."* It all seemed too deliberate, too neat, almost staged. Yet I couldn't ignore it. The rational part of me said that if it was fake, why would Dina risk it? Why would she put her friendship with Lily on the line just to interfere?

But another part of me whispered: maybe she would. Maybe this was about something else entirely.

I pushed the thought away. Overthinking was making me spiral, but not thinking at all felt impossible.

If Lily had lied about this, what else could she lie about later? What if I let myself fall deeper, only to discover worse down the line? Wouldn't it be better to cut it off now, before the roots grew so tangled I couldn't pull free without bleeding?

The decision pressed down on me, heavy and inevitable.

I told myself it was logic. That I was being sensible, responsible, even protective of us both. But really it was fear. Fear that if I let this go, if I let her stay wrapped around my heart, the betrayal would be sharper later. It would break something in me that might never repair.

I thought of my dad, of how he always said not to let people in unless you were sure. I thought of how hard it had been for me to even admit to myself that I liked Lily, how terrifying it had been to hand her those lilies and that book, how much of myself I'd given away without asking for anything in return. And now what if she had taken all that while still holding onto someone else?

My phone buzzed on the desk. Her name. Just her name, glowing innocently, as if it wasn't capable of burning through me.

I stared at it, thumb hovering. My chest tightened until it hurt. If I picked up, I knew I would falter. Her voice would undo me the way it always did. She would sound happy, she would laugh, she would make some silly joke, and I would want to believe her. I would want to erase everything Dina told me.

But then what? Another month, another hidden truth?

No.

I forced myself to swipe the screen and call her back. She answered almost instantly, like she had been waiting.

"Noah," she said, soft, warm, familiar. The sound made my throat ache.

"Hey," I replied, my voice flat again. I couldn't bring myself to fake the usual smile.

There was a pause, just long enough for her to notice. "Is everything okay?"

I hesitated, the weight of the silence filling my room. My reflection in the dark laptop screen looked back at me, jaw tight, eyes tired. I hated myself in that moment, but I pushed the words out anyway.

"Lil... I've been thinking. About us. About everything."

Another pause. I could almost picture her frowning, tilting her head the way she always did when she was worried. "What do you mean?"

I gripped the edge of my desk until my knuckles went white. "I don't think this is going to work. University is starting. We're doing one of the hardest courses, we'll both have enough pressure. I think we need to focus on ourselves. On the course. Not on . . . this."

The line went quiet. So quiet I thought for a second the call had dropped.

When she spoke, her voice cracked in a way I had never heard before. "Noah, what are you saying?"

I swallowed hard, forcing the lie out. "I just don't think it's fair to either of us to add more complications. It's better if we stop now."

The silence after that was worse than anything. It wasn't just silence, it was her trying to breathe, trying to understand, trying not to break on the other end of the line.

Finally she said, "But . . . we have pottery classes. They start in two days. What do you mean?"

I closed my eyes. "We can't miss them. We paid the full price. Let's just... pretend. For the classes. After that, we go back to being friends."

Her voice came back, small but sharp. "Friends."

"Please, Lil," I whispered. The first honest thing I had said all evening. "Don't stop talking to me. I love it. I can't lose that too."

There was no answer. Just her shallow breathing, the sound of her holding herself together.

I wanted to take it all back, every word. I wanted to tell her the truth: that I was scared, that I didn't know what to believe, that if she looked me in the eyes and denied everything, I would believe her without question. But I couldn't. I was too far in, too tangled in my own doubts.

When she finally said goodnight, her voice was hollow.

I stayed staring at my phone long after the call ended, the paper ring she had once worn lying crumpled on my desk.

And for the first time since I met her, the silence between us felt unbearable.

When the line went dead, I sat there with the phone still against my ear, even though the silence on the other end told me she was gone. My room suddenly felt too still, too heavy, like the air itself was pressing down on me. I set the phone on my desk, screen facedown, as though hiding it would make me forget the sound of her voice when I broke us apart.

My hands were shaking. I rubbed them together, trying to steady myself, but the guilt clung stubbornly. This was supposed to be the right decision. I told myself that over and over. If Dina was right, if Lily had already lied once, what would stop her from lying again later? It was easier to cut it off now, before I got in too deep. At least that's what I wanted to believe.

But my mind wouldn't stay quiet. It kept replaying everything: her laugh bubbling across the table at Café Nero, the way her face lit up when I handed her lilies, the sound of her whisper when she told me she missed me at the station. Images of her twirling the paper rings I made for her at the café rose up uninvited, the way she'd always slip them onto her finger like they mattered. Those were hers now. She probably still had them. The thought made my chest ache in a way I hadn't expected.

I opened our chat, scrolling through it without meaning to. The midnight jokes, the "later, alligator" game, her endless photos of strawberry matcha and silly faces. My thumb hovered over the keyboard. I wanted to type something,

anything. An apology. A reason. A promise that I hadn't wanted this.

But I didn't. I locked the phone and shoved it face down again.

I told myself I was protecting both of us. The truth was harsher. I had never let anyone in this far before, and I didn't know how to believe someone so completely without wondering when it would collapse. So I had done the only thing I knew how to do: end it before it could end me.

Still, as I lay back in bed, staring up at the ceiling until my eyes burned, one thought lodged itself deep and refused to leave. If I was wrong, if Lily had been telling me the truth all along, then I had just let go of the best thing I had ever found.

Chapter 24



Lily

I stared at my phone long after the call ended, my thumb hovering above the screen as if by sheer force I could will his name to light up again. But it didn't. The silence around me was deafening.

Noah had just broken up with me.

The words refused to settle, bouncing painfully inside my chest. One moment I was telling him about how excited I was to try the new pottery tools I'd picked up, imagining the two of us kneeling on the dorm floor with clay spinning between us, and the next his voice had gone flat, distant. He told me we wouldn't work out. That uni would be difficult. That we needed to focus on ourselves.

No reason beyond that. No explanation. Just a door quietly shutting.

I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the paper ring he had given me the night by the Thames. I still wore it sometimes, sliding it onto my finger when I missed him, reminding myself he had once meant those words, even if they were only wrapped in paper. Now it looked ridiculous. Fragile. A joke. I pulled it off and set it on the desk beside the bouquet of lilies, their pink petals already beginning to curl at the edges.

My chest tightened. He had given me those lilies only days ago. He had looked at me like I was his whole world. How could someone go from that to this?

I thought of the late nights on the phone, his voice soft when he said “later, alligator,” the way he laughed every time I beat him at UNO, the quiet warmth in his words when he told me he couldn’t wait to see me seven days a week. Had all of that meant less to him than it did to me?

Tears came hot and fast, no warning. I pressed my hands over my face, but it didn’t stop the shaking. The room felt suddenly too big, too empty, every corner echoing with memories he had left behind. I had pictured us walking onto campus together, finding our lecture halls, sharing stupid little rituals like Café Nero trips before class. Now all of that had shattered before it even began.

I wanted to call Dina, but something inside me held back. I couldn’t explain why. Maybe because I wasn’t ready to put this into words, to make it real by saying it aloud. Maybe because I was scared she would confirm what I already dreaded — that I had been foolish to believe him, foolish to think something like this could last.

So instead, I curled up on the bed, hugging my knees to my chest. My phone buzzed once with a group chat notification, but it wasn’t him, and I couldn’t bring myself to check it anyway.

The lilies on the desk caught the last light of the evening, glowing faintly in the shadows. I remembered how he had said “just like your name” when he pressed them into my hands, and my throat burned.

He had promised me forever in tiny ways. Paper rings, bouquets, late-night words. And now, without warning, he had taken it all back.

I didn't know what hurt more: losing him, or realising that maybe I never really had him at all.

The tears came again, harder this time. My chest ached with the weight of it, like I couldn't contain it alone. My hand shook as I picked up my phone. There was only one person I could call.

"Dina?" My voice cracked the second she answered. "He . . . he broke up with me."

There was a rustling on her end, like she had sat up straighter. "Lily, what? What happened?"

"I don't even know," I choked out. "He said uni would be hard, that we should just focus on ourselves, but—" My words dissolved into sobs. "He didn't even give me a reason, Dina. Not really. One second we were talking about pottery supplies, and the next he just—ended it."

She was quiet for a moment, then said gently, "I'm so sorry. I'm here, okay? Just breathe."

"I don't understand," I whispered. "Was I not enough? Did I do something wrong? Because it doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Dina said firmly, the steadiness in her voice trying to anchor me. "Sometimes people . . . sometimes they just don't know what they want."

Her words didn't fix the hollow ache, but hearing someone else's voice kept me from falling apart completely. I pressed

the heel of my hand against my eyes, trying to stop the tears that kept spilling.

"I thought—" I swallowed hard. "I thought we were real."

"You were," Dina said softly. "That doesn't just disappear. It meant something, even if it ended."

I clung to her words even though they slipped through me like water. We talked for a while, or rather, she talked and I cried, until the sobs turned into quieter shivers.

I ended the call with Dina but the silence afterward felt unbearable, heavier than it had before I even dialed her number. Her voice had been steady, reassuring, the way she always tried to be when I was falling apart. But even after pouring everything out, the ache in my chest hadn't shifted. It was still there, stubborn and sharp, refusing to quiet down.

I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, my phone still in my hand. My thoughts scattered like beads rolling across the floor, impossible to collect.

There are three people who have ever really understood me. Dina, Noah, and him.

The thought came uninvited, and I winced at it. Dina was already ticked off the list. She had listened, yes, but something about her words hadn't settled inside me. It felt like trying to patch a hole with fabric that didn't quite fit. Noah... well. I couldn't call him. Not when he was the reason my heart was twisting itself into knots in the first place.

And that left the third.

My thumb hovered over the screen as I scrolled down my contacts, eyes catching on his name. I hadn't spoken to him in six months. Half a year of silence that had been necessary,

maybe even healthy. But in that moment, the temptation pressed against me like a weight: one call, one message, and maybe I wouldn't feel so utterly alone.

I could already picture it — his voice, steady and familiar, the way he used to cut through my storms with a sentence or two. He had always known what to say when no one else could.

But then the guilt rushed in. What right did I have to reach for him now? To break that silence just because I couldn't bear the one Noah had left me with? It wouldn't be fair, not to him and not to me.

I locked my phone quickly, pressing it flat against my chest like I needed to hold myself together.

No. I couldn't go back. Not for comfort, not for anything.

But the fact that I had even thought about it scared me. It made me realise just how desperate I was to feel understood again, to feel like someone was on my side. It also made me certain of something else: if Dina really believed I was still tangled up in that past, she didn't know me as well as I thought she did.

I rolled onto my side, curling into the pillow, clutching my phone so tightly my knuckles ached. My whole body felt restless, like if I stayed still too long the grief would swallow me whole.

The hours slipped by without me noticing. The light outside my window dimmed, stretching long shadows across the room, until the city hummed in its evening rhythm. I hadn't moved much. Just lay there, breathing in shallow bursts, letting the silence press closer and closer around me.

I thought about Noah. About how quickly he had pulled away. About how one day we were making plans, and the next, I

couldn't even reach him without feeling the wall he had built between us.

I replayed every moment in my head, searching for something I'd missed. A word I shouldn't have said, a pause that lasted too long, anything that might explain how we had gone from laughing in cafés to this hollow ache in my chest. But there was nothing. No fight. No goodbye. Just absence.

The worst part is knowing we never had a real ending — just silence that settled like dust. No fight, no explanation, nothing I could point to and say *that was where it broke*. Just his voice turning distant and then gone.

I buried my face in the pillow, as if that would block it out, as if I could force my body to forget the sound of his laugh, the warmth of his hand brushing mine, the certainty I had felt when he looked at me like I was something rare.

But dust has a way of clinging. Of lingering even after you've swept the room clean.

That night, I fell asleep with my phone in my hand, as though holding on to it might keep me tethered to him. As though somewhere, in the dark, he might still decide to reach for me too.

Chapter 25



Noah

The morning of the first pottery class arrived too soon.

I had been dreading it and waiting for it in equal measure, like a storm you know will break whether you want it to or not. Two days since I ended things, and already it felt like weeks, like months. The silence stretched too far, and yet it was filled with her. She was in every space I tried to keep clear.

We hadn't spoken properly since. Just clipped exchanges, bare necessities. No jokes, no late-night calls, no warmth. And still, the memory of her voice clung to me, threaded through everything I did.

I kept replaying the last time we had talked about pottery classes before all of this. She had been so excited, her eyes shining when she said, "Every weekend, let's get each other something. I'll bring you pastries, you'll bring me coffee." A small ritual. A promise that sounded ordinary, but I knew how much weight it carried for her.

And now it was here. The weekend. The class. Our promise.

I almost didn't go to Café Nero. I almost convinced myself that showing up empty-handed would be easier, that it would save me from the humiliation of caring too much. But my feet led me there anyway, because I couldn't stomach the thought of her walking in with something for me while my hands were empty.

The café smelled the same as always, burnt espresso and sugar hanging in the air. The staff barely looked up, though one girl at the counter gave me a fleeting smile of recognition. I ordered her iced coffee, because that's what she asked for when we made the promise. But when the words left my mouth, my chest tightened. Coffee wasn't really her thing. She drank it sometimes, but she lit up over strawberry matcha. Every single time, her order had been strawberry matcha.

I stood there, torn. Then, almost without thinking, I said, "And a strawberry matcha, please."

When the drinks landed on the counter, I stared at them like they were proof of something I couldn't quite name. One was what I had promised. The other was what she loved. Both of them were hers.

By the time I reached the station, my hands were trembling slightly from the weight of the cups, though they weren't heavy. I spotted her standing there, her suitcase wheels long gone now that she was in the dorms, her bag slung neatly over her shoulder. She looked composed, but her eyes shifted when she saw me, just for a second, like she was bracing herself.

I walked up, held out the cups. "I'm sorry," I said, my voice softer than I meant it to be. "I know I promised coffee, but I always saw you have matcha, and I wasn't sure what you'd prefer. So I got both."

Her eyes flicked to the drinks, then to me. She didn't say anything at first, just took them carefully from my hands, like they were fragile. That silence stretched too long, so I tried to smile, but it faltered.

Then she handed me a small white paper bag. "Here," she said simply.

I opened it. A pastry.

The one she had promised me, weeks ago.

My throat tightened so badly I had to swallow before I could speak. She remembered. Even after everything, she remembered.

“Thanks,” I managed. It came out rough, almost hoarse.

Walking to the studio, I could feel the weight of the two drinks she carried. She didn’t sip either. I wondered if she was waiting for me to say which one was really hers. I wanted to tell her both were, that I would buy her every matcha, every coffee in London if it meant keeping that soft light in her eyes. But I stayed quiet. The words lodged in my chest, too dangerous to release.

The pottery studio was tucked into a side street, its windows glowing faintly yellow against the grey sky. Inside, the air smelled of clay and something earthy, damp but comforting. Lily and I were standing near our table, waiting for the instructor to finish setting out sponges and aprons. The room buzzed with quiet chatter from the other couples, the scrape of stools on the tiled floor, the hiss of the kettle boiling for tea in the back.

And then the bell above the studio door jingled.

I looked up.

Dina and Jonathan stepped inside, shaking rain from their coats. My chest tightened instantly, and I saw Lily notice them a heartbeat later. Her whole face brightened, like someone had switched on a light inside her.

“Dina!” she exclaimed, rushing across the room. She pulled her into a hug, tight and familiar, the kind you only give to

someone you trust with everything. Dina hugged her back just as steadily, her hands firm on Lily's shoulders. Jonathan hovered behind, carrying a box of tools, giving a polite nod to the room.

I stood frozen, both cups still in my hands, condensation dampening my skin.

Of course they were here. Dina had told me. Still, the sight of them made something sour twist in my stomach.

Lily was glowing. Laughing. Leaning into Dina like this was the best surprise of her day.

Which meant she didn't know. She couldn't know.

If she had even the faintest idea about what Dina had shown me, she wouldn't be smiling like that. She wouldn't be hugging her best friend like she was home.

My thoughts spiraled.

What if Dina was lying?

The screenshots flashed through my mind — the chats, the dates, the neat little timestamps. The way she had looked at me when she said, "I thought you should know." It had seemed so certain then, so undeniable.

But standing here, watching Lily, I felt the ground shift under me. Would Lily really keep Dina this close if any of it were true? Could Dina have staged it, twisted it, made it up?

My throat tightened. I forced my gaze away, focusing on the cups in my hands. Drops of water slid down onto the floor, cold against my knuckles.

If she had lied... then I had just ruined everything.

And if she hadn't... then Lily's smile right now was nothing more than a mask.

Either way, the question gnawed at me, louder than the chatter of the other couples, louder than the instructor's voice calling everyone to take their seats.

The instructor started with cheerful claps, explaining how to wedge the clay, how to centre it on the wheel, how to let it spin between your palms without fighting it. His voice was upbeat, but my focus drifted. My eyes kept finding her. She had rolled up her sleeves, the thin white fabric of her shirt bunching at her elbows. Stray wisps of hair slipped from her bun, brushing her cheeks as she bent forward, pressing her palms into the clay.

For a moment, I forgot we weren't us anymore. She looked so alive, so focused, that all I wanted was to lean over, touch her wrist, laugh with her when the clay splattered.

Across the room, another couple bickered as their lump of clay collapsed on the wheel. The girl's laugh was loud and unfiltered, and Lily, watching, burst out laughing too. The sound cut through me. Bright. Free. Familiar.

I froze, my hands slipping slightly on my own clay. That laugh. I knew it too well. It was the sound I had waited for every night, the sound that made me feel like I'd won something.

And I thought, with a sudden sharpness: *I hope she never laughs like that for another man. I'd recognise the sound and lose myself all over again.*

The clay spun uselessly in front of me, but I barely noticed. All I could hear was her.

The instructor clapped his hands again, pulling us all back to attention, but my palms stayed heavy on the wheel. Clay spun beneath them, soft and unformed, while my gaze kept drifting sideways. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, smudging her cheek with a streak of pale grey. She didn't even notice.

I wanted to tell her. To lean over and laugh at the mark on her face, to wipe it away like I used to when she had foam on her lip at Café Nero. But that belonged to another version of us, one I wasn't sure I could touch anymore.

Around us, the room was full of chatter, couples teasing each other about lopsided bowls and collapsing cylinders. It should have felt light. Fun. But for me, every second sat heavy, balancing between memory and distance.

I pressed harder into the clay, forcing it into some vague shape. She glanced up at me once, quick and unreadable, and then looked away, smiling at something Dina said.

That was when it settled over me like wet clay refusing to dry: if we were going to get through this class, through the next eight months of it, I'd have to play along. Pretend we were still us. Pretend the laughter and the lilies and the late-night phone calls hadn't already slipped through my hands.

Chapter 26



Lily

The two days after the breakup blurred strangely, as though time had been dipped in something heavy. Each hour stretched longer than it should, but when I looked back, I couldn't really remember what I had done. I knew I had eaten, because there were dishes left on the counter. I knew I had showered, because my hair was still damp on my pillow when I tried to sleep. But nothing felt sharp, nothing stuck.

I told myself to study. I opened a book, read the first line three times, and gave up. I scrolled endlessly through my phone, watching videos I didn't even register. Every so often, my hand drifted to the paper rings he had folded for me, lined up on the windowsill in a mismatched parade. I told myself not to look at them. I always did.

Dina texted me to check in. *You okay? Need me to come over?* I typed *yes* and deleted it, typed *I'm fine* and deleted that too, until I settled on *just tired*. She replied with a heart. I stared at it longer than I should have, as if it could fill the hollow space inside me.

The worst part wasn't even the silence. It was knowing the silence was all we had left. No fight, no reason, no explanation. Just absence that settled over everything like dust.

I tried to fill it. I went for long walks around the city, tracing streets I barely knew. London was alive around me—taxis honking, people spilling out of shops, tourists with cameras

dangling from their necks — but none of it seemed to touch me. It felt like watching a film through glass. Every sound muted, every movement slightly delayed.

The night before pottery class, I sat cross-legged on the floor of my dorm, a box of supplies from the craft store opened in front of me. Tools I didn't know how to use yet, sponges, brushes, a block of clay wrapped in plastic. I picked each item up, turned it over in my hand, and placed it down again. I had been so excited when I bought them, telling Noah on the phone that we could practice together during the week. His voice that evening had been distant, so unlike him, but I hadn't let myself think too hard about it then. Now the memory stung.

When I finally crawled into bed, I lay awake staring at the ceiling. I wondered if he was awake too, thinking about me. Or if he had already decided to stop.

The morning of our first pottery class, I woke before my alarm. For a long time I just sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the little paper rings lined up by the window. I slipped one onto my finger without thinking. The paper had softened with time, but it still held its shape.

I told myself it was only pottery. Just a class. Two hours on a Saturday. But as I pulled on my cardigan and tied back my hair, my stomach twisted. I wanted to see him. I dreaded seeing him. Both things lived in me at once.

At the door, I glanced back at the tools still scattered on my desk. For a moment, I thought about bringing them, offering to practice like we had planned. Then I shook my head. That version of us didn't exist anymore.

I left the hotel a little earlier than I needed to, unable to sit still any longer. On the way to the tube, my phone buzzed. A

message from him: *Shared the location for later. Want me to pick you up?*

I typed quickly: *No, it's fine. I'll meet you there.*

I shoved my phone into my pocket before I could read whatever he might reply. The truth was simple: I wasn't ready to sit beside him in a cab, not yet. But ready or not, in just a few hours, we'd be at the wheel again, clay spinning between our hands, pretending—for everyone else's sake—that we were still us.

I stopped at a little café tucked between a dry cleaner and a newsstand. The glass case was lined with pastries, most of them too sweet or too plain, but then I spotted a dark chocolate croissant. Noah's favourite.

The memory of his voice drifted back to me, from one of our late-night calls. *"Anything dark chocolatey, Lil. None of that milk chocolate nonsense. If you're going to have chocolate, do it properly."*

I ordered it without hesitation. It felt strange, standing at the counter and paying for something so small, but it meant something. We had promised each other—every Saturday before class, one of us would bring the other something to eat or drink. That was when we thought promises stretched forward without question. I wasn't sure where we stood anymore, but I couldn't break this one.

By the time I reached the station closest to the studio, my stomach was tight with nerves. The pastry box felt too light in my hand, like a fragile secret.

And then I saw him.

Noah was leaning against the railing near the entrance, a paper bag at his feet, two takeaway cups balanced in his hands. For

a second, I just stopped walking. The sight was so familiar it hurt. He straightened when he spotted me, his expression unreadable, and for a heartbeat I thought about turning around.

Instead, I walked toward him.

We stood there awkwardly, the world rushing around us, people darting in and out of the station, and it felt as though time slowed just enough to make me aware of every detail. The way his hair curled at the ends, the faint crease between his brows, the way his fingers tightened around the cups.

"I brought this for you," I said, holding the pastry out between us. My voice was steady, though my chest felt anything but.

He blinked, almost startled, then let out a short breath of laughter. "Dark chocolate?"

"Of course." I tried to smile. "I remembered."

His gaze flicked down to the box and then back to me, something soft passing over his face. For a moment it felt like it used to, like we hadn't lost anything at all.

Then he shifted the cups in his hands, offering them toward me. "I'm sorry," he said, quiet enough that I almost missed it. "I know I promised coffee, but I always saw you order matcha here, and I wasn't sure what you'd prefer. So I got both."

I stared at the two cups, the faint steam rising from one, the pink-green swirl peeking through the lid of the other. My throat tightened. He remembered. Even now, he remembered.

"Thank you," I whispered, taking them from him, careful not to let our fingers brush.

We didn't say much else as we started walking to the studio, side by side but not touching. The street stretched ahead of us, busy and ordinary, but in my chest everything felt fragile, like porcelain balanced on the edge of a table.

The class itself was messier than I had expected. Clay smeared across my wrists and dotted my shirt like freckles, the wheel spinning faster than I could control. I laughed more than I thought I would, sometimes at myself, sometimes at the couple across the room who bickered so loudly it drew the whole class's attention. Noah was quieter, focused in that way he always was when he set his mind to something, but when the clay slipped out of his hands, even he couldn't hold back a groan. I smiled at him, wanting to catch his eye, but he didn't look up.

When Dina and Jonathan arrived, I rushed to hug her, the familiarity grounding me. Jonathan gave me a polite smile before heading to his wheel. Throughout the session, Dina leaned toward me now and then, making little comments about how her mug was already looking better than mine, how Jonathan was hopeless with the wheel, how the instructor's patience seemed endless. I laughed with her, grateful for the distraction, even though part of me noticed how Noah grew quieter whenever I turned to her.

The two hours slipped by faster than I thought they would. By the end, my hands were aching, my shirt was streaked with grey, and my wheel held something that could barely pass for a bowl. Still, I was proud of it. It was mine.

As the class wrapped up, Noah stood abruptly. He muttered something about needing to be somewhere and left before I could say anything. I watched the door swing shut behind him, an odd hollowness in my chest.

Dina and Jonathan lingered with me a little longer, chatting easily as we washed the clay from our hands and collected our bags. When we finally stepped out into the street, we walked together for a few blocks before parting ways. Dina hugged me again, promising to text later, Jonathan giving me a quick wave.

And then I was alone.

I walked slowly, thinking of lunch, of the dorm I would be moving into tomorrow, of how everything felt like it was shifting beneath my feet. My bag thumped against my hip with every step, heavier than it should have been.

That was when I saw him.

Through the window of a small café, Noah sat alone at a corner table, his head bowed slightly, a half-finished cup of coffee in front of him. His face was turned toward the glass, though he didn't see me, his expression caught somewhere between lost and thoughtful.

For a long moment, I just stood there on the pavement, watching. Wanting to go in, wanting to look away, wanting too many things at once.

And all I could think was:

I saw him sitting there, a confused but beautiful stranger.

Epilogue



Five months. That's how long it has been since I first walked into the pottery studio with her. Five months of clay-streaked weekends, of wheels spinning and cups collapsing, of awkward silences that softened into something more manageable with time.

We aren't what we were. I know that. But every Saturday, when we sit side by side pretending to be a couple, some part of the old rhythm hums through. She still laughs when someone else's pot caves in, and I still find myself wishing that laugh was mine to keep. She still drinks her strawberry matcha before class, and I still buy her lilies sometimes, though now I leave them on the bench without a word.

University fills the rest of the week. The lectures are hard, harder than I expected. The essays pull me under until I forget what day it is. But in the middle of all that, I'm beginning to discover myself. The part of me that pushes forward even when I'm not sure of the ground. The part that can build something steady, even if my hands are still learning to hold it right.

I see her on campus often. Sometimes alone, sometimes surrounded by a crowd. We don't talk much, not like before, but our eyes meet now and then. There's no anger in hers. No accusation. Just... something quieter. Maybe a question. Maybe an answer. I can't tell.

The classes are nearly over. Soon we'll fire our final pieces, pack up the clay, and leave that studio behind. I wonder what it will mean then — if losing that space will make the distance between us wider, or if it will free us to find something new.

What I do know is this: she mattered. She still matters. And maybe the point of all of this was not to hold on, but to learn how to let go gently. To understand that love, even when it doesn't last in the way you thought it would, can still change you in ways nothing else could.

We're still spinning, both of us. Like clay on a wheel, not quite finished, not quite set. Maybe one day the shape of us will make sense. For now, we're learning. And that, I think, is enough.

Acknowledgement



This book began as a tiny idea on a late night when I thought, *what if I just wrote it down?* I never imagined those words would grow into a full story, let alone into something bound between a cover. If you're reading this, it means that dream has become real — and that's because of the people who held me up along the way.

To my parents — thank you for never holding me back, for letting me dream, and for reminding me that I could always chase whatever made my heart full.

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