

**THE
LAST
SPRING BEFORE FOREVER**

UMASHANKAR VERMA



BlueRoseONE^{com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

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For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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Chapter 1

THE LAST GOODBYE



“Daniel... tell me the truth. Who’s in there with you?”

Lily Potter’s voice scarcely rose above a whisper, yet it carried through the half-open doorway of Apartment 4B with the quiet force of a heart already beginning to break. The bouquet of white tulips trembled in her hand as she stood motionless beneath the warm glow spilling into the corridor, every instinct pleading for an explanation that would turn the dreadful scene into a misunderstanding. Instead, the laughter inside stopped without warning, and the silence that followed settled over the hallway like a heavy winter fog, suffocating every hopeful thought she still possessed.

At twenty-eight, Lily had always believed honesty was the strongest foundation upon which two people could build a life together. Her chestnut-brown hair rested against the shoulders of a light blue sweater dampened by the gentle drizzle outside, while the silver necklace her grandmother had given her lay quietly against her collarbone like a reminder that somewhere in the world unconditional love still existed. She tightened her fingers around the apartment key Daniel had entrusted to her years ago, remembering how proudly he had called it their home, and the

memory warmed her heart for only a fleeting second before reality cruelly stole it away.

The door opened another few inches.

Daniel Brooks stood before her, his tall frame suddenly stripped of the confidence that had once drawn every room towards him. His neatly pressed shirt was creased, his usually composed expression fractured by panic, and the colour drained from his face the instant their eyes met. Hidden inside the pocket of his navy blazer rested a small velvet box containing the engagement ring he had planned to give her within weeks, though now it felt less like a promise and more like a burden too heavy for him to carry.

“Lily...” His voice faltered, and he swallowed hard before forcing the next words through trembling lips. “Please... let me explain.”

Before she could answer, another figure stepped into view.

Emma Collins folded her arms across her cream cardigan, her elegant posture unable to conceal the unease clouding her expression. At twenty-nine, she had always carried herself with effortless confidence, yet the sight of Lily standing at the doorway caused her composure to crack for the briefest moment. Her eyes lowered in hesitation before rising again, as though searching desperately for words capable of softening a truth that had already done its damage.

Lily’s gaze drifted from Daniel to Emma without accusation.

She neither shouted nor wept.

She simply looked.

“Tell me the truth,” she said quietly. “How long has this been happening?”

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment.

The question he had feared for months had finally been spoken aloud.

“It... wasn’t supposed to happen like this,” he admitted, his shoulders sinking beneath the weight of his own failure. “I never meant for you to find out this way.”

Emma drew a slow breath, guilt flickering across her face before she forced herself to speak.

“I know you have every reason to hate me.”

“But I never wanted to hurt you.”

Lily stared at them both, unable to decide which would hurt more—the betrayal itself or the painful realisation that everyone except her seemed to know the truth. Her fingers slowly loosened around the bouquet until the flowers slipped from her grasp and scattered across the polished wooden floor, delicate white petals spreading between them like fragments of a future that would never come to pass. No one bent to pick them up.

Beyond the sitting room, her eyes settled upon a framed photograph resting on the bookshelf.

The image had been taken five years earlier beneath a rainy London sky.

Daniel had wrapped his coat around her shoulders while laughing that one day they would own a little house filled with books, warm bread, children’s laughter, and far too many rescued dogs. She had believed every promise because his smile had never seemed capable of deception, and she remembered thinking that if

happiness possessed a face, it would surely look like the young man standing beside her in that photograph.

Now the same picture felt like a story written by strangers.

Daniel noticed where she was looking and lowered his head in shame.

“I wanted to tell you,” he whispered. “Every day I told myself I’d tell you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow became months,” Lily replied softly.

“And months became lies.”

The words struck harder than any raised voice could have managed.

Daniel instinctively stepped towards her, only for Lily to retreat a single pace, the small movement widening the distance between them more painfully than the length of the room itself. His outstretched hand remained suspended in the air before falling helplessly to his side, and for the first time in years he understood that some bridges collapsed long before anyone noticed the first crack.

Rain continued tapping gently against the windows, its quiet rhythm filling the silence none of them could bear to break.

Emma turned away and wrapped her arms around herself, blinking rapidly as regret settled heavily upon her conscience. She had convinced herself that complicated feelings justified impossible choices, yet standing before the woman she had unknowingly replaced stripped every excuse of its comfort. Shame settled in her throat like stone, leaving her unable to speak another word.

Lily looked once more at the apartment that had been her home, her dreams, and the place where she had imagined growing old beside the man she loved.

Then she slipped the apartment key from her keyring and closed her fingers around the cold silver metal.

Without another word, she walked past Daniel towards the bedroom, leaving both him and Emma standing in stunned silence, unaware that the choice she was about to make would end far more than a relationship.

“I never wanted to hurt you, Lily.”

Daniel’s voice followed her into the bedroom, breaking beneath the weight of regret that had arrived far too late to matter. He remained standing near the doorway instead of stepping inside, as though he finally understood that crossing another boundary would only deepen the wound he had already inflicted. Lily neither turned nor answered, because some apologies existed only to comfort the one who offered them, while the one who suffered was left to gather the shattered pieces alone.

She knelt before the wardrobe and reached for the small navy suitcase resting upon the upper shelf, her hands steady despite the storm raging within her heart. Every drawer she opened revealed another fragment of the life they had built together, from coffee mugs bought during forgotten holidays to theatre tickets carefully tucked inside old novels, each keepsake whispering promises that had quietly withered long before this evening. Rather than linger over memories that could no longer be trusted, she packed only a few changes of clothing, her grandmother’s knitted scarf, and the necessities that belonged solely to her.

Daniel lingered in silence until he could no longer bear it.

“Lily... please say something.”

“Even if it’s anger.”

She closed the suitcase before looking at him, her hazel eyes shimmering with restrained sorrow rather than bitterness. “What would shouting change?” she asked gently. “It wouldn’t return the years we lost, and it certainly wouldn’t restore the trust we buried.” Every word remained calm, yet they carried a quiet dignity that left Daniel unable to defend himself against the truth.

Her gaze settled upon the writing desk beside the window.

There, beneath a stack of loose papers, rested a worn leather notebook whose corners had softened with time and countless evenings spent chasing impossible dreams. She lifted it with both hands, gently brushing away a thin layer of dust before opening the first page, where a younger version of herself had written in neat blue ink, Every story deserves an ending worth remembering. A faint smile trembled across her lips before fading again, for she realised that while one story had indeed reached its end, another still waited patiently to be written.

Emma appeared quietly beside the bedroom door, her confidence completely stripped away.

“I truly am sorry.”

“I know those words aren’t enough.”

Lily met her eyes for a brief moment, seeing not triumph but regret reflected there. “No,” she replied softly. “They aren’t. But I hope one day you’ll understand that love built upon someone else’s tears is rarely the beginning of peace.” Emma lowered her head without another word, accepting that there were wounds too deep for forgiveness to arrive immediately.

Lily slipped the notebook into her suitcase before returning to the sitting room, where the apartment key still rested in her palm. She looked around one final time at the bookshelves they had assembled together, the framed photographs smiling back from happier seasons, and the little dining table where they had once planned a future filled with children, Sunday breakfasts, and growing old side by side. With a quiet breath, she unclipped the silver key from her keyring and placed it upon the wooden table, the gentle metallic sound echoing through the room like the closing sentence of a beloved novel.

“Maybe I lost the man I loved tonight,” she said, her voice trembling for the first time.

“But I refuse to lose myself too.”

She lifted the suitcase and walked towards the front door without looking back.

Daniel remained rooted where he stood.

He understood at last that the greatest punishment was not losing an argument but watching someone walk away with grace after he had given them every reason to hate him.

Outside the apartment, Oliver Hayes was locking the noticeboard for the evening when he noticed Lily struggling with the weight of her suitcase. At thirty-five, the recently divorced building manager recognised heartbreak the way sailors recognised approaching storms, not because it announced itself loudly but because it settled quietly upon a person’s shoulders. Without asking questions that did not belong to him, he offered a warm, understanding smile before gently taking the suitcase from her hand.

“I’ve got this,” Oliver said kindly.

“You shouldn’t have to carry everything by yourself.”

Lily managed a grateful nod, unable to trust her voice. They descended the stairs together in comfortable silence, passing an elderly neighbour who paused outside her flat and offered nothing more than a sympathetic smile, a small gesture that somehow carried more comfort than elaborate speeches ever could. Moments later, a waiting taxi pulled to the kerb, its driver stepping out to place the suitcase into the boot before quietly holding the rear door open.

As the cab pulled away from Maple Grove Apartments, Lily’s mobile phone began to ring.

The screen displayed a name that instantly weakened the walls she had spent the evening holding together.

Gran.

She answered on the second ring, pressing the phone against her ear while raindrops blurred the passing lights beyond the window.

“My sweetheart,” Alicia Potter’s gentle voice said warmly. “You’ve been awfully quiet. Is everything all right?”

For several seconds, Lily could not answer.

A tear finally escaped, tracing a lonely path down her cheek.

“Gran...” she whispered, her voice breaking into a quiet sob. “I’m coming home.”

Alicia did not ask another question.

“You come home,” she replied with unwavering tenderness. “The kettle will be on, and the light will stay burning until you arrive. You don’t have to carry this pain alone anymore.”

Lily closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the cool glass, allowing the words to settle deep within her heart. For the first time that evening, she realised she had not lost everything, because love still existed in the places that asked for nothing in return.

Five years passed like the turning of a well-loved page.

The first rays of sunlight drifted through the front windows of Butter & Bloom Bakery on Portobello Road, painting warm golden streaks across polished wooden counters dusted with fresh flour. A young woman wearing a cream apron unlocked the front door before the streets had fully awakened, tied her hair neatly behind her head, and placed the same worn leather notebook upon the counter beside the morning's bread.

She opened to a blank page.

Then, with a peaceful smile earned through years of quiet healing, she wrote a single sentence.

Maybe this story deserves one more chapter.

The little brass bell above the entrance chimed softly.

A customer stepped inside.

Neither of them realised that before the week reached its end, another stranger would walk through that same doorway and quietly change Lily Potter's life forever.

Chapter 2

BUTTER & BLOOM



“Morning, Lily! Have you saved me my cinnamon rolls, or has someone finally beaten me to them?”

The cheerful voice floated through the bakery before the sun had fully climbed above the rooftops of Portobello Road, drawing a warm smile from Lily Potter as she lifted another tray of golden pastries onto the polished oak display. At twenty-eight, she had become part of Butter & Bloom as naturally as the scent of fresh bread itself, her cream apron lightly dusted with flour and her chestnut-brown hair gathered into a loose braid that escaped in gentle strands around her face. Customers often remarked that she carried a calmness capable of brightening even the greyest London morning, never realising that the smile she offered so freely concealed dreams still waiting for someone to believe in them.

The little brass bell above the entrance chimed softly as Mrs. Eleanor Brown stepped inside with the familiar grace of someone who had followed the same Saturday routine for years. Having spent decades as a nurse, she possessed the quiet habit of noticing details others overlooked, and she immediately recognised the tiredness lingering behind Lily’s bright expression despite the younger woman’s cheerful greeting. Outside, the streets still

glistened from the night's rain, while the warm fragrance of cinnamon, butter, and fresh coffee wrapped itself around every customer who crossed the threshold like a comforting embrace.

"Good morning, Mrs. Brown," Lily said as she carefully placed two cinnamon rolls into a paper bag before adding an extra biscuit without being asked. "I thought you might fancy a little treat with your tea today." Her gentle laugh softened the words, and the older woman smiled knowingly, accepting the parcel with gratitude that extended far beyond the free biscuit itself.

"You always look after everyone else," Mrs. Brown replied kindly.

"I only hope someone remembers to look after you."

Lily laughed softly, though something fragile flickered behind her hazel eyes before disappearing almost as quickly as it had come. She wished life were as simple as kneading dough until it rose or measuring ingredients until every loaf emerged perfectly golden from the oven. Stories, however, refused to follow recipes, and dreams seemed far less forgiving than bread.

The bakery door opened again as the flour delivery arrived, the cheerful driver greeting everyone with a broad wave before wheeling heavy sacks towards the kitchen. Mrs. Margaret Collins, the fifty-eight-year-old owner of Butter & Bloom, thanked him warmly before checking each delivery with the careful attention earned through decades of hard work. Though she carried herself with steady confidence, Lily noticed the thoughtful crease between her employer's brows whenever she glanced across the street towards the modern café that had recently opened, its polished windows and fashionable décor drawing away many younger customers.

“Lily, would you mind serving the front while I sort these invoices?” Mrs. Margaret asked.

“Of course,” Lily answered immediately.

“You’ve enough on your plate already.”

Mrs. Margaret smiled, though concern lingered quietly behind her eyes. The bakery had survived difficult years before, yet rising costs and dwindling customers had begun testing even her unwavering optimism. Still, she refused to allow worry to steal the warmth that had made Butter & Bloom feel more like home than business.

By the time the morning rush eased, Lily slipped quietly into the tiny staff room carrying a steaming mug of tea. She reached into the pocket of her apron and withdrew her mobile phone, where a single unopened email waited patiently upon the screen. The sender’s name alone caused her fingers to hesitate.

Ashford Literary Agency.

Her heartbeat quickened despite herself.

She already knew.

With a slow breath, she opened the message.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript. While we admired your dedication and voice, we regret to inform you that your novel is not the right fit for our current publishing programme. We wish you every success in your future writing.

The familiar words blurred before her eyes.

Another rejection.

Another polite goodbye from people who had never truly met the characters she had spent years bringing to life.

Lily lowered the phone onto the table and closed her eyes, pressing trembling fingers against the worn leather notebook that never left her side. Doubt settled quietly inside her chest once again, whispering the same cruel questions she had fought for years. Perhaps the stories that filled her heart simply were not meant for anyone else.

The staff room door creaked open.

Alicia Potter stepped inside carrying two fresh mugs of tea, her silver feather bookmark still tucked neatly inside the novel beneath her arm. Retirement had never diminished the wisdom in her gentle eyes, and she needed only one glance at Lily's silent expression to understand what had happened.

"Another one?" Alicia asked softly.

Lily managed a faint nod.

"I thought this manuscript might be different."

Alicia rested a comforting hand over her granddaughter's and smiled with quiet certainty. "Dreams don't expire because someone says no." Her voice carried neither false encouragement nor empty optimism, only the calm conviction of someone who had watched countless students stumble before finding their own path. "The right reader is still searching for the story that only you can write."

Before Lily could answer, hurried footsteps echoed through the bakery.

Kevin Potter burst through the back entrance with windblown hair, a rucksack slung over one shoulder and his father's old fountain pen tucked into the front pocket. At twenty-one, his easy grin hid a heart that had healed less than people imagined, yet he still greeted every room as though determined to leave it brighter than he found it.

"Please tell me someone saved breakfast," he laughed.

"I've been dreaming about sausage rolls all the way here."

His playful remark finally coaxed a genuine smile from Lily, and she reached across the counter to ruffle his hair before handing him a warm pastry. Kevin noticed the phone resting face down beside her notebook, and although he asked no questions, he quietly understood enough to change the subject.

The little brass bell above the bakery door chimed once more.

Lily glanced towards the entrance.

Her breath caught.

Standing beneath the morning sunlight, suitcase in one hand and a familiar leather planner in the other, was the one person she had not seen in five years.

Sophie Bennett smiled with tears already shining in her eyes.

"Hello, Lily..."

And suddenly, the quiet life Lily had carefully rebuilt no longer felt quite so quiet.

"You're staring at that rejection email as though it has the final say over your life."

Sophie Bennett's gentle voice carried across the quiet corner of Butter & Bloom, drawing Lily's attention away from the worn leather notebook resting on the table between untouched cups of tea. Five years had softened neither the warmth in Sophie's smile nor the honesty that had always defined their friendship, though success in London's event industry had replaced the carefree university student Lily remembered. She set her leather planner upon the table before wrapping her oldest friend in a heartfelt embrace, and neither woman realised how desperately they had missed the comfort of familiar company until that moment.

Lily laughed through the tears threatening to gather in her eyes and stepped back, studying Sophie's face as though afraid she might disappear again. "I still can't believe you're standing here," she admitted, a genuine smile returning for the first time that day. "London felt a little smaller after you moved away, but somehow much lonelier." Sophie squeezed her hand warmly, understanding that the words carried far more meaning than simple nostalgia.

"I came back because I was tired of chasing promotions that never felt like home," Sophie replied with a soft chuckle. "I spent years organising celebrations for strangers while forgetting the people who once celebrated every little victory with me." Her eyes drifted towards the leather notebook beside Lily's tea, and the hopeful expression upon her face faded ever so slightly. "You received another rejection, didn't you?"

Lily lowered her gaze and slowly nodded.

"It makes twelve."

"I've stopped counting the reasons they give."

Sophie reached across the table and gently closed the rejection email displayed upon Lily's phone before sliding the device aside.

“You’re treating rejection like the end of your story,” she said quietly, her voice carrying the calm certainty of someone who had learned difficult lessons herself. “It isn’t the ending, Lily. It’s only the chapter where the hero hasn’t realised she’s stronger than she believes.”

The words lingered in the silence between them.

Lily rested both hands upon the worn leather notebook, feeling the familiar texture beneath her fingertips like the steady heartbeat of a dream refusing to die. Memories of lonely evenings spent rewriting chapters, crossing out paragraphs, and beginning again returned one after another, yet none of them filled her with regret. If anything, they reminded her that writing had never been something she chose simply because she wanted success; it had become the language through which she understood her own heart.

Kevin wandered into the bakery carrying another tray of warm bread from the kitchen, immediately sensing the thoughtful mood surrounding the table. He set the basket down before settling beside his sister with an easy grin that never quite managed to conceal the sadness lingering behind his own eyes. “Books saved me when people couldn’t,” he said quietly. “If stories can help broken people stand up again, then yours deserve to exist.”

Lily looked at her younger brother with quiet affection.

“You always know what to say.”

“I usually don’t,” Kevin admitted with a sheepish smile.

“I simply know what I needed someone to tell me.”

Across the bakery, Mrs. Margaret Collins stood beside the front window studying the nearly empty pavement outside. A handful of loyal customers still visited every morning, yet the

fashionable café across the road remained crowded from opening until closing, and each passing week seemed to steal another familiar face from Butter & Bloom. She quietly opened the account book resting beneath the counter, her expression growing heavier as figures refused to balance in the bakery's favour.

Lily approached her without hesitation.

"Is everything all right?"

Mrs. Margaret closed the ledger with a gentle sigh before offering the reassuring smile she wore whenever others needed encouragement. "We've survived difficult seasons before," she replied. "We'll survive this one as well." After a brief pause, she glanced towards the staircase leading to the apartment above the bakery. "The spare flat has been empty for nearly three months. Perhaps a new tenant will help with the expenses."

Before anyone could answer, she disappeared into the storeroom and returned carrying a neatly painted wooden sign.

Apartment Available.

Together, Lily and Kevin helped her secure it above the bakery entrance, where it swayed gently in the cool breeze drifting along Portobello Road. The small gesture seemed ordinary enough, yet somehow it filled the quiet street with the subtle feeling that change had already begun long before anyone recognised it.

As customers gradually departed and golden light settled across the old brick buildings surrounding the bakery, Lily found herself alone behind the counter once more. She opened the rejection email one final time, reading every carefully worded sentence before taking a slow, steady breath. Rather than pressing the delete button as she had considered countless times before, she

locked her phone and reached instead for the brown leather notebook that had accompanied her through heartbreak, hope, and every uncertain step between.

She uncapped her favourite fountain pen.

Then she began writing.

“Maybe stories are like bread,” she murmured with a thoughtful smile.

“They only rise because someone refuses to give up on them.”

The first sentence flowed into the second.

The second became another page.

And before long, the rejection that had seemed so devastating that morning had quietly become nothing more than yesterday’s obstacle.

Outside, tyres crunched softly against the rain-dampened kerb as a black London taxi rolled to a gentle stop before Butter & Bloom. The driver climbed out and opened the boot, revealing several heavy cardboard boxes filled almost entirely with books, their worn spines hinting at years spent collecting stories from every corner of the world.

A tall man wearing a navy wool coat stepped onto the pavement, carefully lifting the first box into his arms before raising his eyes towards the apartment above the bakery. His thoughtful features softened into a polite smile as Mrs. Margaret walked outside to greet him, extending her hand with the easy warmth that made strangers feel welcome within moments of meeting her.

“You must be Mr. Tennyson,” she said kindly.

“Welcome to your new home.”

Peter Tennyson returned the handshake with quiet gratitude before glancing once more at the cosy bakery below, where warm light spilled through the windows onto the peaceful London street. Neither he nor Lily noticed one another across the glass, separated by little more than a few shelves of fresh bread and the ordinary rhythm of another working day.

Neither of them could possibly know that by tomorrow morning, fate would begin writing a story far greater than either had ever dared imagine.

Chapter 3

THE NEW TENANT



“**E**xcuse me... would you happen to know whether the flat above the bakery is still available?”

Peter Tennyson’s warm, unhurried voice carried across the quiet pavement as he stepped out of the black London taxi, the cool spring breeze tugging gently at the collar of his navy trench coat. At thirty-one, his tall athletic frame gave the impression of quiet confidence, yet the thoughtful blue eyes behind that composed expression carried the weariness of a man who had spent too many years chasing success while leaving pieces of himself behind. The taxi driver lowered several heavy cardboard boxes onto the pavement, each one filled with well-loved books, while a single worn suitcase rested beside them like the only companion Peter had brought into the next chapter of his life.

Mrs. Margaret Collins looked up from arranging fresh sourdough loaves inside the bakery window, and her welcoming smile appeared before she had even reached the doorway. Years of running Butter & Bloom had taught her that first impressions rarely came from expensive clothes or polished manners, but from the way people treated those around them. She crossed the pavement with the easy warmth that had made countless strangers

feel at home long before they realised they were no longer strangers.

“You must be Mr. Tennyson,” she said kindly as they shook hands.

“I’m Margaret Collins.”

“Welcome to Butter & Bloom.”

Peter returned the smile with quiet gratitude before glancing towards the apartment above the bakery, where flower boxes overflowed with colourful blossoms beneath bright windows. “It’s even lovelier than the photographs,” he admitted, his voice carrying genuine appreciation rather than polite courtesy. “I think I made the right decision coming here.”

“The building has a habit of choosing its own people,” Mrs. Margaret replied with a gentle laugh.

“I simply hand over the keys.”

Before Peter could answer, the little brass bell above the bakery door chimed as another customer stepped inside. The comforting fragrance of fresh cinnamon rolls and roasted coffee drifted onto the street, wrapping itself around him with surprising familiarity, and for reasons he could not quite explain, the scent reminded him of Sunday mornings from a childhood that had always felt safer than adulthood. He stood quietly for a moment, allowing himself to breathe without deadlines, meetings, or ringing office telephones demanding another impossible decision.

The cheerful sound of footsteps approached from inside the bakery.

Lily Potter emerged carrying a paper bag filled with warm pastries, carefully balancing two cups of coffee upon a wooden tray. The sunlight filtering through the shop window caught the flour dusted lightly across her cream apron, while a loose strand of chestnut hair escaped her braid and danced gently in the breeze. She offered Peter the same sincere smile she offered every customer, though something about his thoughtful expression made her pause for the briefest moment.

“I nearly forgot these,” she said, handing the parcel to Mrs. Margaret before turning towards Peter. “Good morning. You must be our new neighbour.”

“I hope I haven’t arrived too early,” Peter replied with a faint smile.

“I’ve a dreadful habit of appearing before everyone else.”

Lily laughed softly, the sound carrying an effortless warmth that surprised him.

“That’s fortunate.”

“Bakers rather like people who appreciate mornings.”

For a fleeting instant, their eyes met.

Neither spoke.

Yet something quietly familiar settled between them, as though two strangers had unknowingly recognised the same loneliness without exchanging a single word.

Another young man hurried from the kitchen carrying a sack of flour over one shoulder with more enthusiasm than grace. Kevin Potter grinned apologetically after almost colliding with Peter before lowering the heavy bag beside the entrance. His easy

humour arrived quicker than embarrassment, and he offered a friendly handshake without hesitation.

“Sorry about that,” Kevin laughed.

“I promise I don’t usually greet new neighbours by nearly knocking them over.”

Peter chuckled.

“I’ll consider it an authentic London welcome.”

Kevin’s attention drifted towards the boxes stacked beside the taxi, his eyes widening the moment he recognised several familiar titles peeking through the open cardboard flaps.

“Those are first editions,” he said with genuine excitement.

“You must really love books.”

Peter glanced at the worn collection before answering with quiet sincerity.

“More than books...”

“I admire the people brave enough to write them.”

Lily looked towards him again.

The answer lingered in her thoughts longer than she expected.

Before conversation could continue, an elderly gentleman approached carrying a polished brass key ring that jingled softly with every step. Henry Lawson, the building caretaker, possessed the comfortable manner of someone who believed every newcomer deserved both practical advice and a proper welcome. After greeting Peter warmly, he handed over the apartment keys before pointing towards the staircase leading above the bakery.

“You’ll find the place bright enough to read all day,” Henry said with a knowing smile.

“And peaceful enough to hear your own thoughts.”

Peter thanked him sincerely before carrying the first box upstairs, returning several times until every belonging had found its way into the modest apartment. Sunshine streamed through wide sash windows overlooking Portobello Road, where cheerful conversations drifted upward alongside the irresistible aroma of freshly baked bread. He placed his father’s vintage fountain pen carefully upon the desk before slowly unpacking shelves of novels collected throughout fifteen demanding years in the publishing world.

His mobile phone vibrated across the wooden table top.

The screen displayed a familiar name.

Richard Hawthorne.

Peter stared at it without moving.

The ringing stopped.

Only to begin again moments later.

Then again.

He let every call fade into silence, though each unanswered ring pulled another memory from the past. Conference rooms filled with endless meetings, manuscripts measured by projected profits rather than honest storytelling, and the promotion that had quietly convinced him to abandon his own unfinished novel in favour of polishing everyone else’s dreams. He lowered himself into the chair beside the window and closed his eyes, wondering whether

success had merely disguised the emptiness he had carried for years.

Down below, laughter drifted from Butter & Bloom.

Peter opened his eyes and watched Lily smiling as she handed a little girl a cinnamon bun with careful kindness.

His phone began ringing again.

This time, he switched it off completely.

Then, with the quiet bakery below and a room still filled with unopened boxes around him, Peter looked towards the final carton marked Silver Maple Publishing and felt an uneasy curiosity stir within him, unaware that something waiting inside would soon change far more than his address.

“Funny... I don’t remember packing this box myself.”

Peter Tennyson rested his hand upon the final cardboard carton standing alone in the corner of the apartment, its worn edges softened by years of storage and several office moves. Every other box had already found its proper place, with books lining the wooden shelves, clothes folded neatly inside the wardrobe, and the small sitting room slowly beginning to resemble a home rather than a temporary refuge. Yet this solitary carton remained unopened, marked only with faded black ink that read Personal Documents, as though the past had quietly waited until the rest of his life had settled before asking to be remembered.

He carried the box onto the desk beside the wide sash window overlooking Butter & Bloom Bakery, where the warm glow from the shop below spilled across Portobello Road like an invitation to belong. The neighbourhood had already begun to feel strangely familiar, from the elderly gentleman who tipped his hat to everyone

he passed, to the little girl who waved every time she cycled past the bakery with ribbons dancing behind her bicycle. Peter realised he had not felt such peaceful ordinary happiness in years, and the discovery unsettled him almost as much as it comforted him.

He slowly lifted the lid.

Inside rested old publishing contracts, editorial reports, handwritten notes from forgotten meetings, and a polished vintage fountain pen wrapped carefully inside a linen cloth. The pen had belonged to his late father, who had once encouraged him to write stories rather than simply admire the work of other authors, insisting that every reader eventually carried a tale worth telling. Peter picked it up with quiet reverence, turning it gently between his fingers before a faint smile crossed his face.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he murmured.

“Perhaps I’ve been the one who was lost.”

The familiar weight of the pen awakened memories he had carefully buried beneath promotions, deadlines, and literary awards earned for improving other people’s manuscripts. He remembered long evenings inside Silver Maple Publishing, where bright young writers arrived carrying hope beneath their arms, only to leave clutching rejection letters they pretended did not hurt. Somewhere along the way he had become exceptionally skilled at recognising brilliant stories in everyone else’s hands while quietly convincing himself that his own belonged forever inside a drawer.

His thoughts were interrupted by the soft vibration of his switched-on mobile phone.

The screen illuminated once more.

Richard Hawthorne Calling.

Peter stared at the name for several silent moments before pressing the side button and allowing the display to fade into darkness. He felt neither anger nor resentment towards the publishing director who had shaped much of his career, only the weary understanding that success purchased at the expense of one's own dream eventually demanded repayment. For the first time in many years, he no longer wished to measure his life by titles, promotions, or impressive office windows.

He reached deeper Into the box.

Beneath another layer of papers rested a thick handwritten manuscript tied carefully with a faded blue ribbon, its pages slightly worn at the corners as though someone had returned to them countless times. Peter frowned, certain he had never seen it before, and slowly untied the ribbon with the same care one might use when opening a treasured family letter. The title page appeared beneath the warm glow of the desk lamp.

The Last Spring Before Forever

Written by Lily Potter

His eyebrows lifted in quiet surprise.

“Lily?”

“How on earth did this end up here?”

He turned the first page, intending only to identify its owner before returning it the following morning. Instead, the opening paragraph caught him completely unprepared, its quiet honesty unfolding with graceful simplicity rather than dramatic spectacle. There was no desperate attempt to impress the reader, only an unmistakable sincerity that wrapped itself around every sentence until he forgot entirely why he had begun reading in the first place.

The heroine stood outside an apartment door carrying white tulips.

She believed she was about to celebrate love.

Instead, she discovered goodbye.

Peter leaned back slowly, his expression changing from polite curiosity to genuine admiration. Years spent editing bestselling novels had sharpened his judgement until emotional manipulation became easy to recognise, yet these pages possessed something far rarer than technical perfection. They carried truth, written with the courage of someone willing to place her own heart upon the paper without disguise.

He read another chapter.

Then another.

Outside, Portobello Road gradually surrendered to peaceful silence as the final customers disappeared and the lights inside Butter & Bloom were extinguished one by one. Across the narrow street, the bakery windows reflected the soft glow of Peter's apartment, where a single lamp continued burning long after the neighbourhood had settled into quiet rest. Time slipped away unnoticed, measured only by the turning of pages and the growing certainty that he was holding something extraordinary.

Peter finally lowered the manuscript onto the desk, exhaling a slow breath he had not realised he had been holding.

"This isn't simply good," he whispered.

"It's honest."

He looked across the street towards the darkened bakery below, remembering Lily's gentle smile, the flour upon her apron,

and the quiet kindness with which she had welcomed a complete stranger that morning. Never once had she mentioned writing, rejection letters, or dreams patiently waiting beneath the surface of ordinary days. She had carried disappointment with remarkable grace, leaving no trace of the battles she fought once the bakery doors closed.

Peter carefully gathered the manuscript together once more and retied the faded blue ribbon with almost reverent hands.

Tomorrow.

He would return it.

Yet deep within his heart, another thought quietly emerged.

Perhaps fate had not misplaced the manuscript at all.

Perhaps two unfinished stories had simply found one another before their authors ever realised they were searching for the same ending.



Chapter 4

THE LOST MANUSCRIPT

“**W**hoever you are... please don't stop writing.”

The quiet words escaped Peter Tennyson's lips before he realised he had spoken aloud, his gaze still fixed upon the handwritten pages resting beneath the warm glow of the desk lamp. Rain whispered gently against the apartment window overlooking Portobello Road, while the forgotten mug of tea beside him had long since turned cold, abandoned hours earlier when curiosity quietly transformed into something far more profound. He had opened the manuscript expecting to skim a few pages before returning it untouched, yet somewhere between the opening chapter and the fragile honesty woven through every sentence, he had ceased reading as a literary editor and begun listening as an ordinary man who had almost forgotten why stories mattered.

The apartment remained wrapped in comforting silence, broken only by the occasional creak of old timber and the steady rhythm of rain upon the glass. Peter turned another page with deliberate care, mindful not to crease the neat handwriting that carried more emotion than many bestselling novels he had spent years polishing behind polished office doors. Each paragraph

breathed with gentle sincerity rather than theatrical drama, allowing heartbreak, hope, and quiet resilience to unfold naturally until he no longer saw words upon paper but living people carrying burdens painfully similar to his own.

He paused for a long moment.

Then removed his reading glasses.

“This isn’t amateur writing,” he murmured, his voice filled with genuine astonishment.

“This is someone who stopped believing in herself.”

The thought lingered heavily within him as he leaned back against the chair, his fingers resting lightly upon the faded blue ribbon lying beside the manuscript. During fifteen years at Silver Maple Publishing, he had evaluated thousands of submissions from hopeful authors desperate to be noticed, many of them technically polished yet strangely hollow beneath their elegant prose. Lily’s manuscript possessed imperfections that could easily be refined, but hidden beneath those rough edges lived something impossible to manufacture—an honest heart willing to tell the truth without pretending life always rewarded kindness.

Peter lowered his eyes to the next chapter.

The heroine spoke softly to her ageing grandmother after another rejection letter, apologising for chasing a dream that seemed to bring nothing except disappointment. Instead of offering grand speeches, the grandmother quietly brewed tea before reminding her that seeds buried beneath soil appeared lifeless long before they reached the sunlight. Peter felt an unfamiliar tightness gather within his chest, for the conversation echoed words his own

father had once spoken during evenings spent writing stories together at the kitchen table.

His father had smiled while handing him an old fountain pen.

“Write honestly,” he had said.

“The world has enough perfect sentences.”

Peter closed his eyes, allowing the memory to settle gently over him. Years had passed since that quiet evening, yet he could still remember the smell of ink upon fresh paper and the excitement of believing stories possessed the power to comfort strangers he would never meet. Somewhere between literary awards, boardroom meetings, and endless negotiations over commercial appeal, that hopeful young writer had quietly disappeared beneath the respectable title of Senior Literary Editor.

His mobile phone vibrated across the desk.

The sudden sound broke the spell surrounding the room.

The screen illuminated with a voicemail notification.

Oliver Grant.

Peter hesitated before pressing play, recognising the calm voice of the colleague he had trusted more than anyone during his final years at Silver Maple Publishing.

“Peter,” Oliver said, sounding unusually serious. “I know you’re avoiding calls, and I respect your decision, but something isn’t right here. I’ve been reviewing old submission records, and there are patterns I can’t ignore. Too many promising manuscripts received generic rejections without proper editorial discussion. Please ring me when you hear this. I think you need to know what’s happening.”

The message ended.

Silence returned.

Peter stared thoughtfully at the manuscript resting before him, his pulse quickening as several forgotten conversations resurfaced inside his memory. There had been occasions when exceptional submissions vanished before reaching senior editors, dismissed with astonishing speed because someone believed unknown authors carried greater financial risk than established names. He had questioned those decisions more than once, only to be reminded that publishing was a business before it became an art.

His gaze returned to Lily's handwriting.

A quiet unease settled inside him.

Had this manuscript been one of those overlooked voices?

He carefully reached for the rejection letter tucked between the pages, recognising the familiar wording used by countless agencies across London. The sentences were courteous, professionally constructed, and utterly impersonal, offering no meaningful guidance beyond polite encouragement to submit elsewhere. Peter knew that format all too well because he had signed hundreds of similar letters himself, convincing disappointed writers that kindness softened rejection.

Now he wondered how many dreams those letters had quietly extinguished.

Rain continued tapping gently against the window while the manuscript remained open before him like an unanswered question. Professional ethics insisted he should close the folder immediately, return it to Lily untouched, and apologise for accidentally receiving something never intended for him. Yet

another voice, quieter but infinitely more human, urged him to continue because this story deserved at least one reader willing to understand it before passing judgement.

He rested both hands upon the pages.

A slow breath escaped his lips.

“If I keep reading,” he whispered to the empty apartment, “I’ll know things she never intended a stranger to know.”

The weight of that truth settled heavily upon his conscience.

He looked towards the bakery below, where darkness concealed the little shop whose warmth had already begun to feel strangely familiar. Somewhere beyond those quiet walls, Lily Potter was likely sleeping peacefully, unaware that her forgotten manuscript had awakened something inside a man who believed his own love for literature had vanished years ago.

Peter gently closed the folder.

His fingers remained upon the cover.

Then, after a long moment of hesitation, he looked once more at the unopened chapter waiting beyond the next page, knowing that the choice he made in the next few seconds would decide whether he remained merely the man returning a misplaced manuscript... or became the first person to truly believe in the writer who had created it.

“Mrs. Collins... I believe this belongs to someone downstairs.”

Peter Tennyson stood at the foot of the staircase with the manuscript protected inside a dark leather document folder, his fingers resting lightly against its edges as though he were carrying something far more valuable than paper and ink. Gentle sunlight

filtered through the front windows of Butter & Bloom Bakery, filling the little shop with the comforting fragrance of warm sourdough, cinnamon, and freshly brewed coffee, while the cheerful murmur of morning customers drifted through the room with the easy familiarity of neighbours beginning another ordinary day. Yet nothing about the folder in Peter's hands felt ordinary, for during a single evening it had quietly reminded him why he had first devoted his life to books before success had taught him to measure stories by sales instead of sincerity.

Mrs. Margaret Collins looked up from arranging fresh loaves upon the wooden shelves, and a knowing smile crossed her face the moment she noticed Peter descending from the apartment above. There was a lighter expression about him than the one she had welcomed the previous day, as though sleep had returned something years of exhaustion had quietly stolen. She wiped the flour from her hands before walking towards him, her thoughtful eyes settling briefly upon the carefully protected folder he carried beneath his arm.

"You've settled in rather quickly," she said warmly.

"I don't believe I've seen you smile quite so much since you arrived."

Peter glanced towards the bakery windows where sunlight danced across the polished counter before answering with quiet honesty. "I slept better last night than I have in several years." His voice carried neither excitement nor exaggeration, only the calm gratitude of a man beginning to recognise that peace sometimes arrived in places the world considered ordinary. "I think your bakery has a rather remarkable way of making strangers feel at home."

Mrs. Margaret chuckled softly before folding her arms with motherly satisfaction.

“Fresh bread has a strange habit of doing exactly that.”

“So does kindness.”

Peter smiled, though his attention soon returned to the folder resting in his hands. The weight of Lily’s manuscript seemed strangely different now, no longer simply forgotten pages but the fragile confidence of someone who had continued writing despite years of polite rejection. He had spent the better part of the night wondering whether returning it without explanation would be the kindest choice, yet every thoughtful conclusion led him back to the same quiet truth.

Some stories deserved to be protected.

Some writers deserved to be encouraged.

Before either of them spoke again, the little brass bell above the entrance chimed softly.

Lily Potter stepped through the doorway carrying a basket of freshly baked rolls balanced carefully against her hip, a few loose strands of chestnut hair escaping her braid as the cool spring breeze followed her inside. She greeted an elderly customer with the same gentle warmth she offered everyone, thanked the newspaper delivery boy for placing the morning edition by the counter, and only then noticed Peter standing beside Mrs. Margaret. Her smile brightened instinctively, though a hint of curiosity settled in her eyes when she recognised the familiar leather folder beneath his arm.

“Good morning, Mr. Tennyson,” she said pleasantly.

“I hope your first night in the flat wasn’t too noisy.”

Peter met her gaze with a calm smile.

“Not at all.”

“I’ve discovered the sound of your bakery beginning the day is far more comforting than any alarm clock.”

A quiet laugh escaped Lily before she lowered the basket onto the counter.

“I’m pleased to hear that.”

She turned to arrange the fresh rolls, and as she did, Peter drew a slow breath before carefully placing the document folder upon the polished wood between them. His movements were deliberate, almost reverent, as though he feared carelessness might somehow diminish what rested inside. Lily looked down in mild confusion, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully as Peter opened the folder and gently slid the handwritten manuscript towards her.

The faded blue ribbon appeared first.

Everything else disappeared.

Her hands froze above the counter before slowly reaching towards the familiar pages, fingertips trembling ever so slightly as though she feared they might vanish if touched too quickly. She recognised every crease, every handwritten correction, and the tiny ink stain near the corner of the title page where her pen had slipped during a sleepless evening months before. Relief swept across her face with such quiet intensity that Peter instinctively looked away, sensing the deeply personal significance of what he had returned.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for this,” Lily whispered, barely trusting her own voice.

“I thought I’d lost it forever.”

Peter nodded gently.

“It found its way into one of my moving boxes.”

“I’m terribly sorry it caused you any worry.”

She held the manuscript carefully against her chest for a brief moment before releasing a slow breath that seemed to carry weeks of hidden anxiety with it. The blue ribbon brushed softly against her fingers, awakening a memory of Alicia patiently tying the knot years earlier while reminding her that every dream deserved to travel with hope. Lily smiled to herself, grateful beyond words that hope had somehow found its way back.

Mrs. Margaret quietly excused herself to serve another customer, leaving the two of them standing in a silence that felt unexpectedly comfortable rather than awkward. Peter watched Lily smooth the edge of the title page with almost unconscious tenderness, recognising the familiar affection every writer carried for a manuscript shaped through countless nights of persistence. He wanted to tell her that her words had remained with him long after he closed the folder, that her characters felt astonishingly alive, and that somewhere between the opening chapter and the final page he had remembered the young man who once dreamed of writing stories himself.

Instead, he simply smiled.

“Every handwritten page deserves to find its owner.”

Lily looked up, gratitude softening her expression before hesitation quietly replaced it. She studied Peter’s calm face for several thoughtful moments, noticing the faint tiredness lingering behind his eyes and the careful kindness with which he had

handled something that meant the world to her. A dozen questions rose inside her mind, though only one truly mattered.

She tightened her fingers around the faded blue ribbon.

Her heartbeat quickened.

“Mr. Tennyson...” she asked gently, her voice carrying equal measures of hope and nervousness. “Did you... happen to read any of my novel?”

Peter’s smile faded into thoughtful silence.

For the first time in years, honesty felt both the easiest and the most difficult answer he could possibly give.



Chapter 5

ANONYMOUS ADVICE

“Chapter Two needs you.”

Lily Potter frowned as the unfamiliar subject line appeared at the very top of her inbox, her finger hovering uncertainly above the screen while the comforting aroma of fresh bread drifted through the quiet bakery. She had opened her emails expecting another courteous rejection wrapped in polished words that never truly softened disappointment, yet this message carried neither the logo of a publishing house nor the formal tone she had come to dread. For reasons she could not explain, her heart began beating a little faster, as though some forgotten part of her recognised hope before her mind dared to believe it.

She drew a slow breath before opening the email, her hazel eyes moving carefully across each sentence while the morning light filtered through the bakery windows and settled softly across the worn leather notebook beside her. The anonymous sender had offered no name, no company, and no signature that might reveal an identity, only a thoughtful observation written with remarkable kindness. Instead of criticising grammar or questioning commercial appeal, the message spoke quietly about her characters, their honesty, and the emotion hidden beneath every page.

“Don’t write to impress readers. Write the truth, and readers will follow.”

Lily remained perfectly still.

She read the sentence once.

Then again.

A warmth she had not felt for years slowly settled inside her chest, replacing the familiar ache left behind by countless rejection letters. Whoever had written those words had looked beyond technical flaws and recognised the heart she had poured into her story, and that simple understanding felt more precious than any acceptance she had imagined receiving.

She continued reading.

“Your heroine doesn’t need more dramatic moments. She needs quieter ones. Let the silence between conversations reveal what words cannot. Chapter Two already knows where it wants to go. Trust it.”

Lily lowered the phone onto the table, blinking rapidly as unexpected emotion filled her eyes. There was no mockery hidden inside the advice, no distant professionalism, and certainly none of the empty encouragement publishers often included out of courtesy. Every sentence felt personal, as though someone had carefully listened to her story before gently helping it find its own voice.

A memory quietly returned.

She was nine years old again, sitting beside her father at the old oak dining table while rain tapped gently against the kitchen window. She had proudly handed him her very first handwritten

story, expecting praise for every page, only to watch him smile warmly before suggesting she rewrite the second chapter because the characters deserved more room to breathe. When she had looked disappointed, he had gently ruffled her hair and laughed.

“Every story deserves another chapter, Lily.”

“Especially the difficult ones.”

The memory lingered like warm sunlight after rain.

She smiled sadly before opening her notebook.

Without another moment of hesitation, she crossed out the first paragraph of Chapter Two and began writing again.

Upstairs, Peter Tennyson stood beside the apartment window holding a mug of untouched coffee that had long since cooled in his hands. From where he stood, he could see Lily seated near the bakery window with her notebook open before her, though the distance prevented him from reading her expression. He had rewritten the anonymous email more than a dozen times before sending it shortly before dawn, deleting every sentence that sounded too professional until only honest encouragement remained.

“What if I overstepped?” he murmured quietly.

“You’ve been smiling all day, and that isn’t because of the cinnamon rolls.”

Sophie Bennett rested her elbows upon the bakery counter with a playful smile, watching Lily Potter carefully wrap a fresh loaf of sourdough for an elderly customer. The movement of Lily’s hands carried an ease that had been missing for weeks, and even the quiet melody she absent-mindedly hummed while arranging

pastries felt wonderfully unfamiliar to those who knew her well. Warm sunlight streamed through the broad front windows of Butter & Bloom, filling every corner of the little bakery with a gentle glow that somehow reflected the quiet change taking place within Lily's heart.

Lily laughed softly before lowering her eyes towards the paper bag she was folding.

"Am I really that obvious?"

"I thought I was hiding it rather well."

Sophie folded her arms and tilted her head with affectionate amusement. "You forget I've known you since university," she replied. "You smile politely when you're being kind, but today you're smiling because something has given you hope." She paused for a thoughtful moment before lowering her voice. "Would that 'something' happen to live upstairs?"

A faint blush coloured Lily's cheeks.

She immediately shook her head.

"No."

"It's... something else."

She could not explain it properly because she scarcely understood it herself. The anonymous email still rested safely inside her inbox, and although she had reread it more times than she wished to admit, every sentence continued carrying the same quiet encouragement that had greeted her before sunrise. Whoever the sender might be, they had spoken to the writer inside her rather than the frightened woman hiding behind rejection letters.

Upstairs, Peter Tennyson sat beside the apartment window with his notebook open across the desk, though he had written only a single sentence during the past half hour. From where he sat, he could see Lily greeting customers with renewed confidence, occasionally reaching for her brown leather notebook whenever business slowed for a few precious minutes. Every time she smiled while writing, a quiet sense of relief settled inside him, gently easing the guilt that had lingered since he sent the anonymous message.

He uncapped his father's vintage fountain pen and quietly added another note to the editorial observations already filling several pages.

“Trust her dialogue. Her characters become strongest when she allows silence to carry the emotion.”

Peter studied the sentence before closing the notebook with a thoughtful sigh.

“I’ve become an invisible editor,” he murmured with a faint smile.

“And perhaps that’s exactly what she needs.”

His computer chimed softly.

A new email had arrived.

The sender’s name caused his heartbeat to pause.

Lily Potter.

He opened the message slowly, surprised to discover she had replied to the anonymous address he had created only hours earlier.

“I don’t know who you are, or why you chose to help a stranger instead of ignoring her like everyone else. Your advice reminded me why I started writing before I became afraid of failing. Whoever you are... thank you for believing in someone who had almost forgotten how to believe in herself.”

Peter remained perfectly still.

The words blurred slightly before his eyes.

Not because they were dramatic.

Because they were sincere.

He rested both hands upon the desk, resisting the overwhelming temptation to reply immediately and reveal everything. Honesty had always guided his life, yet another truth quietly challenged him now. If Lily discovered he had read her manuscript without permission before trust had a chance to grow, the encouragement he offered today might become the very reason she doubted him tomorrow.

He began typing.

“Your story deserves—”

His fingers stopped.

After a long moment, he deleted every word.

Sometimes silence protected fragile hope better than explanations ever could.

Downstairs, the afternoon slipped peacefully onward as customers came and went, their conversations blending with the comforting sounds of cups being placed upon saucers and fresh bread leaving the oven. Kevin Potter wandered into the bakery carrying a novel beneath one arm before noticing Lily writing

another page during a quiet moment between orders. He leaned against the counter with an approving grin.

“That’s the third time today you’ve opened your notebook.”

“I’ve lost count,” Lily admitted with a cheerful laugh.

“It doesn’t feel like work anymore.”

Kevin smiled warmly.

“The best chapters always begin after people think the story is over.”

Lily looked thoughtfully towards the staircase leading to the apartment above the bakery, wondering once again who had understood her writing well enough to offer advice that felt strangely familiar. She never once imagined the answer rested only a few metres away, quietly wondering whether remaining anonymous was an act of kindness or cowardice.

As the final customers departed and the evening settled gently across Portobello Road, Mrs. Margaret locked the front door before thanking everyone for another successful day. Peter descended briefly to collect a takeaway coffee before heading towards Hyde Park for a quiet walk, exchanging a polite smile with Lily as he left. Their conversation lasted only a few moments, yet Sophie noticed the ease with which they spoke and the subtle warmth lingering between them long after the bakery door closed.

“You really do seem happier whenever he appears,” Sophie observed softly.

Lily laughed and shook her head.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I hardly know the man.”

“Perhaps,” Sophie replied with a knowing smile.

“But sometimes kindness introduces people long before names ever do.”

Lily considered the words without answering.

After everyone else had gone home, she wandered through the now silent bakery collecting forgotten cups, straightening chairs, and wiping the final table beside the window. As she reached the quiet corner where Peter had spent part of the afternoon reading, something caught her attention.

A black leather notebook.

She frowned gently before picking it up, immediately recognising the careful craftsmanship of its worn cover. It was heavier than she expected, its pages filled with neat handwritten notes visible where the ribbon marker rested halfway through the book. Assuming it contained a name or telephone number, Lily carefully opened the first page.

Instead of contact details, she found precise editorial observations written in elegant handwriting.

“A compelling protagonist always reveals emotion through choice rather than explanation.”

She turned another page.

“Readers remember honest characters long after they forget perfect plots.”

Her breathing slowed.

The next page mentioned manuscript structure, publishing standards, and developmental editing techniques far beyond ordinary reading notes. Lily’s eyes widened as quiet realisation

began forming inside her mind, while upstairs, Peter remained completely unaware that the notebook he had guarded for years was no longer resting safely upon his desk.

For the first time since receiving the anonymous email, Lily wondered whether the stranger encouraging her writing might not be a stranger at all.

“What if I’ve made things worse?”

His thoughts refused to settle.

Professional ethics insisted he should never have contacted her without revealing who he truly was, yet his conscience could not ignore the certainty that her manuscript deserved guidance rather than another silent rejection. He had spent years watching gifted writers abandon extraordinary stories after receiving form letters from people too busy to recognise genuine promise, and he could not bear the thought of Lily quietly joining that forgotten collection.

Peter rested his father’s vintage fountain pen upon the windowsill and closed his eyes briefly.

He remembered another aspiring novelist from the beginning of his editorial career, a nervous young woman whose manuscript had arrived carrying more heart than polish. Rather than rejecting it outright, Peter had written several pages of detailed editorial suggestions before returning the submission with encouragement to keep writing. Months later, she had sent him a handwritten letter thanking him for believing in a story no one else had noticed, explaining that his comments had given her the courage to finish the novel she had nearly abandoned.

That letter still rested inside his desk drawer.

Not because it praised him.

But because it reminded him why he had become an editor.

Downstairs, Lily continued writing.

She no longer paused after every sentence to doubt herself.

Instead, she allowed the story to unfold naturally, smiling faintly whenever the anonymous suggestions helped a conversation feel more honest or a quiet moment breathe more deeply. For the first time in years, writing no longer felt like proving her worth to strangers but like rediscovering an old friend she had neglected through fear.

Mrs. Margaret glanced towards her from behind the counter before exchanging a knowing smile with Alicia Potter, who had quietly arrived carrying her favourite novel beneath one arm. Neither woman interrupted the peaceful silence surrounding Lily, though both noticed the gentle determination replacing the heaviness that had shadowed her for so long.

Emily Carter, a regular customer carrying a weathered sketchbook beneath her arm, settled into her favourite corner table before observing Lily's focused expression with quiet admiration. After watching her write for several minutes, she smiled warmly and lifted her cup of tea.

"I don't know what you're working on," Emily said gently, "but you look happier writing it than most people look achieving success."

Lily looked up, surprised by the unexpected kindness.

"I almost gave up."

Emily shook her head with quiet certainty.

“The world already has enough people who stop creating.”

“It always needs one more person brave enough to continue.”

The words settled softly beside the anonymous email already resting in Lily’s heart. She looked down at the newly rewritten pages, gently smoothing the paper with her fingertips before adding another paragraph with steady confidence.

A quiet smile slowly appeared across her face.

Not because she believed she had finally become a great writer.

But because, for the first time in many weeks, she remembered why she had fallen in love with writing in the first place.

Chapter 6

COFFEE & CONVERSATIONS



“**M**r. Tennyson... I believe you’ve misplaced something rather important.”

Lily Potter’s gentle voice carried across the quiet bakery as she stepped from behind the counter, the black leather notebook resting carefully in both hands instead of being tucked beneath her arm. The last of the day’s customers had drifted back onto Portobello Road, leaving Butter & Bloom wrapped in the comforting fragrance of warm bread and freshly ground coffee, while golden evening light slipped through the front windows and painted long amber shadows across the polished wooden floor. Peter looked from the notebook to Lily’s warm smile, and an unexpected mixture of relief and embarrassment settled over him as he realised how close he had come to losing something that had accompanied him through nearly every year of his professional life.

He accepted the notebook with quiet gratitude, his fingers lingering for a brief moment upon its worn leather cover before meeting Lily’s eyes. “Thank you,” he said sincerely. “Most people would have opened every page out of curiosity.” A faint smile softened his thoughtful expression as he gently slipped the

notebook beneath his arm. "You returned it exactly as you found it, and that says rather a lot about the sort of person you are."

Lily laughed softly before brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her cheeks warming ever so slightly beneath the compliment. "I was tempted," she admitted with cheerful honesty. "The first page looked terribly interesting, but Gran always says trust is much easier to lose than it is to earn." She hesitated for a heartbeat before adding with playful curiosity, "Although I do wonder what sort of person carries enough notes to fill an entire notebook."

Peter smiled to himself.

"Someone who forgets things unless he writes them down."

"Or perhaps someone who notices too much."

Their shared laughter settled comfortably between them, effortless and unforced, surprising them both with its natural ease. Mrs. Margaret glanced across the bakery while locking the display cabinet, and the quiet satisfaction in her smile remained hidden behind the practical busyness of closing the shop. She had watched countless strangers pass through Butter & Bloom over the years, yet there was something unusually peaceful about the conversation unfolding between Peter and Lily, as though both had unknowingly found a familiar place to rest after carrying heavy thoughts for far too long.

With the final tray washed and the chairs neatly placed upon the tables, the bakery gradually surrendered to the calm that arrived each evening after another day's work. Lily wiped flour from the countertop while Peter carried several empty crates towards the storeroom without needing to be asked, earning an amused smile from Mrs. Margaret.

“You’ve only lived upstairs for two days,” she teased warmly.

“You’re already working for free.”

Peter chuckled as he returned the last crate.

“I suspect your bakery has that effect on people.”

“It makes helping feel rather natural.”

Mrs. Margaret shook her head with affectionate amusement before hanging her apron beside the kitchen door. “Just don’t let Lily convince you to scrub baking trays,” she laughed. “That’s how lifelong friendships begin around here.”

A comfortable silence followed after Mrs. Margaret disappeared upstairs, leaving Peter and Lily alone beneath the soft glow of the hanging lights. Neither seemed particularly eager to leave, though both searched quietly for a reason to prolong the conversation without appearing awkward.

Peter cleared his throat gently.

“Would you...”

He paused with a faintly self-conscious smile.

“Would you like a coffee?”

Lily blinked in mild surprise, instinctively tightening her fingers around the strap of her shoulder bag. The invitation felt wonderfully ordinary, yet her heart hesitated before answering, remembering another chapter of her life when simple conversations had slowly become promises that later shattered beyond repair. She lowered her eyes for a thoughtful moment before lifting them again, finding nothing except patient sincerity in Peter’s expression.

“I’d like that,” she replied softly.

The Riverside Café overlooked the gentle curve of the Thames, where the fading sunlight danced across the water in shimmering ribbons of gold and amber. A violinist performed quietly nearby, his gentle melody drifting through the cool spring breeze while visitors wandered along the riverside without hurry, content simply to enjoy the peaceful evening. Grace Wilson welcomed them with a cheerful smile before leading them to a table beside the broad windows, where the river seemed close enough to touch.

“I’ll have a flat white,” Peter said.

“And whatever cake Lily recommends.”

Lily laughed, caught pleasantly off guard.

“That’s a dangerous amount of trust.”

Grace smiled knowingly before jotting down the order.

“I’ve found the best recommendations usually come from people who love what they do.”

After she departed, an easy silence settled between them, neither uncomfortable nor forced. Peter rested his hands around the warm coffee cup once it arrived, while Lily absent-mindedly traced the rim of her mug, watching boats drift lazily along the river beyond the window.

“I’ve been wondering something,” Peter said gently.

“May I ask why you started writing?”

Lily looked out towards the Thames, her thoughtful smile carrying equal parts nostalgia and longing.

“My father believed stories were maps,” she replied quietly. “When I was little, he’d take me to the library every Saturday and bring home books like Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, and The Chronicles of Narnia. He used to tell me that great stories teach people how to dream long before they teach them how to write.”

She laughed softly.

“I think I believed him.”

Peter listened without interruption, captivated less by the books she mentioned than by the quiet affection filling her voice whenever she spoke about her father. He recognised that same expression from aspiring writers who described the moment they first discovered literature could become more than entertainment—it could become home.

“What about you?” Lily asked.

“You understand stories rather well.”

Peter smiled thoughtfully before lowering his gaze towards the coffee between his hands.

“I once thought books would become my whole life.”

“They did...”

“Just not in the way I’d imagined.”

Lily sensed there was more behind the answer, yet respected the silence that followed instead of pressing further. She had learned through experience that some memories needed invitation rather than interrogation.

A gentle breeze stirred the river outside.

The violinist began another melody.

Peter looked towards the peaceful Thames before turning back to Lily, a quiet warmth settling comfortably between them.

“Would you mind,” he asked with a gentle smile, “taking a walk along the river before we head home?”

“Of course,” Lily replied with a gentle smile. “The Thames always feels different after sunset. It’s almost as though the river remembers every story London has ever heard.”

They left the warmth of Riverside Café together and wandered towards the broad riverside promenade, where the evening breeze carried the scent of the river and the distant fragrance of roasted chestnuts from a nearby street vendor. Soft golden lights shimmered upon the moving water while Westminster Bridge stood proudly against the darkening sky, its familiar silhouette watching generations of strangers pass beneath it with hopes, regrets, and dreams known only to themselves. A violinist performed an old melody beside the stone embankment, and the quiet music wrapped itself around their footsteps until conversation felt less like strangers exchanging words and more like two travellers gradually discovering the same destination.

Neither hurried.

Neither searched for clever things to say.

For the first time in many years, both realised that comfortable silence could sometimes reveal more than endless conversation.

Lily rested her hands lightly inside the pockets of her coat while watching a family laugh together near the riverside railings. An elderly couple walked slowly ahead of them, fingers intertwined with the quiet confidence earned through decades of shared

seasons, and the simple sight stirred something gentle inside her heart. She remembered believing love always grew stronger with time, yet experience had taught her that promises could disappear far more quickly than they were made.

Peter noticed the thoughtful expression crossing her face but chose patience instead of questions.

“The river has a remarkable way of encouraging honesty,” he said quietly.

“I think that’s why I like walking here.”

Lily smiled faintly.

“Perhaps rivers understand that people carry things too heavy for words.”

They continued walking until the city grew quieter behind them, leaving only the gentle rhythm of flowing water and the distant laughter of passing tourists. Peter rested his forearms upon the stone balustrade overlooking the Thames, his thoughtful gaze following the lights reflected upon the slow current. For several moments he said nothing, weighing old memories against the growing trust he felt beside the woman standing quietly at his side.

“When I was at university,” he began at last, “I wanted only one thing.”

“I wanted to become a novelist.”

His voice remained calm, though Lily recognised the quiet ache hidden beneath the admission.

“I wrote every evening after lectures. I filled notebooks with characters, outlined impossible adventures, and convinced myself that one day I’d see my own name upon the cover of a book.”

He laughed softly, though the sound carried more reflection than amusement.

“Life had other plans.”

Lily turned towards him with genuine surprise.

“I thought you were always certain about your career.”

“I used to think certainty and happiness were the same thing,” Peter replied. “Then promotions arrived, responsibilities grew heavier, and I slowly became so busy helping other people chase their dreams that I quietly abandoned my own.”

The words lingered between them with gentle honesty.

Lily understood that feeling more deeply than she wished to admit.

She looked towards the water, gathering courage before speaking again.

“I wasn’t frightened of writing after Daniel,” she confessed softly.

“I was frightened of trusting.”

Peter remained silent, allowing her to continue at her own pace.

“I kept wondering whether I was foolish,” Lily said, her fingers tightening around the strap of her handbag. “If I could spend five years loving the wrong person, perhaps I wasn’t very good at recognising the right ones. After that... every kind gesture felt temporary. Every promise sounded fragile. I started believing happiness always arrived carrying an expiry date.”

Peter’s heart tightened with quiet sympathy.

He did not offer comforting clichés.

He simply stood beside her.

“I don’t think trusting someone means believing they’ll never hurt you,” he said gently after a thoughtful pause. “I think it means deciding they deserve the chance to prove they won’t.”

Lily looked at him.

The city lights reflected quietly within her hazel eyes.

“You make difficult things sound surprisingly simple.”

Peter smiled.

“They’re never simple.”

“They’re simply worth trying.”

The breeze lifted a loose strand of Lily’s hair across her face, and she tucked it behind her ear with a shy laugh that carried far less sadness than before. Somewhere between coffee, conversation, and the peaceful walk beside the river, the guarded distance she had carefully maintained since her heartbreak had begun to soften without either of them noticing.

“I’ve rewritten Chapter Two,” she admitted after another thoughtful silence.

“I almost enjoyed it.”

Peter’s eyes brightened.

“I’m glad.”

“I even started Chapter Three.”

She looked down with quiet embarrassment.

“I still don’t know whether it’s any good.”

Peter hesitated.

The secret resting quietly between them weighed heavily upon his conscience, yet another thought gently surfaced above it.

“If...” he began carefully, “if you ever wanted another opinion... I’d be happy to read your future chapters.”

Lily blinked in surprise.

“You would?”

“I’d be honoured.”

His answer arrived without hesitation, and the sincerity within it dissolved the final trace of uncertainty lingering inside her heart. She had spent years sending manuscripts to strangers who measured stories through anonymous forms and rejection templates. Now, for the first time, someone wished to read her work not because they had to, but because they genuinely wanted to.

A grateful smile slowly appeared upon her face.

“I’d like that.”

“I really would.”

They began the walk back towards Notting Hill beneath a sky scattered with early stars, their conversation drifting naturally from favourite novels to childhood libraries, forgotten bookshops, and the comforting smell of old pages hidden inside second-hand bookstores. The easy rhythm of their laughter echoed softly through quiet streets until Butter & Bloom finally appeared beneath the warm glow of its hanging lantern.

Neither noticed how reluctant they were to say goodnight.

As they reached the bakery, the peaceful evening was suddenly interrupted by the smooth purr of an expensive engine. A sleek black Mercedes rolled quietly to the kerb before the entrance, its polished surface reflecting the golden streetlights dancing across Portobello Road. Peter frowned slightly, recognising the vehicle before the passenger door had fully opened.

An elegant woman stepped gracefully onto the pavement.

Her dark coat moved gently with the evening breeze as she looked directly towards Peter, relief instantly replacing the anxious determination upon her face. Without the slightest hesitation, she crossed the short distance between them and wrapped him in a warm embrace that spoke of years of shared history.

“Peter...” she whispered, her voice trembling with unmistakable affection.

“I finally found you.”

Lily stood perfectly still.

The smile that had accompanied her throughout the evening faded so quietly that no one except her could have recognised the moment it disappeared. She lowered her eyes for only an instant, yet an unfamiliar ache settled silently inside her heart, whispering a question she was not yet brave enough to ask.

Peter slowly looked from Julia De Luca to Lily.

In that single fragile moment, he realised the peaceful new beginning he had only just started to cherish had unexpectedly collided with a chapter of his past that refused to remain unfinished.

Chapter 7

PAGES BETWEEN HEARTS



“Peter... you still disappear whenever life becomes complicated.”

Julia’s soft laughter carried across the quiet street as she wrapped Peter in a warm embrace, the affection between them as natural as breathing after years of friendship. The sleek black Mercedes remained parked outside Butter & Bloom beneath the gentle glow of the streetlights, while the last traces of sunset painted Portobello Road in warm shades of amber and gold. Peter smiled with genuine surprise as he returned the embrace, grateful to see a familiar face after months of silence, never noticing that only a few steps away, Lily Potter had quietly lowered her eyes towards the pavement because an unfamiliar ache had begun settling inside her heart.

Lily had promised herself long ago that she would never again allow another person to become the centre of her happiness. Daniel’s betrayal had taught her how easily beautiful promises could become painful memories, and she had carefully rebuilt her life one ordinary day at a time until peace finally felt possible again. Yet watching Peter smile so openly at another woman stirred an emotion she neither expected nor welcomed, leaving her

wondering why disappointment had arrived before she even understood its cause.

Peter gently stepped back from Julia, still smiling at the unexpected reunion.

“I honestly thought you’d forgotten where I was.”

“You’ve always been impossible to find,” Julia replied with playful affection.

“You vanish whenever you need time to think.”

Before the silence could grow uncomfortable, Peter turned towards Lily, suddenly realising how the scene must have appeared.

“Lily,” he said warmly, “I’d like you to meet Julia De Luca.”

“My oldest friend.”

The simple introduction carried quiet sincerity rather than nervous explanation, yet Peter still searched Lily’s face with unconscious concern, hoping she had not misunderstood what she had witnessed. Lily lifted her eyes and managed a polite smile, though the warmth she normally carried seemed hidden behind careful restraint. She reminded herself that Peter owed her no explanation, and the very thought only deepened the quiet disappointment she struggled to understand.

Julia noticed everything.

Years spent working with authors had taught her that silence often revealed far more than conversation, and she recognised the brief hesitation lingering between Peter and Lily almost immediately. Instead of allowing awkwardness to settle, she

stepped towards Lily with effortless kindness before offering her hand.

“I’ve heard quite a lot about Butter & Bloom already,” Julia said with an inviting smile.

“I was beginning to think Peter spoke more fondly about this bakery than anywhere else in London.”

Lily laughed softly despite herself.

“That’s a rather generous compliment.”

“I’ll pretend it was directed at the bread.”

Julia’s smile widened.

“I suspect it wasn’t only the bread.”

The gentle humour dissolved much of the tension lingering in the evening air, and before long the three of them found themselves standing inside the bakery after Mrs. Margaret insisted nobody should attempt serious conversation without tea and freshly baked scones. Watching them from behind the counter, she quietly recognised something comforting about Julia’s warmth. Rather than protecting her own place in Peter’s life, the elegant Italian woman seemed genuinely interested in making Lily feel included.

Conversation drifted naturally towards books, travel, and favourite cities.

Julia spoke fondly of Florence, describing little cafés hidden beside ancient streets where strangers still carried novels beneath their arms instead of mobile phones. Lily listened with genuine curiosity, asking thoughtful questions about Italian bookshops and independent publishers, while Peter found himself smiling more

than he had realised. For the first time since leaving his demanding career behind, friendship felt uncomplicated again.

Julia eventually glanced towards Peter with affectionate amusement.

“Do you remember university?”

“You insisted we’d discover the next great novelist together.”

Peter laughed quietly.

“I remember believing we could change the publishing world.”

“You still can,” Julia replied gently.

Her words lingered in the silence that followed.

Lily noticed the thoughtful expression crossing Peter’s face and wondered how many dreams he had quietly set aside before arriving above Butter & Bloom. She realised she knew surprisingly little about the man whose company had already begun feeling strangely familiar, and curiosity slowly replaced the uncertainty that had troubled her only moments earlier.

Across Hyde Park, Sophie Bennett wandered beside Serpentine Lake after finishing a demanding meeting nearby, welcoming the peaceful evening as an opportunity to clear her thoughts. The breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass while children laughed in the distance, their cheerful voices blending with the soft melody of a violinist performing beneath the old trees. Sophie smiled to herself, grateful for the rare chance to enjoy London’s quieter side without deadlines or ringing telephones demanding her attention.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Kevin Potter's cheerful voice interrupted her thoughts as he approached carrying two takeaway coffees, a familiar novel tucked beneath one arm. Sophie blinked in surprise before laughing warmly at the coincidence, accepting one of the cups with grateful appreciation.

"You've developed remarkable timing."

"I like to think it's luck," Kevin replied.

"My sister insists it's mostly chaos."

They strolled slowly beside the lake, their conversation flowing effortlessly from university lectures to favourite novels before drifting towards the small disappointments both had quietly carried through recent years. Sophie found herself smiling more easily than she had expected, while Kevin gradually forgot the guarded hesitation that heartbreak had left behind. For the first time in a long while, neither felt the need to pretend they had everything figured out.

Their laughter echoed gently across the pathway.

Then everything changed.

A deep bark shattered the peaceful atmosphere as an enormous Rottweiler broke free from its startled owner several metres ahead, the frightened animal rushing wildly across the grass with its lead trailing behind. Nearby children screamed in surprise while pedestrians instinctively stepped backwards, unsure which direction offered safety. Sophie froze for a fraction of a second, caught completely off guard by the sudden commotion.

Kevin reacted before conscious thought could catch up.

"Sophie!"

Without hesitation, he reached for her wrist and pulled her firmly behind him, placing himself between her and the charging dog as his heart pounded with instinctive determination. His protective stance surprised even him, yet in that single heartbeat he cared only about keeping her safe, unaware that the next few seconds would quietly change the way they looked at one another forever.

“Kevin... are you all right?”

Sophie’s voice trembled as the park ranger finally secured the frightened Rottweiler, allowing the anxious crowd to breathe again. Kevin slowly lowered his raised arm, only then noticing the scrape across the back of his hand where the rough lead had caught his skin during the brief struggle. The sting hardly mattered to him, because the first thing he searched for was Sophie’s face, quietly relieved to find she was unharmed.

Sophie stepped towards him before he could dismiss the incident with another easy joke, her usually confident expression softened by genuine concern. She gently examined the small scrape upon his hand, her fingers lingering for only a heartbeat before she realised how naturally she had reached for him. “You didn’t even think,” she whispered, looking into his eyes. “You simply stepped in front of me.”

Kevin offered the familiar crooked smile that often appeared whenever he felt embarrassed by praise.

“It wasn’t really a decision.”

“It just happened.”

The honesty of his answer settled warmly inside Sophie’s heart. For years she had surrounded herself with successful

colleagues, polished clients, and carefully planned events, yet very few people had ever placed her safety above their own comfort without expecting something in return. As they continued their quiet walk through Hyde Park, the distance between them felt noticeably smaller than it had only an hour earlier, and neither hurried to break the comfortable silence that had begun growing between them.

Back at Butter & Bloom Bakery, Julia De Luca remained beside the window watching Peter help Mrs. Margaret carry several flour sacks into the storeroom despite repeated protests that he was supposed to be a guest rather than free labour. The easy smile upon his face appeared so effortless that it stirred memories of the young university student she had once known, the man who believed books possessed the power to change ordinary lives one reader at a time. She had not seen that expression in years, and its quiet return filled her with equal measures of happiness and bittersweet understanding.

Lily arranged fresh loaves upon the display shelves before joining Julia beside the front window, uncertain whether conversation would feel awkward after the unexpected meeting outside the bakery. Instead, Julia greeted her with the same graceful warmth she had shown from the beginning, leaving no room for rivalry or uncomfortable assumptions. She studied Lily's thoughtful expression for a moment before smiling gently, recognising emotions that words had not yet confessed.

"You care about him," Julia said softly.

Lily blinked in surprise before instinctively shaking her head.

"I..."

"I don't even know him properly."

Julia's smile never faded.

"Perhaps."

"But your eyes look for him every time he leaves the room."

The observation left Lily wonderfully speechless. She lowered her gaze towards the wooden floor, uncertain whether embarrassment or quiet acceptance had coloured her cheeks, because denying the truth suddenly felt far more difficult than admitting she looked forward to Peter's company. Somewhere between shared coffees, conversations about stories, and simple acts of kindness, the guarded walls around her heart had begun opening without asking permission.

Peter returned carrying the final sack of flour and immediately sensed the thoughtful silence waiting beside the counter. He looked first at Julia, then at Lily, recognising that both women had been speaking about something important. Julia merely offered him an encouraging smile before collecting her handbag.

"I should leave you two to finish closing," she said warmly. "My hotel won't appreciate me arriving after midnight."

Peter walked her towards the entrance.

Before leaving, Julia hugged him once more, though this embrace carried quiet farewell rather than surprise.

"I'm glad you came here," she whispered.

"I think you've finally found what you were searching for."

Peter looked at her with grateful affection.

"You've always understood me."

Julia laughed softly.

“That’s because we’re family.”

Lily heard the final sentence clearly.

Something inside her quietly relaxed.

After Julia’s taxi disappeared along Portobello Road, Peter found Lily standing alone beneath the bakery awning, watching the last light fade beyond the rooftops. He joined her without speaking immediately, content simply to share the peaceful evening until words found their own time to arrive.

“I think I owe you an explanation,” he said at last.

Lily looked towards him.

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I’d still like to give one.”

Peter rested his hands inside the pockets of his coat before smiling faintly.

“Julia and I met during our first year at university.”

“We studied together, argued about books together, celebrated every success together, and supported one another through every disappointment.”

He paused briefly.

“She’s family to me.”

“Nothing more.”

The sincerity in his voice left no room for uncertainty. Lily felt the last traces of anxious misunderstanding quietly dissolve, replaced by a gentle relief that surprised her more than the jealousy itself ever had. She realised she had wanted his answer long before

she admitted the question existed, and the discovery frightened her only slightly less than it comforted her.

A small smile appeared upon her face.

“I’m glad.”

Peter noticed the warmth returning to her expression and found himself smiling in return, though neither fully understood why the other’s opinion had suddenly become so important. They stood together beneath the quiet evening sky, listening to the distant sounds of London settling into another peaceful night while the lights inside Butter & Bloom cast a welcoming glow onto the empty pavement.

As Lily returned indoors to help Alicia tidy the final shelves, Peter walked towards the apartment entrance where the day’s post waited inside the old brass mailbox. Among ordinary letters and utility bills rested a thick white envelope stamped with the unmistakable crest of Silver Maple Publishing. His expression changed the instant he noticed the bold red words printed across the front.

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A chill settled quietly across his shoulders.

He opened the envelope with careful hands and unfolded the first page beneath the streetlamp, his eyes moving rapidly across the formal paragraphs until one familiar sentence stopped him completely.

We have reopened an investigation into irregularities involving previously rejected manuscripts and missing editorial submissions.

Peter’s breathing slowed.

Another line followed.

Your assistance may be essential in identifying affected authors.

He lowered the papers only slightly before looking through the bakery window, where Lily laughed softly with her grandmother while carefully tying a faded blue ribbon around her manuscript once again. The simple sight filled him with equal parts hope and dread, because a terrible possibility had suddenly become impossible to ignore.

“After all these years...” he whispered into the quiet London evening.

“They’ve finally found the trail.”

His eyes remained fixed upon the warmly lit bakery, and a single question echoed relentlessly through his mind.

What if Lily Potter had never failed because her story lacked talent?

What if someone had ensured the world never truly had the chance to read it?



Chapter 8

A SECOND CHANCE?

“H ello... Lily.”

The familiar voice drifted gently across Butter & Bloom Bakery, so calm and ordinary that for a fleeting heartbeat Lily Potter believed her memory had betrayed her. She looked up from the tray of freshly baked cinnamon rolls in her hands, expecting another cheerful customer beginning the morning with warm bread and coffee, yet the sight waiting near the entrance caused every sound around her to fade into distant silence. Five years had softened many wounds, but they had not erased the face of the man who had once promised her forever before teaching her how quickly forever could disappear.

Daniel Brooks stood quietly beside the front door, his grey business suit immaculate despite the uncertainty clouding his tired eyes. The confidence that had once defined his every movement had given way to careful hesitation, while one hand remained tucked inside his coat pocket where an old engagement ring rested unseen inside a worn leather wallet. He had rehearsed countless apologies during the journey across London, yet none of them survived the moment he saw Lily standing only a few steps away,

stronger, calmer, and somehow brighter than the woman whose heart he had broken.

“...Daniel?”

Lily’s voice barely rose above a whisper.

For the first time in years, she found herself unable to move.

The tray trembled ever so slightly in her hands before Mrs. Margaret quietly stepped forward and relieved her of it without speaking. The older woman's thoughtful eyes moved from Lily to the unexpected visitor before settling into the calm watchfulness of someone prepared to protect a person she loved if necessary. Around them, customers continued chatting over breakfast, coffee machines hummed steadily behind the counter, and laughter drifted through the bakery exactly as it had moments before, yet for Lily it felt as though time itself had paused to revisit a chapter she believed had finally ended.

Daniel swallowed carefully before taking a respectful step forward.

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me.”

“I almost turned around three times before walking through the door.”

Lily looked at him steadily, searching his face with surprising calm instead of anger. She noticed the faint shadows beneath his eyes, the weariness replacing the effortless charm she once admired, and the quiet regret lingering inside every hesitant word. Five years earlier she might have mistaken that expression for hope, but experience had taught her that remorse and change were not always the same thing.

“You’re five years too late,” she replied softly.

Daniel lowered his head.

“I know.”

“But I had to try.”

Across the bakery, Peter Tennyson emerged from the staircase carrying several empty coffee cups, only to pause the instant he recognised the unfamiliar tension surrounding Lily. His thoughtful gaze shifted briefly towards Daniel before returning to Lily, instinctively understanding that the stranger standing before her belonged not to her present but to a painful chapter she had worked tirelessly to leave behind. Every protective instinct urged him to step between them, yet something even stronger quietly persuaded him otherwise.

This choice belonged to Lily.

Not to him.

Without interrupting, Peter silently carried the cups towards the kitchen before taking a place near the rear shelves where he remained close enough to help if needed but far enough away to leave Lily completely free. Mrs. Margaret noticed his decision and offered the faintest approving nod, recognising the rare maturity of someone willing to support another person without controlling their battle.

Daniel looked towards Lily once more.

“I’ve imagined this conversation almost every day.”

“I only wish I’d found the courage much sooner.”

Lily folded her hands gently before her apron, her breathing slow despite the memories beginning to stir beneath the surface.

His voice carried her back to another rainy evening years earlier when she had stood outside Apartment 4B with a single suitcase in one hand and her unfinished manuscript in the other, whispering through tears that if her heart could survive betrayal, perhaps her dreams would survive alongside it. She had walked away believing she would never again mistake familiarity for safety.

The memory faded.

She returned to the present.

“What do you want from me, Daniel?”

Her question held neither accusation nor bitterness.

Only quiet honesty.

Daniel drew a slow breath before answering.

“I came back because I never stopped regretting what I lost.”

“I’ve spent five years wishing I’d been the man you deserved.”

Silence settled gently between them.

Lily looked into his eyes, recognising genuine regret without confusing it for redemption. There had been a time when hearing those words would have shattered every wall she had built around her heart, yet standing inside the warmth of Butter & Bloom, surrounded by people who valued honesty without demanding perfection, she realised something remarkable.

The pain was no longer controlling her.

It was only reminding her how far she had travelled.

Sophie Bennett quietly entered through the side door carrying several event brochures, immediately sensing the delicate atmosphere waiting inside the bakery. Kevin Potter followed

moments later with a box of books borrowed from the university library, his expression tightening the instant he recognised Daniel. He instinctively took one step forward before Peter gently rested a reassuring hand against his shoulder.

Kevin glanced towards him.

Peter shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“Trust her,” he whispered.

Those two simple words carried all the confidence Lily needed, though she never heard them spoken. She felt it instead, quietly present like the steady light of a lighthouse guiding ships without demanding they change direction. For the first time since Daniel had appeared, she realised she did not feel alone.

Daniel reached carefully into his wallet.

Without opening it, he rested his fingers upon the old engagement ring hidden inside.

“I know apologies can’t erase what happened.”

“I know I don’t deserve another chance.”

His voice faltered.

“But if there’s even the smallest possibility...”

He lifted his eyes towards hers with trembling hope.

“Can we begin again?”

The question lingered quietly between them, neither demanding an answer nor allowing escape from one. Butter & Bloom Bakery continued serving customers as though nothing extraordinary had happened, yet for Lily Potter the familiar fragrance of cinnamon and fresh coffee had become inseparable

from memories she believed had long since settled into the past. She looked at Daniel Brooks without anger, without longing, and discovered that the greatest difference between the woman she had been and the woman she had become was not the absence of pain but the presence of peace.

Daniel waited patiently, his shoulders held straighter than his uncertain heart. The confident marketing executive who had once believed every problem could be solved with the right words now understood that some wounds belonged to time rather than persuasion. His fingers remained lightly pressed against the old engagement ring inside his wallet, not because he expected it to change the future, but because it reminded him of the future he had once thrown away through his own choices.

Lily lowered her eyes for a brief moment, and memories returned with surprising gentleness instead of the crushing force they once carried. She remembered leaving the apartment beneath cold rain with nothing except a suitcase, a leather notebook, and enough courage to keep walking despite believing her future had disappeared behind her. She remembered Alicia opening the front door without asking a single question, wrapping her in a warm embrace, and quietly proving that home was never a place where love had to be earned.

A familiar voice interrupted the silence with calm kindness.

“May I say something?”

Dr. Amelia Harris, a regular customer known to Mrs. Margaret for her thoughtful conversations over tea, stepped forward after quietly waiting until she sensed the moment was right. Her elegant glasses caught the soft morning light as she offered Lily a reassuring smile that carried neither judgement nor

curiosity. Years spent listening to broken relationships had taught her that the most important words were often the simplest.

“Forgiveness frees your heart,” Amelia said gently.

“Reconciliation is a separate choice.”

The quiet wisdom settled over the room like the first warm breeze after a long winter. Lily looked thoughtfully towards the counsellor before nodding almost imperceptibly, recognising that the words described something she had been feeling but had never managed to express. Forgiving Daniel no longer frightened her, yet returning to the life she had left behind felt impossible because she was no longer the same woman who had once walked into his apartment believing love alone could overcome every disappointment.

Peter remained near the bookshelves without speaking, his calm blue eyes never leaving Lily. Every instinct urged him to shield her from another difficult conversation, yet genuine love demanded something far more difficult than rescue. It required trust, and he trusted Lily completely, believing that whatever decision she reached would be born from strength rather than fear.

Lily lifted her gaze until it met Daniel’s once more.

“I spent a long time wondering what I could have done differently,” she admitted quietly. “I blamed myself for not seeing what was happening, for believing promises too easily, and for thinking love could survive without honesty.” She smiled faintly, though there was sadness rather than bitterness in the expression. “Then I realised healing didn’t begin when you regretted losing me. It began when I stopped believing I had lost myself.”

Daniel closed his eyes briefly.

Every word felt deserved.

“I never expected forgiveness,” he said softly.

“I only hoped.”

Lily nodded.

“And I do forgive you.”

The simple sentence filled the silence more completely than tears ever could. Daniel felt the weight he had carried for five years begin to lift, yet he also recognised that forgiveness had arrived without the future he secretly wished might accompany it. He opened his mouth to speak before Lily gently continued.

“But my future isn’t waiting behind me.”

“It belongs to the woman I’ve become.”

There was no anger in her voice.

Only quiet certainty.

Daniel looked at her for a long moment before the truth finally settled within his heart. The greatest act of love he could offer now was not another apology or another promise, but the courage to let her continue walking towards the life she had built without him. He reached into his wallet, touched the old engagement ring one final time, and slowly closed it again.

“I understand,” he whispered.

“I truly do.”

Alicia Potter smiled through misted eyes while Kevin released a breath he had not realised he had been holding. Sophie rested a gentle hand upon Lily’s shoulder, not because comfort was needed, but because some victories deserved quiet companionship

rather than celebration. Mrs. Margaret returned to serving fresh bread with a peaceful smile, grateful that the bakery had once again become a place where people healed instead of hiding.

Daniel offered Lily one final grateful nod before turning towards the door. As he stepped onto Portobello Road, he glanced back only once and saw Peter accepting a freshly brewed cup of coffee from Lily with an easy smile that carried warmth, respect, and quiet understanding. No jealousy stirred within him now, only the bittersweet recognition that trust had already begun growing where regret could never follow.

He slipped the old engagement ring back into his wallet.

“I didn’t lose her today,” he murmured to himself.

“I lost her five years ago.”

Across the street, Peter and Lily began walking together towards the riverside, speaking about ordinary things as though ordinary conversations had quietly become life’s greatest treasures. Their footsteps carried neither haste nor uncertainty, only the gentle comfort of two people discovering that friendship sometimes prepared the heart for something even deeper. Neither noticed the courier entering a modern office building several miles away, carrying a thick confidential file towards the executive floor of Silver Maple Publishing.

Inside a quiet conference room, Oliver Grant placed a familiar folder upon the polished table before Richard Hawthorne. A red stamp marked the cover with unmistakable clarity.

CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATION

Oliver opened the file and slid a handwritten manuscript record across the table.

“It has finally been traced,” he said evenly.

Richard’s composed expression faltered for the first time in years as he read the author’s name.

Lily Potter.

Another document followed immediately beneath it.

Former Senior Literary Editor:

Peter Tennyson.

The room fell silent.

Outside, London carried on as though nothing had changed, yet inside Silver Maple Publishing the past had begun moving once more, and its first destination was the quiet bakery where two unwitting hearts believed their greatest challenges were already behind them.



Chapter 9

HIDDEN TRUTHS

“Peter... why is your name written beside Silver Maple Publishing?”

Peter stopped halfway across the bakery, the question striking him with the force of a door suddenly opened onto a room he had spent years keeping locked. Lily stood beside the counter with his black leather notebook open in her hands, her hazel eyes moving between the handwritten editorial notes and his face as the truth assembled itself in her mind. Outside, light rain whispered against the windows of Butter & Bloom, while inside, customers continued talking over coffee and Mrs. Margaret arranged loaves as though the ordinary rhythm of the morning might somehow protect them from the conversation beginning between two people who had grown far too important to one another. Peter’s expression changed slowly, and Lily noticed the hesitation before he finally answered.

“Lily, I can explain.”

“Then explain everything.”

She closed the notebook with deliberate care, though her fingers had begun trembling beneath the leather cover. The name

of Silver Maple Publishing had already awakened memories she had spent years trying to bury: rejection emails arriving one after another, manuscripts disappearing into polite silence, and evenings when she had stared at an empty screen while pretending to Alicia that everything was fine. Then came the anonymous messages, Peter's thoughtful advice, his offer to read her chapters, and every conversation in which she had believed she was speaking to an ordinary neighbour who simply loved books. Suddenly, those memories seemed to rearrange themselves before her eyes, and the warmth she had associated with him acquired an unsettling shadow.

Peter drew a slow breath.

"I'm a senior literary editor."

The words landed quietly.

Yet to Lily, they sounded louder than the rain.

She stared at him as though waiting for him to laugh and tell her that she had misunderstood the notes, but his silence offered no escape. Peter lowered his gaze for a moment, accepting the weight of what she had discovered, and when he looked back at her, there was no attempt to hide behind charm or professional confidence. He had spent years knowing how to handle difficult conversations with authors, but standing before Lily now, he realised none of those skills could protect him from the one person whose opinion mattered more than any publisher's approval.

"You knew about my manuscript," Lily said.

"Yes."

Her lips parted slightly.

“How long?”

Peter hesitated.

“Since I found it in my box.”

“And the anonymous emails?”

“I sent them.”

The bakery seemed suddenly too quiet.

Lily stepped backwards, her shoulders drawing inward as though the truth had physically pushed her away from him. She remembered the first anonymous message telling her that Chapter Two needed her, the encouragement that had brought her back to writing after she had almost abandoned her dream, and the strange familiarity of advice that seemed to understand exactly where her story was struggling. She had thanked an unknown stranger for believing in her, never imagining that the man she had begun trusting was standing only a few metres away, watching her struggle with the same secret he had chosen not to reveal.

“So every time you encouraged me...”

Peter swallowed.

“I meant every word.”

“But you were an editor.”

“Yes.”

“And you were evaluating my writing.”

“Not in the way you’re thinking.”

A faint, wounded laugh escaped her.

“Then what exactly was I supposed to think?”

Peter had no answer that could make the moment painless.

He stepped closer, then stopped when he saw her expression and respected the distance she had created. "I should have told you from the beginning," he said quietly. "There is no excuse for that."

Lily's eyes glistened, though she refused to let the tears fall.

"Why didn't you?"

Peter looked towards the rain-streaked window before returning his attention to her.

"Because I wanted your confidence to belong to you, not to my profession."

He paused, his voice becoming softer.

"I was afraid that if you knew I was an editor, every compliment would sound like professional judgement, and every suggestion would feel like I was deciding whether you were good enough."

Lily shook her head, disappointment replacing the first shock.

"You should have trusted me with the truth."

"You're right."

Peter did not defend himself.

"You're absolutely right, Lily."

That simple admission unsettled her more than an argument might have done. She had expected excuses, perhaps some polished explanation designed to make his decision appear noble, but Peter offered none. He stood there carrying the consequences

of his choice without trying to place them upon her shoulders, and somehow that made the situation harder rather than easier.

Sophie arrived through the bakery door several minutes later and immediately sensed the tension. She approached Lily cautiously, but Lily only handed her the notebook without speaking. Sophie opened it, read the first few lines, and then looked towards Peter with surprise.

“You’re a literary editor?”

Peter nodded.

Sophie exhaled slowly before turning towards Lily.

“A secret can come from fear without coming from cruelty.”

Lily looked away.

“I know.”

“But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.”

Peter’s shoulders lowered slightly.

“I know that too.”

Kevin entered shortly afterwards carrying his university bag, and the moment he saw his sister’s expression, his usual humour disappeared. He listened as Sophie quietly explained what had happened, his jaw tightening while he tried to find the right words. He frowned, opened his mouth, then hesitated.

“He’s not a... a... you know, someone who deliberately—”

“Deceives?” Sophie supplied gently.

“Yes,” Kevin replied, relieved. “Deceives.”

He looked towards Peter.

“I don’t think he meant to hurt her, but Lily doesn’t need another person deciding what she can handle.”

Peter nodded.

“You’re right.”

The words left no room for pride.

Later, Lily walked alone through Hyde Park beneath the fine rain, her brown leather notebook held tightly against her chest. The wet pavement reflected grey skies and passing figures, while the trees stirred gently in the cool breeze, yet she barely noticed the world around her because her thoughts had returned to the years when trust had first become dangerous. Daniel had hidden another woman; Peter had hidden his profession, and although the reasons were completely different, her heart could not immediately separate secrecy from betrayal.

She stopped beneath a large tree and opened her notebook.

The anonymous sentence remained written on one of the pages.

“Don’t write to impress readers. Write the truth, and readers will follow.”

A tear slipped down her cheek.

“Was that your truth,” she whispered, “or mine?”

Back at Butter & Bloom, Peter stood alone near the counter while Mrs. Margaret quietly prepared tea. He looked exhausted, not physically, but in the manner of someone finally understanding that good intentions could still cause genuine harm. He had wanted to protect Lily’s confidence, yet by choosing silence he had

taken away the very thing he claimed to respect: her right to make an informed choice.

Mrs. Margaret placed a cup before him.

“You cannot decide how quickly she forgives you.”

Peter nodded.

“I know.”

“You can only decide whether you’ll be honest from now on.”

He looked down at the untouched tea.

“I should have known better.”

Meanwhile, Lily returned home after speaking with Alicia and Sophie, still uncertain what she wanted from Peter. Alicia listened without interrupting, then gently touched her granddaughter’s hand.

“Trust isn’t rebuilt by promises, darling.”

“It’s rebuilt by what someone does after they’ve disappointed you.”

Lily lowered her eyes.

“I still care about him.”

Alicia squeezed her hand.

“That doesn’t mean you must decide anything tonight.”

The advice gave Lily permission to remain uncertain.

That evening, Peter received a message from Oliver Grant asking him to meet privately. The investigation at Silver Maple Publishing had moved faster than expected, and Oliver’s voice over the telephone carried an unusual seriousness.

“We’ve found something in the old rejection records.”

Peter’s expression tightened.

“What?”

Oliver paused.

“Lily’s manuscript was never properly reviewed.”

Peter went still.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying someone marked it as rejected before it reached the assigned editorial department.”

The revelation left Peter staring at the darkened window.

For years he had believed Lily’s repeated failures were simply the cruel mathematics of publishing.

Now he wondered whether someone had deliberately buried her work.

And if that was true, then Lily’s rejection history was not merely unfortunate.

It was evidence.

The following morning, Lily’s phone vibrated while she walked along Portobello Road.

She expected Sophie.

Instead, an unknown number appeared.

UNKNOWN: You shouldn’t trust Peter Tennyson.

Lily stopped.

Another message arrived.

UNKNOWN: He knows what happened to your manuscripts.

Her fingers tightened around the phone.

Across the street, Butter & Bloom glowed warmly through the rain-streaked windows, but Lily no longer knew whether the man upstairs represented another betrayal waiting to happen or the one person who might finally help her uncover the truth.

Her phone vibrated again.

UNKNOWN: Ask him about the first rejection.

Lily looked towards Peter's apartment.

For the first time, uncertainty frightened her more than the truth.



Chapter 10

BROKEN TRUST

“I brought your coffee.”

Lily stopped unlocking the bakery door, her fingers remaining around the cold brass key as she stared at the paper cup Peter held towards her. The street was still quiet, washed clean by a fine overnight rain, and the pale morning light had barely begun to settle over Portobello Road when she found herself standing face to face with the man she had spent the last several days trying not to think about. She looked at the coffee, then at him, noticing the tiredness beneath his eyes and the careful distance he had kept between them, and an ache she did not want to name stirred beneath the disappointment she had been carrying since discovering his secret.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

Peter lowered the cup slightly but did not move closer.

“Then why are you still here?”

He hesitated, his fingers tightening around the cardboard sleeve before he finally met her gaze.

“Because leaving without saying anything feels worse.”

Lily looked away.

“Peter... I need space.”

“I know.”

The quiet acceptance hurt more than an argument would have done, because some hidden part of her had hoped he might insist that everything could be fixed if only she listened long enough. Instead, he stood there respecting the boundary she had asked for, and that restraint reminded her of the man she had come to trust before the truth had complicated everything. She unlocked the bakery door and pushed it open, allowing the familiar fragrance of bread and coffee to greet her, yet the warmth inside did little to settle the loneliness that had followed her through the rain.

Peter placed the coffee carefully on the counter.

“You don’t have to drink it.”

“I simply remembered you liked cinnamon in yours.”

Lily’s eyes moved towards the cup.

“That’s the problem.”

Peter frowned.

“What is?”

“You remember things about me.”

Her voice softened.

“And somehow that makes this harder.”

Peter stood silently while she entered the bakery, knowing that every explanation he had prepared would sound like an excuse if

he offered it too soon. He wanted to tell her that the anonymous advice had never been manipulation, that he had admired her writing before he knew how much she mattered to him, and that every encouraging word had come from genuine belief rather than professional obligation. Yet none of those truths changed the fact that he had chosen silence when she deserved honesty.

“I was wrong,” he said quietly.

Lily stopped.

“I know.”

“I should have told you.”

She turned slowly.

“Yes, you should have.”

The words were not angry.

That somehow made them worse.

Peter nodded, accepting them without defence.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me because I explain myself.”

“I only want you to know that I understand why you’re hurt.”

Lily’s expression tightened as she looked towards the untouched coffee.

“I don’t know what hurts more.”

“What do you mean?”

“Finding out that you lied...”

She swallowed.

“Or realising that I still miss talking to you.”

Peter's breath caught, though he carefully kept his expression composed.

Lily looked embarrassed by her own admission and turned towards the ovens, pretending to inspect the trays waiting inside.

"I hate that," she whispered.

"I hate that part of me still wants to tell you about every ridiculous thing that happens during the day."

Peter's voice was almost inaudible.

"I miss it too."

Neither moved for several seconds.

The bakery bell finally chimed as Sophie arrived carrying her leather planner and an umbrella dripping rainwater onto the mat. She took one look at Lily, then at Peter, and wisely decided not to ask questions until she had put her belongings down. Kevin arrived soon afterwards with a university textbook tucked beneath his arm, his expression becoming protective when he noticed the tension between his sister and the man standing near the counter.

"So," Kevin began cautiously, "we're still doing the awkward thing."

Sophie gave him a warning look.

"Kevin."

"What?"

He shrugged.

"I'm just saying it."

Lily almost smiled.

It was the first hint of amusement Peter had seen from her that morning, and although it lasted only a second, he quietly treasured it.

Later, after Peter had gone upstairs, Lily sat with Sophie and Kevin near the back table while rain tapped softly against the windows. Kevin leaned forward, trying to make sense of the situation, but his frustration showed when he struggled to find the precise word he wanted.

“I don’t think Peter was trying to...”

He stopped.

Sophie waited.

“Trying to what?”

Kevin frowned at the ceiling.

“To... you know...”

Lily looked up despite herself.

“Control me?”

“No.”

Sophie offered another suggestion.

“Lie?”

“No, not exactly.”

A customer at the nearby table glanced over with mild curiosity.

Kevin sighed.

“Manipulate?”

His face brightened.

“Yes! Manipulate. That’s the word.”

Sophie laughed softly.

“You had that word five seconds ago.”

“It was there.”

He tapped his temple.

“My brain just refused to hand it over.”

A small laugh escaped Lily before she could stop it.

The sound surprised her.

Sophie noticed.

So did Kevin.

Neither commented.

Instead, Sophie gently rested her hand over Lily’s.

“You don’t have to decide what Peter means today.”

Lily stared at the table.

“I still care about him.”

“I know.”

“And that makes me feel foolish.”

Sophie shook her head.

“It makes you human.”

Kevin nodded firmly.

“Peter messed up, but messing up isn’t the same as deliberately trying to hurt someone.”

He hesitated again, searching for the next word.

“He needs to... to...”

Sophie smiled.

“Take responsibility?”

Kevin pointed at her.

“Exactly.”

Lily smiled faintly.

“You’re both very helpful.”

“We’re professionals,” Kevin replied.

Sophie laughed.

“You are an English literature student.”

“Exactly. Highly qualified.”

The moment was light, but beneath it Lily felt something shift inside her. The hurt remained, yet it was no longer consuming every thought, and somewhere beneath the disappointment there was a quiet longing for the friendship she had lost.

That afternoon, Peter walked alone through Hyde Park, remembering the first time he and Lily had spoken beside the Thames. He remembered her laughter, the way she became animated whenever she discussed a favourite novel, and the quiet confidence that appeared whenever she talked about the characters she was creating. He had fallen for those moments gradually, almost without noticing, and now he understood how deeply he had allowed her into the private places of his heart.

His phone vibrated.

Julia.

He answered.

“Peter?”

“I’m here.”

Her voice was gentle.

“How are you holding up?”

Peter looked across the wet grass.

“Badly.”

Julia was silent for a moment.

“Then don’t pretend otherwise.”

He gave a tired laugh.

“I thought being honest would make things easier.”

“Honesty isn’t a magic trick.”

“It doesn’t erase the consequences.”

Peter closed his eyes.

“I don’t want to lose her.”

“I know.”

Julia’s voice softened.

“But you cannot love someone by deciding what they should forgive.”

Peter opened his eyes.

“You sound like you’ve been waiting years to say that.”

“I probably have.”

There was sadness beneath her words, but no bitterness.

“Peter, if Lily matters to you, give her the truth and then give her room.”

He nodded.

“Thank you.”

Julia smiled faintly on the other end.

“You’re welcome.”

That evening, Peter stopped outside a small parish church before returning home. Father Michael Donovan, a sixty-year-old parish priest known for listening more than speaking, was standing near the entrance after finishing his evening duties. Peter had met him only a handful of times, yet something about the man’s quiet presence made conversation easier.

“You’re carrying something heavy,” Father Michael observed.

Peter smiled sadly.

“I hurt someone.”

“Then apologise.”

“I already did.”

“Then don’t keep apologising simply to make yourself feel forgiven.”

Peter became still.

Father Michael continued gently.

“An apology isn’t proven by how beautifully someone explains it.”

“It’s proven by what they do afterward.”

The words followed Peter all the way home.

He sat at his desk, opened a sheet of paper, and picked up his father's vintage fountain pen.

For several minutes, he wrote nothing.

Then he began.

"Dear Lily,

I'm not asking you to forget what I did. I'm only asking you to understand why I was afraid to tell you the truth.

I was wrong.

You deserved to know who I was before you trusted my advice, and I should never have decided that hiding my profession was somehow protecting you.

Your writing was never good because I was an editor.

I encouraged you because you had something worth saying.

If you never want me to read another page, I will respect that.

If you never forgive me, I will understand.

But I will never regret believing in your talent."

Peter stopped writing.

A drop of rain struck the window.

He folded the letter carefully and carried it downstairs.

Lily was alone behind the counter, arranging the final loaves for the following morning.

Peter placed the envelope beside her notebook.

She looked at it.

Then at him.

“I need some time.”

“I’ll give you all the time you need.”

He walked away without asking for anything more.

Lily watched him disappear through the doorway, her heart aching with an emotion she could neither accept nor dismiss.

She picked up the letter.

For several minutes, she simply held it.

Then she opened it.

The first page made her angry.

The second made her eyes sting.

By the third, she could no longer deny that the man who had hurt her had also been sincere about one thing: he had believed in her writing.

Her fingers rested against the final page.

Before she could finish reading it, the bakery bell chimed.

Lily looked up.

An elderly man stood inside the doorway holding a sealed brown envelope.

He appeared nervous, almost as though he had spent years rehearsing the moment when he would finally deliver it.

“Lily Potter?”

She slowly stood.

“Yes?”

The man approached the counter and placed the envelope before her.

“Your father asked me to give you this when the time was right.”

Lily stared at the handwriting on the front.

She knew it immediately.

Her father’s handwriting.

Her breath caught.

“How long have you had this?”

The man hesitated.

“Longer than I care to admit.”

Lily’s hand trembled as she touched the envelope.

Behind her, Peter’s unfinished letter remained open on the counter.

Two secrets.

Two different men.

Two pieces of her past suddenly standing beside one another.

And Lily realised that Peter’s secret might not be the only truth that had been waiting patiently for her.

Outside, a dark car stopped across the street.

The elderly messenger glanced towards it.

His expression changed.

“Miss Potter...”

Lily looked up.

“What’s wrong?”

The man lowered his voice.

“You should read your father’s letter before someone else finds out that you have it.”

The bakery bell moved gently in the silence.

Lily stared towards the rain-covered window.

For the first time that day, she was no longer thinking only about Peter.

She was wondering what her father had known all those years ago.



Chapter 11

A STORY WORTH FIGHTING FOR

“**W**hy are you doing this?”
Peter looked towards the crowd rather than directly at Lily.

“Because someone once made me believe my story wasn’t worth finishing.”

Lily’s fingers tightened around the brown leather notebook resting against her chest as Peter’s words travelled through the crowded community hall. Sunlight poured through the tall windows of the London library, touching rows of booksellers, folding chairs, handwritten posters, and nervous young writers who had arrived carrying stories they were afraid might never find a home. Peter stood at the front beside Professor Eleanor Hughes, composed in his navy suit, yet there was something unguarded in his voice that made Lily forget for a moment that he had once kept a painful secret from her.

“And now?”

Peter finally raised his eyes.

“Now I refuse to let someone else believe the same thing about themselves.”

Lily swallowed.

The words struck somewhere deeper than she expected.

She had spent days telling herself that Peter’s kindness had been complicated by his profession, that every thoughtful suggestion might have been an editor’s instinct rather than a friend’s affection, yet hearing him speak to strangers without asking anything from them made that certainty begin to loosen. He wasn’t looking towards her, waiting for her reaction, and perhaps that was what made the moment feel honest; for once, Peter seemed to be speaking because the words mattered, not because Lily was listening.

Professor Eleanor Hughes stepped forward and smiled at the audience before introducing the next question. The fifty-five-year-old lecturer carried herself with the quiet confidence of someone who had spent decades listening to frightened writers explain why their stories were not good enough, and when a young man near the front nervously raised his hand, the room settled into attentive silence. Noah Reed, nineteen and visibly nervous, held a folded rejection letter between his fingers as though it were something embarrassing he wished he could hide.

“How many rejections are too many?” Noah asked.

A few people exchanged sympathetic looks.

Peter leaned against the edge of the table.

“Enough to make you stop writing—but never enough to make your story worthless.”

Noah stared at him.

Peter continued more gently, “A rejection letter is an answer to a manuscript, not a judgment of the person who wrote it.”

Lily’s throat tightened.

Five years of rejection suddenly seemed to gather inside that single sentence, every cold email, every polite refusal, every night she had closed her laptop and wondered whether she had mistaken persistence for talent. She remembered her father sitting beside her as a child, placing a notebook in her hands and telling her that another person’s opinion could never decide what lived inside her, and for the first time in years she wondered whether she had been carrying his advice while forgetting to believe it herself.

At the back of the room, Alicia watched her granddaughter without interrupting. Her seventy-two-year-old face softened when she noticed the change in Lily’s expression, because she had seen that look once before, years ago, when Lily had written her first little story and believed the whole world would eventually read it. Beside Alicia, Sophie quietly closed her planner and smiled, while Kevin folded his arms and watched Peter with a respect he had not been willing to offer so easily a few days earlier.

Peter spoke for another twenty minutes, refusing to make publishing sound glamorous or rejection sound harmless. He spoke about unfinished manuscripts, exhausted writers, stories that found readers years after their first refusal, and the dangerous habit of measuring one’s worth by somebody else’s decision, yet he never mentioned Lily’s name. That restraint affected her more than any public declaration could have done, because she realised he had not come there to win her forgiveness; he had come to remind people like Noah that their stories deserved another chance.

When the applause finally rose, Peter stepped away from the microphone.

Lily remained where she was.

For several moments, she could not decide whether to follow him.

Then she did.

Outside the library, the afternoon air carried the clean freshness left behind by several rainy days, and London seemed unusually gentle beneath the pale blue sky. Peter stood near the stone steps speaking briefly with Professor Hughes, who noticed Lily approaching and gave them both a knowing but discreet smile before walking away.

Lily stopped a few feet from him.

“You didn’t have to say all that.”

Peter looked at her.

“I wasn’t saying it for you.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“You knew I was there.”

“Yes.”

The honesty almost made her laugh.

“You could have at least pretended.”

“I’ve had enough of pretending.”

The answer silenced her.

Peter looked down at his hands.

“I knew you might hear me, but I didn’t want to make your forgiveness part of my speech.”

Lily studied him, searching for the careful professional tone she had once suspected was hiding behind every sentence.

She found none.

“You still believe in my writing?”

Peter answered without hesitation.

“I believe you should decide what your writing becomes.”

“And if I never publish?”

“Then you’ll still be a writer.”

“And if I fail?”

“You’ll write something else.”

A faint smile appeared.

“You make it sound terribly simple.”

“No.”

Peter’s expression softened.

“I make it sound possible.”

Something inside Lily gave way.

Not completely.

Not enough to erase what had happened.

But enough to let warmth enter the space where anger had been living.

“I missed talking to you,” she admitted.

Peter's eyes lowered for a moment.

"I missed you too."

Neither reached for the other.

The distance remained.

Yet it no longer felt like a wall.

It felt like a bridge they had only just begun rebuilding.

From several steps away, Julia watched the exchange with quiet understanding. She had known Peter for years, long enough to recognise the difference between his polite smile and the rare expression that reached his eyes, and she knew now that whatever place she had once imagined for herself beside him belonged to another chapter. There was sadness in that realisation, but there was also peace, because loving someone sometimes meant wanting their happiness even when it did not include you.

"Sometimes letting go is another way of loving," she murmured to herself before turning towards the booksellers.

By the time Lily returned to Butter & Bloom, Mrs. Margaret had already heard about the speech from several customers. The bakery smelled of warm sourdough and cinnamon, and the familiar sounds of cups, conversation, and the espresso machine created the ordinary comfort Lily had missed without realising it.

Margaret looked at her.

"You're smiling."

Lily touched her cheek.

"Am I?"

"You are."

Kevin leaned across the counter.

“That’s dangerous.”

Lily raised an eyebrow.

“What is?”

“Hope.”

Sophie laughed.

“Don’t listen to him.”

Kevin considered that.

“I meant happiness.”

“Did you?”

He frowned.

“I was trying to say something more profound.”

Sophie smiled.

“You were looking for the word again.”

Kevin sighed.

“It was there a moment ago.”

Lily laughed properly this time.

The sound filled the bakery.

For the first time since discovering Peter’s secret, the room did not feel divided between what had been lost and what might still be possible.

Later, as evening settled over Portobello Road, Lily found Peter standing outside the bakery. He had clearly been waiting, but when he saw her, he did not approach until she nodded.

She walked towards him carrying two paper cups.

“You still take two sugars?”

Peter stared at the cup.

Then at her.

“You remembered?”

Lily gave him a small smile.

“Some things are difficult to forget.”

He accepted it carefully.

“Thank you.”

They stood together beneath the soft streetlights without rushing towards anything neither was ready to name. The silence between them had changed, no longer filled with accusation or fear, and Lily realised forgiveness did not mean pretending nothing had happened; perhaps it simply meant refusing to let yesterday decide every tomorrow.

“I don’t want everything to go back to how it was,” she said.

Peter nodded.

“Neither do I.”

She looked surprised.

“I want something better,” he explained. “Something honest.”

Lily lowered her eyes.

“Friendship first.”

“Friendship first.”

“Trust slowly.”

“Slowly.”

“No secrets.”

Peter smiled faintly.

“No secrets.”

Lily breathed out, and some invisible weight seemed to leave her shoulders.

“Maybe this isn’t the end of our story after all.”

Peter looked at her with quiet affection.

“Maybe it’s finally the part where we learn how to write it properly.”

That night, Lily returned home, placed her notebook beside the laptop, and opened the manuscript she had nearly abandoned. She did not write because Peter had encouraged her, nor because a publisher might eventually notice her, but because the characters inside those pages were still waiting for her to finish telling their story.

She wrote until the words began to flow naturally.

Then the laptop chimed.

Lily stopped.

A new email had arrived.

FROM: SILVER MAPLE PUBLISHING.

Her heartbeat quickened.

SUBJECT: DIRECT MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION
INVITATION.

She opened it with trembling fingers.

“Dear Miss Potter,

We would like to invite you to submit your complete revised manuscript directly to our editorial department for consideration.”

Lily stared at the screen.

After years of rejection, the company that had once represented everything she feared was now asking to read her work.

Across Portobello Road, Peter stood outside his apartment window, unaware of the message glowing on Lily’s screen. Their eyes met through the distance, and Lily smiled before looking back at the laptop.

At the bottom of the email was one final sentence.

“Your manuscript has been selected for reasons beyond its literary merit.”

Her smile disappeared.

Lily read the sentence again.

Then once more.

Outside, London remained peaceful.

But somewhere inside Silver Maple Publishing, someone had just opened a file that should have remained buried.

And this time, Lily’s name was written on it.



Chapter 12

THE PUBLISHING DECISION

“I can’t press it.”

Lily’s finger remained suspended above the glowing button while the quiet hum of her laptop filled the bedroom, and beyond the window Portobello Road was slowly waking beneath a clear London sky after several days of rain. The manuscript sat open on the screen, three hundred and twelve pages of characters, mistakes, rewrites, sleepless nights, and stubborn hope that had survived far more than Lily had ever expected it to endure. She had imagined this moment so many times during the years when rejection letters arrived faster than encouragement, yet now that the opportunity was real, the possibility of hearing another no frightened her more deeply than any refusal she had received before.

Alicia sat beside her, the silver feather bookmark resting between the pages of Lily’s old notebook.

“Why?”

Lily swallowed.

“Because if I press it, they can reject me again.”

Alicia’s expression remained gentle.

“And if you don’t?”

Lily stared at the screen.

“You’ll reject yourself before they ever get the chance.”

The words settled between them, quiet but immovable.

Lily leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, feeling the familiar pressure behind them that came whenever fear tried to disguise itself as practicality. She had spent years telling herself that protecting her heart was sensible, that another rejection would be easier to avoid than endure, and that perhaps she could live peacefully without ever knowing whether her novel might have succeeded. Yet somewhere beneath those arguments remained the little girl who had once believed an empty page was an invitation rather than a threat.

“Dad...” Lily whispered.

Alicia turned towards her.

“What if I still can’t do this?”

For a moment, Alicia said nothing.

Then she reached across and touched Lily’s hand.

“He never asked you to know the ending.”

Lily opened her eyes.

“Then what did he ask?”

“To turn the page.”

Lily looked back at the manuscript.

Her father’s voice seemed almost present in the quiet room, carried by a memory from another London morning when she had

been twelve and had complained that her first story was terrible. He had laughed, not cruelly but with the warm amusement of a father who understood that children often judged themselves more harshly than anyone else could, and he had placed a blank notebook before her before telling her that every great story began with someone brave enough to write the first imperfect sentence.

The memory brought both comfort and sorrow.

Lily rubbed her thumb over the edge of the brown leather notebook.

“I’ve spent years waiting for someone to tell me I’m good enough.”

Alicia smiled.

“Perhaps it’s time you stopped waiting.”

Lily breathed slowly.

She looked at the submission portal again.

Her manuscript title appeared beneath the words DIRECT MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION.

She remembered Daniel.

The betrayal.

The suitcase.

The five years she had spent rebuilding herself one ordinary day at a time.

Then Peter appeared in her thoughts.

His quiet encouragement.

His refusal to take credit.

His words at the community book fair.

Your dream deserves to survive, even if our friendship doesn't.

Lily's throat tightened.

She finally understood what had changed.

She was no longer submitting because she needed a publisher to prove that she mattered.

She was submitting because she wanted to know what happened when she stopped being afraid of the answer.

"I can't promise I'll be brave tomorrow."

Alicia squeezed her hand.

"You don't need tomorrow's courage today."

Lily smiled faintly.

"I'm scared."

"Good."

Lily looked at her.

"Good?"

"It means this still matters."

A small laugh escaped Lily, fragile but genuine.

Then she placed her finger over the button.

"This time," she whispered, "I'm not submitting because I need them to believe in me."

Her hand stopped trembling.

"I'm submitting because I believe in my story."

She clicked.

For one second, nothing happened.

Then the screen changed.

SUBMISSION SUCCESSFUL.

Lily stared at the words.

She did not scream.

She did not cry.

She simply closed her eyes and released a breath she felt she had been holding for years.

Alicia watched the smile slowly reach her face.

“There.”

Lily opened her eyes.

“I actually did it.”

“Yes.”

“I actually submitted it.”

Alicia’s eyes shone with pride.

“No matter what happens next, nobody can take this moment away from you.”

Downstairs at Butter & Bloom, Mrs. Margaret had prepared Lily’s favourite pastry without announcing why, while Kevin and Sophie argued cheerfully over whether Lily would spend the entire day refreshing her inbox. Kevin insisted she would, Sophie insisted she had more self-control than that, and Margaret quietly placed a plate on the counter because she knew neither of them was entirely right.

Lily arrived later than usual, carrying herself with a strange mixture of exhaustion and lightness.

Sophie noticed first.

“You did it.”

Lily nodded.

“I did.”

Kevin raised both hands.

“Right, nobody panic.”

Sophie laughed.

“Why would anyone panic?”

“Because this is Lily we’re talking about.”

He paused.

“She needs to stop worrying about the... the...”

He frowned.

Sophie waited.

“The rejection?”

“No.”

Lily smiled.

“Failure?”

“Not exactly.”

A customer nearby glanced over.

“Criticism?”

Kevin shook his head.

Peter entered through the bakery door at that exact moment, carrying his usual quiet composure with him.

“Outcome?”

Kevin pointed towards him.

“Yes! Outcome.”

Sophie laughed.

“Your brain finally found the word.”

“It was hiding.”

Lily laughed too, and Peter’s expression softened when he heard it.

“You submitted?”

She nodded.

“Yes.”

Peter did not congratulate her too quickly.

Instead, he looked at her as though he understood how much courage the simple word carried.

“Then you’ve already done the hardest part.”

Lily studied him.

“You don’t sound surprised.”

“I knew you would eventually press it.”

“What if they reject it?”

“Then you decide what comes next.”

“And if they accept it?”

Peter smiled.

“Then you decide what comes next.”

Lily’s shoulders relaxed.

“You’re remarkably calm.”

“I’ve spent years around authors.”

“That sounds like a warning.”

“It is.”

She laughed again.

The conversation remained easy for several minutes, yet beneath it both understood that something important had shifted. Peter had once wanted to protect Lily from disappointment, but now he understood that protecting someone did not mean removing every risk from their path; sometimes it meant standing nearby while they faced the risk themselves.

When Lily told him about the submission confirmation, Peter’s smile became quieter.

“I’m proud of you.”

“Not because you’re an editor?”

He shook his head.

“Because you’re Lily.”

The simplicity of the answer touched her more deeply than a grand declaration could have done.

Across the bakery, Julia watched them from a distance before quietly returning to her phone. She had already understood what Peter was no longer trying to hide, and rather than feeling defeated

by it, she felt strangely peaceful. Some stories did not end because somebody lost; sometimes they ended because two people finally accepted that happiness could take a different shape than the one they had imagined.

That evening, Lily walked home through Hyde Park before returning to her flat, allowing the cool breeze to settle her thoughts. She still feared rejection, but it no longer possessed the same power over her, because she had finally separated the result from the act of trying.

She opened her laptop again.

No new email.

She smiled.

For once, she did not need one.

Then the notification appeared.

Ding.

Lily froze.

FROM: SILVER MAPLE PUBLISHING.

SUBJECT: FINAL EDITORIAL REVIEW.

Her heartbeat quickened.

She opened the message.

“Dear Miss Potter,

Your manuscript has successfully entered our Final Editorial Review.”

Lily read the sentence twice.

Under normal circumstances, the words would have terrified her, but tonight they felt different.

Under review did not mean rejected.

It meant someone was reading.

Someone had decided her story deserved another look.

Her hands trembled as she continued.

She reached the final line.

“Your manuscript has been selected for reasons beyond its literary merit.”

Lily’s smile disappeared.

She read it again.

“What does that mean?”

Across Portobello Road, Peter stood near his apartment window, unaware of the message she had just received.

Inside Silver Maple Publishing, Emily Foster sat beneath the cold white lights of the editorial department, Lily’s manuscript open on her screen. Beside it rested a thick confidential investigation folder marked with several dates from years earlier, and when Emily noticed the author’s name, her professional curiosity gave way to unease.

Lily Potter.

She opened the internal record.

Several old rejection numbers appeared.

Some matched documents she had recently been instructed to retrieve.

Emily adjusted her glasses.

“What exactly happened here?”

The office door opened.

Richard Hawthorne entered carrying his black leather briefcase, his expression controlled until he noticed the manuscript displayed on Emily’s monitor.

He stopped.

“Who authorised this submission?”

Emily turned towards him.

“The editorial committee.”

Richard’s gaze remained fixed on the screen.

“Then reopen the old records.”

Emily hesitated.

“Which records?”

Richard slowly looked at the confidential folder.

“The Potter file.”

The room fell silent.

Back in her flat, Lily stared at the final sentence of the email while the excitement of submitting her dream gradually became tangled with a question she could not answer.

Why her?

Why now?

And what did Silver Maple mean by reasons beyond its literary merit?

She glanced towards the window.

Across the street, Peter was still there.

Their eyes met.

Lily gave him a small smile.

Peter returned it.

Neither of them knew that somewhere inside Silver Maple Publishing, an old decision had just been reopened.

And this time, Lily's manuscript was no longer merely a submission.

It was evidence.



Chapter 13

DREAMS IN PRINT

“**M**iss Potter, we’ve finished reviewing your manuscript.”

Lily closed her eyes, her fingers tightening around the phone as she stood behind the counter at Butter & Bloom, surrounded by the familiar warmth of bread, coffee, and the quiet clatter of a London morning. For five years, she had heard variations of that sentence followed by polite refusals, careful encouragements, and invitations to try again, so the old instinct immediately returned and she prepared herself for another disappointment before the woman on the other end could continue. She drew a slow breath and managed a tired little smile, though nobody in the bakery could have guessed how much courage it had taken simply to answer the call.

“I understand.”

There was a brief silence.

“Do you?”

Lily opened her eyes.

“I’ve heard this speech before.”

The woman gave a soft laugh, warm rather than amused.

“Then let me give you a different ending.”

Lily’s heart seemed to stop.

“Your manuscript has been accepted for publication.”

For several seconds, the sounds around her disappeared, leaving only the faint ringing in her ears and the pressure of her own hand against the phone. She looked towards the bakery window as though London itself might somehow confirm that she had heard correctly, while a delivery driver carried flour through the doorway and Mrs. Margaret continued arranging loaves without noticing that Lily’s entire understanding of her life had just shifted. Five years of rejection had taught her to distrust good news, and even now she could not bring herself to believe that the word she had once written in her dreams had finally become real.

“Accepted?”

“Yes, Miss Potter.”

Lily covered her mouth.

“Your manuscript has been approved for publication, subject to the final contractual process.”

She swallowed hard.

“After all these years...”

Emma Richardson’s voice softened.

“You earned this moment, Lily.”

Lily’s eyes filled before she could stop them.

“Thank you.”

When the call ended, she remained completely still, staring at the phone as though it belonged to someone else. Mrs. Margaret noticed the expression on her face and hurried towards the counter, wiping her hands on her apron before asking what had happened, and Lily tried to answer but found her voice refusing to cooperate. She finally laughed through the tears gathering in her eyes and whispered the words she had been afraid to hope for.

“They accepted my novel.”

Margaret stared.

Then her face broke into a delighted smile.

“Oh, Lily.”

She pulled her into an embrace, and Lily surrendered to it, laughing and crying against the older woman’s shoulder while the bakery suddenly erupted with questions from customers who had only caught the final sentence. Sophie arrived moments later and nearly dropped her planner when she heard the news, while Kevin came rushing from the pavement after Margaret called him, demanding to know whether his sister had finally conquered the publishing world.

“She’s finally... she’s finally...”

Kevin stopped.

Sophie raised an eyebrow.

“Published?”

“No, that’s not the word.”

“Successful?”

Kevin shook his head.

A customer smiled from a nearby table.

“Recognition?”

Kevin snapped his fingers.

“That’s it! Recognition!”

Lily laughed.

“You could have just said, ‘My sister is an author.’”

Kevin looked offended.

“I was building suspense.”

Peter had entered quietly during the exchange, and the smile that appeared on his face was impossible for Lily to miss.

“Sometimes the right word takes its time.”

Kevin pointed towards him.

“Exactly.”

Sophie laughed.

“Your brain finally found an ally.”

Lily looked at Peter, and for a moment the celebration around them faded into the background. He did not step forward immediately, nor did he claim that he had known this would happen, and she appreciated him for that restraint. He simply looked proud, almost relieved, as though the acceptance belonged entirely to her.

“You did it,” he said.

Lily nodded.

“I don’t know whether I believe it yet.”

“You will.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because you kept writing when certainty was the one thing you didn’t have.”

The words settled gently inside her.

Alicia arrived shortly afterwards, leaning on her handbag as she crossed the bakery floor, and Lily rushed towards her with tears already returning. Her grandmother held the publishing contract with trembling fingers, reading every line carefully before pressing it against her chest, and for a moment the seventy-two-year-old woman looked not at the document but at the child Lily had once been. She remembered a little girl sitting at a kitchen table with ink on her fingers, inventing characters while her father washed the breakfast dishes nearby and listened as though every childish sentence mattered.

“I wish your father could see this,” Alicia whispered.

Lily’s smile faltered.

“So do I.”

Alicia touched her cheek.

“He would have been terribly proud.”

Lily looked down at the contract.

“I want to dedicate the book to him.”

“You should.”

“He always told me to write something that made people feel less alone.”

Alicia’s eyes glistened.

“Then perhaps you’ve already done what he asked.”

The celebration continued through the afternoon, with a small cake appearing from the kitchen and Sophie taking far too many photographs while Kevin proudly informed anyone who would listen that his sister had written the impossible. Lily laughed more that day than she had in months, yet beneath the happiness was an unfamiliar sensation that she could not quite name.

She had become accustomed to being the woman who was trying.

Now she had to learn how to be the woman who had succeeded.

Across London, Peter sat inside his apartment with an old editorial file spread across his desk. The happiness he had felt when Lily called him with the news had gradually been replaced by concern as he compared her name against archived submission records, and the pattern appearing across the documents was becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss as ordinary editorial judgment. Several manuscripts had been rejected within unusually short periods, while internal notes suggested that some submissions had been redirected before reaching the editors named on the rejection letters.

Peter ran a hand across his jaw.

“What happened here?”

His former career had taught him to recognise irregularities, but this felt different because Lily’s name was no longer simply a writer’s name on a document. It belonged to someone he cared about, and that made every discovery more dangerous.

Julia stood near the doorway, reading his expression.

“You found something.”

Peter nodded.

“I’m not sure what yet.”

“Does it involve Lily?”

He hesitated.

“Yes.”

Julia’s face became serious.

“Then don’t protect her by hiding it.”

Peter looked at her.

“I know.”

“You’ve already learned that lesson.”

His mouth tightened into a rueful smile.

“I’d rather not learn it twice.”

Peter turned another page.

A handwritten notation appeared beside one of Lily’s earlier submissions.

Not suitable for consideration.

No explanation.

No editorial assessment.

Nothing resembling the detailed feedback that Silver Maple normally required.

Then he noticed the initials.

Richard Hawthorne.

Peter leaned back.

The discovery unsettled him more than he wished to admit.

That evening, Lily stood outside Butter & Bloom holding the first advance cover proof of her novel. Her name appeared across the page in elegant lettering, and for a moment she simply stared at it, afraid that blinking might make it disappear. Peter stepped outside when he saw her and approached slowly, leaving enough space between them to honour everything they had rebuilt.

“You were right,” Lily said.

Peter looked puzzled.

“About what?”

She held the cover towards him.

“My story deserved another chance.”

Peter smiled.

“You gave it that chance.”

“I nearly didn’t.”

“But you did.”

She looked at him for several seconds.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“I know.”

Lily stepped closer.

Then, with a hesitation that lasted only a heartbeat, she wrapped her arms around him.

Peter went completely still.

For all his confidence with manuscripts and negotiations, he seemed suddenly uncertain what to do with the tenderness of the moment. Then he gently returned the embrace, careful and unhurried, as though he understood that this was not a declaration of love but something perhaps more precious at this stage: trust beginning to breathe again.

Lily closed her eyes.

For once, she did not think about Daniel.

She did not think about rejection.

She did not think about what might happen tomorrow.

She simply allowed herself to feel happy.

Later that evening, she returned home and found Alicia waiting in the sitting room with a small parcel wrapped in faded brown paper.

Lily frowned.

“What’s this?”

Alicia looked towards her with tears already gathering.

“Something your father left behind.”

Lily slowly opened the parcel.

Inside lay an old leather-bound journal.

Her fingers trembled when she recognised the handwriting on the first page.

Lily, if you are reading this, then you finally became a published author.

Her breath caught.

She turned the page.

Now you are ready to learn why I never finished my novel.

Lily looked up.

“Grandma...”

Alicia said nothing.

“What did Dad know?”

The older woman lowered her eyes.

“I think you should read the rest yourself.”

Lily sat down and turned another page.

There were names.

Dates.

Publishing addresses.

References to a manuscript submitted years before Lily had even understood what publishing meant.

Then she saw the name Silver Maple Publishing.

Her pulse quickened.

Across London, Peter opened the confidential investigation file again, unaware that Lily was reading the same company’s name in her father’s handwriting. A symbol stamped beside one of the old records caught his attention, and when he compared it with the photograph Oliver Grant had previously sent him, the blood seemed to drain from his face.

“No...”

He opened another page.

The same symbol appeared beside Lily's father's name.

Peter stared at it in disbelief.

The final investigation report contained only one line under the subject heading.

SUBJECT: LILY POTTER'S FATHER.

Peter slowly closed the file.

For years, Lily had believed the greatest obstacle between herself and becoming an author was rejection.

Now she was beginning to understand that perhaps rejection had never been the whole story.

She looked down at her father's journal, tears gathering silently along her lashes.

The joy of becoming a published author remained in her heart.

But beneath it grew a question she could no longer ignore.

Why had Silver Maple finally said yes?

And what had happened to her father's unfinished novel?

Outside, London remained bright beneath the fading evening sky, while two people in different rooms turned pages that had been waiting years to be opened.

Neither yet understood that Lily's greatest success might also become the doorway to the truth that had been hidden from her family for years.



Chapter 14

CHOOSING TOMORROW

“Dad... was I finally brave enough?”

Alicia looked at the journal resting between Lily’s hands, the faded leather softened by years of being opened and closed in secret, while pale morning light slipped through the curtains and settled across the room. Lily traced one finger over her father’s handwriting, feeling the familiar ache beneath her ribs that had followed her since childhood, though today the sorrow seemed gentler than before. She had spent years believing that becoming an author would somehow complete the promise she had made to him, yet the journal had made her wonder whether she had misunderstood what he had actually wanted for her.

“Brave enough for what?”

“To become the writer you always believed I could be.”

Alicia’s eyes filled with tears.

“You didn’t become the writer he wanted, Lily.”

Lily looked up.

“You became the writer you chose to be.”

The words reached somewhere the publishing contract never had, and Lily lowered her gaze again as she drew a careful breath, allowing the silence to settle without fighting it. Her father had been gone for years, yet his handwriting was suddenly alive beneath her fingertips, bringing back memories she had locked away because remembering him had always seemed to mean remembering the loss. She opened the journal.

“Then I’m ready to read his story.”

The first pages contained observations about books, unfinished thoughts about characters, and little descriptions of London streets written in a careful hand that Lily recognised immediately. Her father had not merely wanted to write a novel; he had studied people, listened to conversations, collected fragments of ordinary life, and believed that even a quiet person carried an entire world inside them. One entry described a girl who wanted to become a writer but feared that nobody would ever understand her, and Lily smiled through sudden tears because the description felt almost painfully familiar.

She turned another page.

Stories don’t live inside books. They live inside people brave enough to tell them.

Lily pressed the journal against her chest.

For once, the memory did not break her.

It warmed her.

She remembered sitting on her father’s lap as a child while he invented ridiculous adventures about talking foxes, travelling kings, and lonely children who discovered courage in unexpected places. She remembered laughing when he forgot a character’s

name and made one up on the spot, and she remembered asking why grown-ups always wrote serious stories when funny ones could make people happier. He had laughed then and told her that perhaps she would write the better stories.

A soft knock sounded at the door.

Kevin leaned into the room, holding two mugs.

“Are we allowed to come in, or is this one of those mysterious author moments?”

Lily smiled.

“Come in.”

He entered with Sophie behind him, and the tension that had lingered around the family since the journal appeared eased slightly when Kevin noticed the open pages. He placed the mugs down and studied the handwriting with an expression of exaggerated seriousness, clearly trying to understand the significance without asking too many questions. Sophie stood beside him, watching Lily rather than the journal, and the small smile on her face told Lily that she had already noticed something had changed.

Kevin frowned at a page.

“So Dad’s novel was... was...”

He stopped.

Sophie tilted her head.

“Unfinished?”

“No, I know the word.”

Lily looked over.

“Unpublished?”

“Close.”

A customer passing through the doorway heard him and offered help.

“Abandoned?”

Kevin pointed at Lily.

“Yes! Abandoned.”

Lily laughed softly.

“Sometimes I think you make these pauses longer just to make everyone else nervous.”

Kevin looked pleased.

“It builds suspense.”

Peter’s voice came from the doorway.

“Sometimes a story isn’t abandoned. Sometimes its writer simply isn’t ready.”

Kevin turned towards him.

“That sounded suspiciously personal.”

Peter smiled.

“Perhaps it was.”

Lily looked at him, and the warmth that appeared in her expression was no longer something she tried to hide. He had become familiar in a way that frightened her occasionally, because familiarity meant that his absence could now be felt, but she was beginning to understand that caring for someone did not require surrendering the independence she had fought so hard to regain.

Peter stepped closer.

“How are you?”

Lily glanced at the journal.

“Better.”

He waited.

“I thought reading this would make me angry at everything I lost.”

“And instead?”

She looked towards the window.

“I think I’m finally grateful for what I had.”

Peter’s expression softened.

“That’s a difficult kind of courage.”

Lily smiled.

“You’ve been using that word a lot lately.”

“Maybe because I’ve finally learned how much of it you’ve needed.”

Their eyes remained together for a quiet moment, and neither hurried to fill the silence. Outside, Portobello Road carried on with its ordinary rhythm of delivery vans, footsteps, bicycle bells, and shopkeepers lifting shutters, yet within the bakery there was a stillness that felt almost sacred.

Alicia eventually joined them and placed her hand over Lily’s.

“There is something else you should know.”

Lily looked at her.

“What?”

“Your father didn’t stop writing because he stopped loving stories.”

The sentence changed the room.

“Then why did he stop?”

Alicia hesitated.

“I promised him I wouldn’t tell you until you were old enough to understand.”

Before Lily could answer, the bakery door opened.

An elderly man entered slowly, carrying a worn leather satchel and a small brass key attached to a faded ribbon. His silver hair was neatly combed, and thin glasses rested low on his nose as he looked around with the careful attention of someone entering a place connected to an old memory.

His gaze stopped on Lily.

“David’s daughter?”

Lily straightened.

“Yes.”

The man gave a quiet smile.

“My name is Arthur Bennett.”

He removed his hat.

“I knew your father.”

Lily’s fingers tightened around the journal.

“You knew him?”

“Very well.”

Arthur sat at the nearest table, and when Lily joined him, he studied the journal with an expression that carried decades of affection and regret. He told her that her father had once spent long evenings in the library discussing novels, publishing, and the manuscript he believed would become his life’s greatest work. He had completed most of it, Arthur said, before something happened that made him withdraw from the publishing world altogether.

“What happened to the manuscript?”

Arthur lowered his eyes.

“It disappeared.”

Lily’s heart sank.

“How?”

“I never learned the entire truth.”

Peter remained silent, but Lily noticed his attention sharpen.

Arthur continued.

“Your father asked me not to investigate, and I respected that request.”

“You knew the manuscript was missing?”

“Yes.”

“And you never told Grandma?”

Arthur’s expression tightened.

“She knew enough.”

Lily looked at Alicia.

The older woman nodded reluctantly.

“I knew there had been trouble, but your father didn’t want the matter to become your burden.”

Lily closed her eyes for a moment.

For years, she had believed her father’s unfinished dream had simply been abandoned because life had become difficult.

Now she wondered whether somebody else had made the decision for him.

Later, as the sun descended over Hyde Park, Lily walked beside Peter beneath trees beginning to glow gold in the evening light. Children chased one another near the paths while ducks drifted across the water, and the gentle sounds of London seemed strangely distant as Lily considered everything she had learned.

“For years,” she said, “I thought moving forward meant forgetting everyone I lost.”

Peter looked at her.

“Maybe moving forward means carrying them with you.”

She stopped.

He stopped too.

Lily looked down at his hand before slowly reaching for it.

Peter’s fingers closed around hers.

“Stay?”

His answer came without hesitation.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, and for a while neither spoke. There was no dramatic promise, no hurried confession, and no need for anything more than the warmth of his hand around hers, because after everything they had survived, quiet certainty felt more precious than grand declarations.

“I can remember my past without living inside it,” Lily whispered.

Peter looked down at her.

“And you can choose what comes next.”

She smiled.

“The past wrote my scars.”

Peter squeezed her hand gently.

“Then tomorrow belongs to you.”

They continued towards Portobello Road together, and Lily felt lighter than she had in years. She could honour her father without becoming trapped inside his unfinished dream, forgive Daniel without returning to him, and love Peter without losing the person she had fought so hard to become. For the first time, tomorrow did not feel like something she had to fear.

It felt like something she could choose.

That night, however, the peace did not last.

Lily lay beneath the covers with her father’s journal resting on the bedside table when her phone vibrated against the wood.

BZZZT.

She reached for it.

An unknown number appeared.

Your father's unfinished novel was never truly unfinished.

Lily sat upright.

A second message arrived.

Someone else completed the ending.

Her pulse quickened.

Then another message appeared.

If you want the truth, look inside Silver Maple Publishing.

She stared at the screen before immediately calling Peter.

He answered on the second ring.

"Lily?"

"Come over."

Something in her voice made him pause.

"What's happened?"

"I'll explain when you get here."

Peter arrived minutes later, and Lily silently handed him the phone. His eyes moved across the messages once, then again, before his expression changed completely.

"What is it?"

He turned the phone towards the light.

"There should be a reference code."

Lily frowned.

"What reference code?"

“Here.”

A string of numbers appeared beneath the message.

Peter recognised it immediately.

His jaw tightened.

“This isn’t random.”

“What does it mean?”

“It matches one of the old Silver Maple investigation codes.”

Lily felt the warmth leave her face.

“Then someone knows what happened to Dad’s manuscript.”

Peter looked at her.

“Yes.”

A long silence followed.

Then he opened his laptop and accessed the archived investigation records.

One document appeared.

AUTHOR: DAVID POTTER.

Peter scrolled downward.

MANUSCRIPT STATUS: COMPLETED.

Lily leaned closer.

“But Dad never finished it.”

Peter stared at the screen.

“According to Silver Maple’s records...”

He swallowed.

“Someone did.”

Lily’s phone vibrated again.

She looked down.

The final message appeared.

You are reading the wrong story.

Find the person who wrote your father’s ending.

Lily slowly raised her eyes towards Peter.

The peaceful future she had chosen only hours earlier suddenly seemed to stand on the edge of something far darker.

Peter closed the laptop.

“We’re going to find out who did this.”

Lily looked at her father’s journal.

Then at the man beside her.

For the first time, she was not afraid of the past because she wanted to live in it.

She was afraid because the past had begun reaching for her.

And somewhere inside Silver Maple Publishing, someone was still holding the ending to a story that should have belonged to her father.



Chapter 15

THE MISSING ENDING

“Dad... why did you leave your story unfinished?”

Peter looked at the open journal in Lily’s trembling hands, the faded leather lying beneath the warm lamp as though it had been waiting years for this particular evening. The room was quiet except for the faint hum of the kettle, yet Lily could hear her own heartbeat as she stared at the handwriting she had known since childhood. Beneath the familiar lines was a page folded inward, almost deliberately hidden from anyone who might casually turn the journal.

“Maybe he didn’t.”

Lily slowly raised her eyes.

“What do you mean?”

Peter leaned closer, careful not to touch the page, and pointed towards the faded title written in dark blue ink. His expression had changed from gentle curiosity to the concentration she had learned to recognise whenever his mind began assembling pieces of a puzzle. Lily swallowed, feeling the old grief return with a strange new companion beside it—hope.

“I mean we should find out whether he actually stopped writing.”

Her fingers tightened around the paper.

“And if someone stopped him?”

Peter’s expression hardened.

“Then we’ll find out who.”

For several seconds, Lily could not move, because the words beneath the title seemed to make the room smaller around her. The Last Spring Before Forever was written in her father’s unmistakable hand, followed by a sentence that looked as though it had been added in haste: The ending was taken from me. Lily read it once, then again, and on the third reading her eyes blurred until the letters seemed to swim together.

“Taken from you?”

Peter glanced at her.

“That’s what it says.”

Lily pressed the heel of her hand beneath one eye, irritated with herself for crying when she had promised she would face whatever came next with courage. Yet this was not another rejection letter that could be deleted or another painful memory that could be pushed into a drawer; this was her father’s voice reaching through fourteen years of silence. She had spent so long thinking his unfinished novel was simply another dream life had interrupted that the possibility of something deliberate happening to it left her almost breathless.

“I used to ask him about this book.”

Peter remained quiet.

“I was twelve, perhaps younger, and he’d sit at the kitchen table with pages everywhere.”

A small smile appeared through her tears.

“I asked him whether I’d ever get to read it.”

“What did he say?”

Lily looked down at the journal.

“He said, ‘When I finish it.’”

The memory arrived so vividly that for a moment the present disappeared, replaced by the warm kitchen of her childhood. Her father had been sitting beneath the yellow light with his sleeves rolled up, a fountain pen between his fingers and several pages spread before him, while young Lily leaned over the table trying to read upside down. She remembered the patient smile he gave her whenever she asked too many questions, and the gentle way he had closed the manuscript whenever she tried to peek at the ending.

“Daddy, is it a love story?”

David had laughed.

“It is a story about people who don’t know how much they need each other.”

“Does it have a happy ending?”

He had looked towards the unfinished pages.

“I haven’t written the ending yet.”

The memory faded, leaving Lily standing beside Peter with tears resting on her lashes. She expected the grief to crush her as it always had, but something different happened this time; beneath

the sorrow was a quiet determination that refused to disappear. She touched the journal again, almost tenderly.

“I lost my father once.”

Peter waited.

“I won’t lose his story too.”

The following morning, Notting Hill Public Library smelled of old paper, polished wood and rain-damp coats, and Lily felt strangely comforted by it. Peter walked beside her carrying a folder of notes, while Arthur Bennett waited near the reference desk with his old library key resting against his palm. The retired librarian looked older than he had the previous day, and when his eyes fell upon the title in Lily’s journal, his expression changed so completely that Lily immediately knew he had recognised it.

“David really called it that.”

Lily stopped.

“You knew about the novel?”

Arthur removed his glasses and polished them slowly.

“I knew about more than the title.”

The words settled heavily between them.

Arthur explained that David had spent years developing the manuscript, discussing characters and structure with him during long afternoons in the library. He had been excited at first, convinced that Silver Maple Publishing might give the book a chance, but his confidence changed after several meetings with editors.

“He told me someone was taking manuscripts that didn’t belong to them.”

Lily stared at him.

“Taking them?”

Arthur nodded reluctantly.

“He didn’t know who.”

Peter’s jaw tightened.

“Did he have evidence?”

“No.”

Arthur looked towards the journal.

“But he had enough fear to stop trusting people.”

The sentence struck Peter harder than he expected, because it echoed memories from his own early years at Silver Maple. He remembered being twenty-four, ambitious and desperate to prove himself, when promising submissions would vanish from the editorial system without explanation. Whenever he questioned the matter, senior staff told him not to concern himself with decisions made above his position.

He had obeyed.

At the time, he had called it professionalism.

Now it felt dangerously close to cowardice.

“I should have asked more questions,” he murmured.

Lily turned towards him.

“You didn’t know.”

Peter met her gaze.

“I should have.”

There was no excuse in his voice, and Lily appreciated that more than any attempt at reassurance. They continued towards the archive section, where Margaret Reed was waiting with a red folder and an expression that suggested she already knew their request was unusual. The senior archivist spoke carefully as she explained that older records were not normally accessed without formal authorisation, yet the investigation connected to David Potter had reopened enough files to permit limited review.

When the screen illuminated, Lily felt her stomach tighten.

AUTHOR: DAVID POTTER.

TITLE: THE LAST SPRING BEFORE FOREVER.

STATUS: COMPLETED.

She stared.

“That can’t be right.”

Peter leaned towards the screen.

“Completion date?”

Margaret hesitated.

“October 2006.”

Lily shook her head.

“My father never completed it.”

Margaret’s fingers moved across the keyboard.

“There is something else.”

A second line appeared.

FINAL EDITOR: RICHARD HAWTHORNE.

Peter went completely still.

Lily looked at him.

“Who is Richard Hawthorne?”

Peter did not answer immediately.

“He was an executive director at Silver Maple.”

“And he was listed as Dad’s final editor?”

“Yes.”

Lily’s confusion hardened into suspicion.

“But Dad died before this record was marked completed.”

Margaret looked uncomfortable.

“The record was modified after the original registration.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed.

“By whom?”

Margaret glanced towards the security camera before lowering her voice.

“That information isn’t available to me.”

Lily stepped back from the screen, suddenly feeling as though the air had changed. Her father’s death, the missing manuscript, the strange completion record and Peter’s former company were no longer separate pieces of an old family mystery. They were beginning to form a single shape, and she did not like what it suggested.

Outside the library, Lily stood beneath the awning while Peter studied the notes they had gathered. The afternoon clouds had thickened over London, turning the familiar street grey, and for the first time since opening the journal she felt tired rather than determined. She leaned against the brick wall and closed her eyes, wishing briefly that she could return to the uncomplicated happiness of the bakery.

Peter noticed.

“You’ve had enough for today.”

Lily opened her eyes.

“No.”

“You don’t have to prove anything.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you pushing yourself?”

She looked at him for a long moment.

“Because if I stop now, I’ll wonder whether I was afraid.”

Peter’s expression softened.

“Being afraid doesn’t make you weak.”

“Neither does being tired.”

“No.”

A faint smile touched his mouth.

“It makes you human.”

That small exchange eased something inside her, and when they returned to Butter & Bloom later, Lily sat beside him at one of the quiet tables rather than taking her usual seat across the room.

The bakery had emptied, leaving only the scent of cinnamon and fresh bread lingering beneath the wooden beams, while rain whispered against the front window. Lily rested her head against Peter's shoulder almost without thinking, and when she realised what she had done, she nearly moved away.

Peter stayed perfectly still.

"I'm glad you're here."

His voice was quiet.

"So am I."

Their hands rested beside one another on the table, close enough for their fingers to touch. Neither made a hurried movement, and somehow that restraint made the moment more intimate than any dramatic declaration could have been. Lily had once believed trust meant never being frightened around another person, but she was beginning to understand that perhaps trust meant being frightened and still choosing not to run.

A message arrived from Julia shortly afterwards.

Peter opened it.

She had located an old Silver Maple archive reference showing that David's registration had originally been marked incomplete, then altered years later. Beneath the information was a warning.

Someone didn't simply lose the manuscript.

Someone changed its history.

Peter showed Lily the message.

She read it twice.

"Why would anyone do that?"

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think Richard Hawthorne knows?”

Peter’s silence answered before his words did.

“I think we need evidence before we accuse anyone.”

Lily nodded.

“Then let’s find it.”

That evening, Peter returned to his apartment and opened the archived file once more while Lily sat beside him. The original registration appeared on the screen, followed by the altered version, and between them was a digital record showing that the final chapter had supposedly been received and approved.

Lily stared.

“Dad never wrote a final chapter.”

Peter clicked the attachment.

ACCESS DENIED.

Before either could speak, his phone rang.

UNKNOWN NUMBER.

Peter answered.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

Only faint breathing.

His eyes moved towards Lily.

Then a distorted voice finally emerged.

“Stop looking for the ending.”

The call disconnected.

Lily’s face lost its colour.

“They know.”

Peter stood and moved towards the window, scanning the street below. Portobello Road looked ordinary, almost peaceful, with passing cars, warm shop windows and pedestrians hurrying beneath umbrellas. Yet the sense of being watched refused to disappear.

Then his laptop chimed.

NEW FILE UPLOADED.

Peter turned back.

A file appeared on the screen.

DAVID_POTTER_FINAL_MANUSCRIPT.pdf.

Lily’s breath caught.

“Open it.”

Peter clicked.

A password prompt appeared.

Beneath it was a single sentence.

HINT: THE PERSON WHO KNOWS THE
ENDING IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

Neither spoke.

Lily looked at Peter, and the affection she had begun allowing herself to feel was suddenly tangled with fear. She had wanted

someone beside her while she searched for her father's truth, and now that person was standing exactly where she had asked him to be.

Peter closed his hand gently around hers.

"We'll face this together."

Lily squeezed his fingers.

But somewhere beyond the warm windows of Butter & Bloom, someone already knew that they had found the missing ending.

And whoever possessed the final chapter had no intention of letting Lily read it.



Chapter 16

MORE THAN FRIENDSHIP

“Peter... are you sure we should be investigating this?”

Peter looked across the bakery counter at Lily, who had been turning her coffee cup between both hands without taking a sip, as though the warmth might somehow steady the thoughts racing through her mind. The threat from the previous evening still lingered between them, unspoken but present in every pause, and the ordinary sounds of Butter & Bloom—the hiss of the coffee machine, the clink of porcelain, the murmur of customers beyond the counter—felt strangely distant. Peter rested one hand against the wooden surface and studied her expression with quiet concern, recognising the particular tension around her eyes that appeared whenever she was trying to be brave for someone else.

“No.”

Lily blinked, genuinely surprised by the answer.

“That’s not very reassuring.”

A faint smile touched Peter’s face, though his eyes remained serious.

“But I’m sure we shouldn’t stop.”

Lily lowered her gaze, tracing the rim of the cup with her thumb as uncertainty settled heavily inside her. The mystery surrounding her father had begun as something she could investigate at her own pace, but it had changed the moment an unknown voice warned them away, and now every unanswered question seemed to carry the possibility of another danger. She looked towards Peter again, finding an unexpected steadiness in his expression, and wondered how a man who had once been the source of such complicated feelings had somehow become the person she most wanted beside her when everything became frightening.

“I’m scared of what we’ll find.”

Peter’s expression softened.

“Then you won’t have to find it alone.”

Lily held his gaze for a moment longer than she intended, and something warm moved through the fear tightening her chest. She had spent years teaching herself that relying upon another person was dangerous, because Daniel had once turned her trust into the sharpest wound she had ever carried, yet Peter never seemed to demand anything from her in return for his kindness. That distinction mattered more than she wished to admit, and when he gave her a small, reassuring nod, the tension in her shoulders finally eased.

“You really mean that?”

Peter gave a quiet breath of laughter and reached for his coffee.

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.”

The simple answer stayed with Lily long after he had moved away from the counter. By late morning, the bakery had grown

busy, and Lily found herself returning to ordinary work with a strange sense of gratitude, serving customers, arranging pastries and signing copies of her newly published novel whenever someone recognised her name. One elderly customer asked about the story behind the book, and Lily smiled while answering, but when she glanced towards Peter and found him watching from the corner table, pride flickered across his face so naturally that her heart gave an inconvenient little pull.

“You’re staring,” Lily murmured when she brought him another coffee.

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“I’m observing.”

“That sounds suspiciously like staring with professional vocabulary.”

He leaned back, amusement appearing in his eyes.

“Occupational hazard.”

Lily tried not to smile and failed, and for a few precious minutes the mystery disappeared beneath the easy rhythm they had once shared. Peter teased her about signing books with increasingly elaborate messages, while Lily accused him of using his editorial experience to judge her handwriting, and the familiarity between them felt almost like coming home after a journey neither had planned to take. Yet beneath the laughter Lily remained conscious of how naturally she searched for him whenever something happened, and the realisation unsettled her because she could no longer pretend that his presence meant nothing.

After closing, Peter waited outside while Lily locked the bakery door, and the evening air carried the faint scent of rain from somewhere beyond Notting Hill. He had dressed simply, but there was something about his quiet patience that made Lily suddenly aware of her own appearance, and she wondered whether she had spent far too long choosing what to wear for a dinner that was supposedly only between friends. When she finally stepped outside, Peter looked at her for a second before offering the smallest smile, and the warmth in his eyes made her forget every sensible thought she had rehearsed.

“Would you have dinner with me?”

Lily hesitated.

“As friends?”

Peter’s expression changed almost imperceptibly, as though the word had landed somewhere tender.

“If that’s what you need it to be.”

She studied him, searching for disappointment, pressure or expectation, but found none. That absence gave her the courage to smile.

“Then yes.”

They chose a small Italian restaurant tucked away from the busier streets, where warm lamps shone across wooden tables and the quiet conversation of other diners filled the room without overwhelming their own. Over dinner, they spoke about childhood memories, books they had loved, foolish ambitions they had once been too embarrassed to admit and the peculiar disappointments that followed them into adulthood, until Lily found herself laughing so freely that she nearly forgot the unfinished manuscript

waiting somewhere inside Silver Maple's records. When Peter admitted that he had once wanted to become a novelist himself, she looked at him with genuine surprise, because the man who could discuss other people's stories with such confidence suddenly seemed vulnerable in a way she had never seen before.

"You?"

Peter laughed softly and lowered his eyes towards his glass.

"Yes, me."

"You wanted to write novels?"

"I did."

"What happened?"

He turned the glass slowly between his fingers.

"I became very good at helping other people finish theirs."

Lily's smile faded into something gentler.

"And yours?"

Peter looked towards the window, where London's lights reflected faintly in the glass.

"Mine remained unfinished."

She understood the answer without needing an explanation, because there was a sadness beneath his humour that reminded her of her own abandoned pages. For once, neither of them needed to rescue the other from that feeling, and the silence that followed was comfortable rather than awkward.

"You know what I think?" Lily asked quietly, leaning slightly closer across the table.

Peter glanced at her.

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“I think unfinished doesn’t always mean failed.”

His expression softened.

“Perhaps not.”

“Perhaps some stories simply need longer to find their ending.”

Peter held her gaze, and for a moment the restaurant seemed to disappear around them. The attraction between them was no longer something Lily could dismiss as gratitude, friendship or emotional dependence; it had become quieter and deeper than that, something she felt in the pause before he spoke and in the strange disappointment she experienced whenever their conversations ended.

Later, they walked through Hyde Park beneath a clear sky, the breeze moving gently through the trees as distant traffic faded behind them. Lily had expected the familiar fear to return once they were alone, but instead she found herself walking closer to Peter without consciously deciding to do so, their shoulders occasionally brushing as they followed the path. When they stopped near a quiet stretch of the park, Lily looked at him with an honesty that frightened her more than the mystery ever had.

“Peter?”

“Hmm?”

She swallowed.

“I feel safe with you.”

Peter became completely still, because those four words meant more to him than any declaration she might have made. He wanted to reach for her, but he remembered every moment when Lily had needed space, every wound she had fought to overcome, and he refused to turn her trust into another demand upon her heart.

“That’s the one thing I never want to take for granted.”

Lily looked away, blinking quickly.

“Why do you always look at me like that?”

Peter gave a nervous breath of laughter.

“Because I’m trying very hard not to.”

Her eyes returned to his, and neither of them moved for several seconds. The distance between them seemed suddenly insignificant, yet neither rushed to close it, because they both understood that whatever happened next could change the fragile friendship they had fought so hard to rebuild.

“Tell me to stop,” Peter whispered, his voice barely carrying above the evening breeze.

Lily did not answer.

Instead, she remained where she was, her breath uneven, her eyes fixed upon his as he waited without moving closer. Their faces came within inches of one another, and Lily could feel the warmth of his breath before fear rose sharply through her chest, bringing with it the memory of Daniel, broken promises and the terrifying knowledge that loving someone meant giving them the power to hurt her.

She stepped back.

Peter immediately stopped.

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologise."

His voice remained gentle.

"You were afraid."

Lily's eyes filled, though she smiled faintly.

"I wanted to."

Peter understood.

"That's enough for me."

The answer broke something open inside her, because he had not sounded offended, wounded or demanding; he had simply accepted her boundary as though her hesitation were not a rejection of him. Lily lowered her eyes and breathed slowly, realising that Peter had just shown her something Daniel never had—the ability to stay without trying to possess.

Across the park, Julia De Luca had witnessed enough to understand what words could not explain. She stood beneath the glow of a nearby streetlamp, her composed expression slowly giving way to a quiet sadness as memories of university returned with painful clarity. She remembered Peter laughing beside her, the late conversations, the promises they had made about their futures and the years she had quietly hoped friendship would eventually become something more.

"I waited too long," she whispered.

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her handbag, but she did not approach them. She knew Peter's happiness was no longer

a possibility she could pretend belonged to her, and although the realisation hurt, Julia possessed enough dignity to walk away rather than interfere.

Back at the bakery, Kevin was helping Sophie close the remaining shelves when he suddenly stopped halfway through a sentence. He frowned at the ceiling, visibly annoyed with himself as the word he wanted remained frustratingly out of reach.

“It’s... what’s the word?”

Sophie folded her arms, amused.

“You’re going to have to give me more than that.”

“When a character suddenly realises something important.”

“Revelation?”

“No.”

“Realisation?”

“Too obvious.”

Sophie laughed.

“Your brain has officially abandoned you.”

Kevin pointed at her.

“That’s not helpful.”

“It’s accurate.”

He finally snapped his fingers.

“Epiphany!”

Sophie smiled.

“There you are.”

Kevin shook his head with mock irritation.

“I knew it. My brain just wanted me to suffer first.”

Their laughter drifted through the quiet bakery, unaware that elsewhere in London another conversation was taking place.

Julia sat alone in her hotel room with an old university photograph resting on her knees. She touched Peter’s face with the tip of one finger, then lowered the photograph as her phone vibrated.

Richard Hawthorne.

If you still care about Peter, you need to know what happened at Silver Maple.

Julia stared at the message before replying.

“What are you talking about?”

A photograph arrived.

Peter stood outside Silver Maple Publishing years earlier, and beside him was a man Julia immediately recognised from Lily’s photographs.

David Potter.

Her breath caught.

Another message appeared.

Peter knows more about Lily’s father’s manuscript than he has told her.

Julia’s fingers began to tremble.

For several seconds she simply stared at the screen, caught between the love she had spent years trying to release and the

suspicion Richard had deliberately placed inside her mind. She knew Peter well enough to believe he would not willingly betray Lily, yet she also knew Silver Maple had secrets capable of making honest people appear guilty.

“Peter,” she whispered, looking once more at the photograph, “what have you been hiding?”

Outside her window, London continued beneath the cool evening sky as though nothing had changed, while across the city Lily stood at her bedroom mirror, touching her lips and wondering why the memory of almost kissing Peter frightened her less than the thought of never doing it again.

For the first time, she admitted the truth she had been avoiding.

Peter was no longer simply the person who made her feel safe.

He was becoming the person she wanted.

And somewhere in the darkness, Richard Hawthorne had just given Julia a reason to question whether that happiness had been built upon a secret.

The night had begun with friendship.

It ended with love on the verge of being spoken—and suspicion waiting to tear it apart.



Chapter 17

JULIA'S SECRET

Julia stared at the old photograph in her trembling hands, the edges softened by years of being carried from one apartment to another, as though some part of her had never been willing to let that chapter disappear. Peter stood beside her in the picture, younger and careless, his smile brighter than she remembered, while Julia could almost hear the rain from that university evening twelve years ago. She ran one finger gently across his face, and the ache she had kept hidden beneath years of professional composure rose quietly into her throat. For a woman who had learned to negotiate contracts, manage difficult clients and walk away from impossible situations without looking back, this particular memory remained the one thing she had never known how to surrender.

“How long can I pretend I’m only his friend?” Julia whispered, her voice barely audible in the quiet hotel room.

She turned the photograph over, finding the date written in her own handwriting, and gave a small, humourless smile as another memory returned. Peter had once placed his jacket over her shoulders during a rainstorm, laughing when she complained that he would catch a cold, and his careless reply had remained with her long after the evening itself had faded. She had been too young

to understand why her heart had begun beating differently whenever he entered a room, and by the time she understood it, their friendship had become too precious for her to risk destroying it.

“I loved him before I even understood what love was,” she admitted, lowering her eyes as moisture gathered along her lashes.

Her phone vibrated across the table, and the sudden sound made her straighten, the warmth of nostalgia replaced by a wary uneasiness. The message displayed only a name she had learned to associate with closed doors, private meetings and decisions that rarely favoured people without power. Julia read it twice before answering, her thumb hovering over the screen as if instinct warned her that whatever came next would change more than she wanted it to.

Richard: “We need to talk.”

Julia’s expression hardened as she typed her reply.

“About Peter?”

The answer came almost immediately.

“About what Peter doesn’t want Lily to know.”

Julia’s heart sank, and for one dangerous moment jealousy whispered that perhaps this was the information she had secretly wanted, some hidden flaw that might make Peter’s growing attachment to Lily less certain. She hated herself for the thought almost as soon as it appeared, because she knew Peter’s happiness could never be measured by another woman’s misfortune. Yet curiosity was stronger than pride, and within an hour Julia was sitting opposite Richard Hawthorne in a quiet café near Silver

Maple Publishing, watching him place an old photograph on the table between them.

Julia did not touch it at first, because she recognised the building before she recognised the people standing outside it. Peter was younger, dressed in the plain clothes of an ambitious junior editor, and beside him stood David Potter, Lily's father, whose face Julia had seen only in family photographs. Her stomach tightened as she looked at the date, because it placed Peter far closer to David's manuscript than Lily had ever known.

"Where did you get this?" Julia asked, leaning forward as her fingers tightened around the edge of the table.

Richard folded his hands calmly, his expression carrying the controlled confidence of a man accustomed to possessing information other people needed.

"From the archives."

Julia looked up sharply.

"Why are you showing it to me?"

Richard allowed a faint smile to appear.

"Because Peter isn't telling Lily everything."

The words struck harder than Julia expected, and she hated the small spark of jealousy that accompanied them. Richard noticed her hesitation and leaned back, allowing silence to do the work of persuasion, but Julia had spent too many years around people who used silence as a weapon to mistake his calmness for honesty.

“If you’re trying to make me doubt him,” she said, keeping her voice steady despite the unease gathering beneath her ribs, “you’ll need more than an old photograph.”

Richard’s smile disappeared.

“Then ask Peter why David Potter visited Silver Maple before Lily ever knew her father’s manuscript existed.”

Julia stared at him, and the café seemed to grow strangely quiet.

Years earlier, she had heard Peter mention David’s name once, though she had never understood its importance. She remembered the young editor standing beside a pile of manuscripts, his usual confidence replaced by frustration, and when she had asked whether David’s novel was worth reading, Peter had answered with unusual seriousness.

“It’s special.”

Young Julia had smiled.

“Then help him publish it.”

Peter had looked towards the corridor before lowering his voice.

“Someone doesn’t want it published.”

The memory returned with such force that Julia’s breath caught.

She realised she had heard the truth once before.

She simply had not understood it.

At Butter & Bloom, Lily was having an entirely different sort of difficulty. She had spent most of the morning pretending to

arrange books beside the counter while repeatedly glancing towards the bakery door, and Alicia had watched this performance with the quiet amusement of someone who had raised enough children to recognise romantic foolishness when she saw it. When Peter finally entered, Lily's face brightened before she could stop it, and that involuntary reaction embarrassed her far more than any teasing remark could have done. Peter noticed, of course, but possessed enough courtesy not to mention it, which only made Lily more conscious of the warmth spreading across her cheeks.

"You came early," Lily said, placing his usual coffee on the counter before realising she had prepared it without asking.

Peter looked at the cup, then at her.

"You noticed?"

Lily hesitated, pretending to inspect the coffee machine.

"Maybe."

Alicia glanced between them and smiled into her newspaper.

When Lily turned away, Alicia quietly remarked, "You put cinnamon in his coffee."

Lily froze.

"He likes it."

Alicia lowered the newspaper just enough to reveal her amused eyes.

"I didn't say he didn't."

Lily's cheeks warmed.

"Grandma."

Alicia chuckled softly and returned to her reading, leaving Lily to hide her embarrassment behind a stack of paper cups. Peter watched the exchange with an affectionate smile, and for a brief moment the mystery surrounding Silver Maple seemed very far away.

Later, Julia entered the bakery and found herself facing precisely the sight she had feared. Peter was laughing at something Lily had said, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes brighter than they had been during their recent conversations about the investigation. Julia felt the familiar ache beneath her ribs, but she refused to let it become bitterness, because Lily had never stolen anything from her and Peter had never promised her a future. She walked towards them with a composed smile, carrying the dignity of someone who had finally understood that love could not be claimed merely because it had lasted a long time.

“It’s wonderful to see you both,” Julia said warmly, though her fingers tightened around the silver bookmark inside her handbag.

Lily smiled.

“I’m glad you came.”

Julia returned the smile, and for a moment she almost believed the words were effortless.

Later, when Peter stepped outside to take a call, Lily glanced at Julia with quiet curiosity.

“You’ve known him for years, haven’t you?”

Julia nodded.

“Since university.”

Lily hesitated before asking, “Was he always like this?”

Julia's expression softened.

"Peter has always been terrible at admitting when he cares."

Lily looked towards the window where Peter stood beneath the awning.

"What do you mean?"

Julia gave her a small, bittersweet smile.

"You'll understand eventually."

The words were gentle, but they left Lily wondering.

That afternoon, Julia met Sophie in a small café near Hyde Park, and she did not need to explain much before Sophie understood what had happened. Sophie listened without interrupting, her hands wrapped around a mug while Julia finally allowed herself to speak about the love she had kept hidden for years. There was no theatrical confession, only the quiet exhaustion of a woman who had spent too long pretending that patience would eventually change another person's heart.

"I spent years waiting for him to notice me," Julia admitted, lowering her gaze.

Sophie studied her with unexpected tenderness.

"Sometimes waiting becomes another word for being afraid."

Julia's eyes glistened.

"Maybe I was afraid the answer wouldn't be what I wanted."

Sophie reached across the table and touched her hand.

"Perhaps the answer was never yours to control."

Julia gave a faint smile, though sadness remained behind it.

For the first time, she understood that letting Peter go did not mean her years of love had been meaningless. It simply meant she had finally stopped asking him to return feelings he had never promised to give.

Then Richard called.

His voice was colder this time.

“Walk away from the investigation, and Peter stays safe.”

Julia rose from her chair, anger replacing the softness in her expression.

“Are you threatening him?”

Richard gave a quiet, contemptuous laugh.

“I’m warning you.”

“You don’t get to threaten people simply because you control their records.”

“Then perhaps you should ask Peter why his name appears beside David Potter’s manuscript.”

The call ended.

Julia stood motionless, her fingers trembling around the phone, because fear had finally become something more useful than jealousy. If Richard was manipulating her, she needed proof, and if he was telling the truth, Lily deserved to know before another secret destroyed her trust.

That evening, Julia met Peter privately outside Silver Maple.

He took one look at her face and knew something was wrong.

“You look worried,” Peter said, studying her expression with concern.

Julia forced a smile.

“I’m fine.”

Peter shook his head gently.

“Julia, you know you can tell me anything.”

Her eyes became wet, and she looked away before he could see the conflict written across her face.

“That’s exactly why this is so difficult.”

Peter frowned.

“What happened?”

Julia almost told him.

Instead, she whispered, “Be careful, Peter.”

He stared at her.

“Of what?”

Julia swallowed the truth.

“Of people who suddenly become interested in your past.”

She walked away before he could ask another question, leaving Peter watching her with growing concern.

Across London, Lily was waiting outside her home when Peter arrived to walk her back from the bakery. The conversation remained light at first, but the memory of their almost-kiss returned with every quiet pause, and eventually Lily stopped beneath a streetlamp and turned towards him. Her courage was not

dramatic; it was simply the decision to say something honest instead of hiding behind another joke.

“Peter?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad you didn’t rush me.”

Peter’s expression softened.

“I can wait.”

Lily reached for his hand.

This time, she did not pull away.

Their fingers settled together naturally, and Peter looked down at their joined hands before meeting her eyes again.

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not.”

She gave his hand a small squeeze.

“I’m afraid of how much I trust you.”

Peter’s expression changed, because he understood exactly what she meant.

“You don’t have to name what you’re feeling yet.”

Lily smiled.

“That’s becoming your favourite answer.”

“Perhaps because it seems to work.”

She laughed softly, and for a few moments the world felt uncomplicated.

But later that night, Julia sat alone in her hotel room when another message arrived from Richard. The photograph showed Peter, David Potter and Richard Hawthorne standing inside Silver Maple Publishing, but the date printed beneath "t made Julia's blood run cold.

2006.

She stared at the photograph again.

Peter had been only eleven.

"That's impossible," she whispered.

Another message appeared.

Ask Peter who the boy standing beside David really is.

Julia zoomed into the image, and her breath caught.

The boy wasn't Peter.

Yet the resemblance was unmistakable.

Same dark hair.

Similar eyes.

A familiar shape to the face.

Her phone slipped slightly in her hand.

A final message appeared.

You trusted Peter with Lily's future. Perhaps you should find out who he was before she met him.

Julia stared at the photograph, torn between fear and loyalty.

For the first time, her heartbreak no longer concerned only herself.

Someone was using her love for Peter as a doorway into a much darker secret.

And somewhere beyond the hotel windows, London carried on beneath the quiet summer sky, unaware that Julia De Luca had just chosen truth over jealousy.

She picked up her phone and opened a new message.

To Marco Bellini.

I need you to investigate David Potter's manuscript.

She hesitated before pressing send.

Then she added one final sentence.

And I need to know who the boy in this photograph is.

Julia placed the phone on the table and closed her eyes.

"I may have lost Peter," she whispered, "but I won't let them destroy Lily."

Across town, Peter stood outside Lily's home, watching her disappear behind the door with a faint smile still on his face.

He had no idea that the past was already moving towards them.

And Julia had no idea whether the mysterious boy in the photograph would reveal Peter's hidden history—or expose a lie designed to tear the two people she cared about apart.

The answer waited inside Silver Maple.

And someone had been waiting twelve years to make sure it stayed buried.



Chapter 18

THE AUTHOR WHO DISAPPEARED

Peter had learned that some photographs were dangerous not because of what they showed, but because of what they made people remember. The picture lying beneath the bakery lamp appeared ordinary at first, yet the longer he studied the unfamiliar boy beside David Potter, the more uneasy he became, for the date placed the photograph in a year when he himself had been far too young to have stood outside Silver Maple Publishing. Lily remained opposite him, her fingers resting against the brown leather notebook she carried everywhere, and although fear had tightened her features, she no longer looked like the woman who once avoided every rejection because it hurt too much.

“Peter... who is that boy?” Lily asked, leaning closer to the photograph as her hazel eyes searched the blurred face.

Peter turned the picture beneath the light, studying the building, the date and the figures reflected faintly in the glass behind them.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, his voice quiet but firm, “and that is precisely what worries me.”

Lily swallowed, then looked directly at him.

“Then why does Richard know something about him?”

Peter’s jaw tightened as suspicion settled behind his eyes.

“Because someone has been hiding this photograph for a very long time.”

For a moment neither spoke, while the ordinary sounds of Portobello Road drifted through the bakery windows: buses sighing at the kerb, bicycles rattling over the road and customers laughing somewhere beyond the counter. Lily looked down at the photograph again and felt the familiar ache associated with her father, though this time grief did not make her retreat; it sharpened something within her. Five years of rejection had taught her how easily fear could become a cage, and David's journal had taught her that unfinished stories could survive longer than the people who wrote them. She drew a slow breath, closed her notebook and placed both hands flat upon the counter.

“Then I want to know what they’re hiding,” Lily said, her voice trembling slightly despite the determination in her eyes.

Peter watched her carefully before answering.

“Lily, you don’t have to do this.”

She shook her head.

“I’m not doing this because I’m not afraid, Peter; I’m doing it because I’m tired of being afraid.”

Something softened in Peter’s expression, and he reached across the counter without hesitation, his fingers closing gently around hers. There was no attempt to take control of the investigation, no promise that he could make the danger disappear, only the quiet certainty of someone willing to remain beside her

when the answers became difficult. Lily looked down at their joined hands and felt an unexpected warmth spread through her chest, because for once protection did not feel like a locked door; it felt like having someone standing beside the door while she chose whether to open it.

“Then we find the truth together,” Peter said, meeting her gaze.

“No more secrets?” Lily asked.

“No more secrets,” he promised.

She gave his hand a small squeeze.

“Together.”

The photograph was later placed beneath Peter’s desk lamp at his flat, where the stronger light revealed details neither had noticed at the bakery. The image had been processed rather than simply printed, and a faint archival number appeared along the lower edge, almost invisible beneath the faded paper. Peter entered the code into his laptop, his fingers moving with the practiced precision of a man who had spent years searching publishing databases, and Lily watched the screen with growing impatience. When the Silver Maple archive logo appeared, her stomach tightened, because the company had not merely possessed the photograph; someone had deliberately preserved it.

“You found something, didn’t you?” Lily asked, moving behind his chair.

Peter turned the screen towards her.

“This photograph passed through Silver Maple’s internal archive system.”

Lily’s brows drew together.

“Why would they keep a photograph of Dad with a child nobody seems to know?”

Peter leaned back, staring at the image.

“That is exactly the question they don’t want us asking.”

Before leaving, Peter noticed Lily’s face had become pale, and he quietly closed the laptop. She looked at him in surprise, almost offended by the interruption, but he remained calm.

“We can stop,” he said, resting his forearms against his knees. “Your father’s history doesn’t have to become your entire life, and I won’t turn your grief into an investigation simply because I need answers.”

Lily looked at the notebook her father had given her years ago, remembering his handwriting across its first page. She had once believed courage meant becoming fearless, yet perhaps courage had always been the opposite: knowing exactly what might hurt and choosing to continue anyway. When she finally raised her eyes, there was sadness there, but it no longer ruled her.

“I want the truth,” she said quietly. “Not revenge, not some perfect explanation, just the truth.”

Peter nodded.

“Then I’ll stand beside you while you find it.”

Their first stop was Notting Hill Public Library, where Arthur Bennett had agreed to meet them among the old shelves. The retired librarian looked unusually troubled when Lily placed the photograph before him, and his fingers trembled slightly as he adjusted his round spectacles. He studied the unfamiliar boy first, then David, and finally the Silver Maple building behind them, before taking a long breath that told Lily he knew more than he

had previously admitted. The silence made her uneasy, but she waited, remembering that some truths needed to be approached gently.

“Arthur,” Lily asked, “you recognise something.”

Arthur removed his glasses.

“Not the boy.”

Peter leaned forward.

“Then what?”

Arthur pointed towards the background.

“Your father was investigating a writer named Elias Vane.”

Lily’s expression changed.

“Elias Vane?”

Arthur nodded slowly.

“He was young, gifted and very promising, but he accused Silver Maple of taking unpublished manuscripts and using ideas that belonged to other writers.”

Lily’s lips parted.

“Dad knew him?”

“More than knew him,” Arthur replied, lowering his gaze. “David was helping him.”

The words seemed to drain the warmth from the room. Lily remembered her father at the kitchen table, bent over pages while she sat nearby drawing flowers in the margins, and suddenly those childhood memories acquired a second meaning. Perhaps the tiredness she had mistaken for ordinary work had been fear;

perhaps the quiet conversations he ended whenever she entered the room had concerned something much more serious.

“How many writers lost their dreams because of this?” Lily asked, her voice breaking slightly.

Arthur looked at her with regret.

“I don’t know, Lily.”

Peter closed the folder carefully.

“But Elias knew.”

Arthur nodded.

“And then Elias disappeared.”

The old literary directory revealed a photograph of Elias Vane, whose sharp eyes and youthful confidence seemed strangely alive despite the years separating him from the present. Beside his name were correspondence records involving David Potter, and several entries referred to manuscripts whose status had changed without explanation. Lily read each line slowly, feeling anger replace the helpless sorrow that had followed her father’s death.

“He was trying to expose them,” she murmured.

Arthur’s expression tightened.

“Yes.”

“And Dad helped him.”

“Yes.”

“Then why did nobody tell me?”

Arthur looked away.

“Because people became frightened.”

Peter's eyes narrowed.

"Frightened of Silver Maple?"

Arthur did not answer immediately.

"Frightened of what might happen if they were wrong."

The words followed Peter long after they left the library. On the pavement outside, London moved around them as though nothing extraordinary had happened, yet Peter felt the weight of an old memory returning. He remembered being a young editor, watching promising manuscripts vanish from the system, and asking his supervisor why the files had disappeared.

The answer had been cold and dismissive.

"Some manuscripts are better left unpublished."

At the time, Peter had accepted it as the unpleasant machinery of the publishing world. Now he understood how naïve that had been, and the realisation brought a quiet shame he could not hide.

"I saw files disappear," Peter admitted, stopping beside the library railings.

Lily looked at him.

"You remember?"

"I remember enough to regret not asking more questions."

She studied his face.

"You were young."

"I still should have asked."

Lily reached for his hand.

"You didn't know what you know now."

Peter looked down at their joined hands.

“But I know now.”

They walked through Hyde Park later that afternoon, the trees moving gently beneath the warm breeze while children chased one another across the grass. Lily remained quiet until they reached a quieter path, where she finally stopped and looked towards him. The investigation had changed something between them; it had made Peter less like the man who once knew how to solve professional problems and more like the man who was willing to admit his own mistakes.

“I used to think being strong meant handling everything alone,” Lily said, rubbing her thumb against his knuckles.

Peter’s expression softened.

“You don’t have to anymore.”

She looked down at their hands.

“I’m starting to believe that.”

He smiled faintly.

“And I’m starting to believe you don’t need rescuing.”

Lily laughed under her breath.

“That sounded almost insulting.”

“Almost?”

She nudged his shoulder.

“Moron.”

Peter laughed, and the tension that had followed them from the library finally loosened. For a few minutes, they were not

investigators, wounded children of difficult histories or people being watched by powerful strangers; they were simply two people walking through London who had discovered that silence could sometimes be comfortable when shared.

Meanwhile, Kevin had joined Sophie at the library and attempted to explain an old literary technique he had been studying. His confidence lasted until Sophie asked him to name it, at which point his eyebrows pulled together and he stared helplessly at the ceiling. He snapped his fingers once, then twice, growing increasingly irritated with his own memory while Sophie tried not to laugh.

“It’s the thing where the writer leaves a clue early, but the reader doesn’t understand it until much later,” Kevin said.

Sophie folded her arms.

“You study English Literature, Kevin.”

“I know.”

“You’re supposed to know words.”

“I know that too.”

“Then what the hell is the word?”

Kevin stared at her.

“That is an unnecessarily aggressive question.”

Sophie burst out laughing.

Kevin suddenly snapped his fingers.

“Foreshadowing!”

Sophie grinned.

“There you are.”

Kevin smiled back.

“You waited for me.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Their eyes met for a moment longer than necessary, and neither seemed entirely certain why the teasing suddenly felt different.

At Silver Maple Publishing, the atmosphere was considerably less playful. Margaret Reed approached Richard Hawthorne's office carrying a red archive folder, her expression cautious as she placed it upon his desk. Richard opened it and scanned the access report, his controlled demeanour cracking only slightly when he saw Peter Tennyson's name. He closed the folder and leaned back, his fingers tapping once against the polished surface before he reached for his phone.

“Peter has accessed the Potter files,” Margaret said carefully.

Richard looked towards the window.

“How much did he see?”

“I don't know.”

His jaw tightened.

“Find out.”

Margaret hesitated.

“And if he already knows about Elias Vane?”

Richard's eyes hardened.

“Then we have a problem.”

That evening, Lily returned to Butter & Bloom and opened her father's journal once more. A loose sheet slipped from between the pages and landed near her feet, and when she picked it up, she saw a name written in David's handwriting.

Elias Vane.

Beneath it were seven words that made her heart pound.

"If anything happens to me, find Elias."

Peter read the page over her shoulder.

Lily looked at him.

"He's the missing author."

Peter nodded slowly.

"And he may be the person who knows what happened to your father's final chapters."

He searched Silver Maple's old database, expecting another dead end. Instead, an archived profile appeared on the screen, and beneath Elias Vane's name was a status that made Lily's hope collapse.

DECEASED.

Then Peter scrolled.

His expression changed.

Lily leaned closer.

"What?"

Peter turned the screen towards her.

Last Known Activity: London — 2025.

Lily stared.

“He wasn’t dead?”

Peter shook his head.

“Not according to this.”

Before either could speak, another notification appeared.

ARCHIVE ACCESS REQUEST — APPROVED.

Requester: Richard Hawthorne.

The room seemed suddenly colder.

Peter slowly closed the laptop.

“Richard isn’t just hiding the past.”

Lily looked towards him.

“What is he doing?”

Peter stared at the darkened window.

“Protecting it.”

Outside, light rain began tapping against the glass, soft at first, then steady enough to fill the silence. Lily slipped her hand into Peter’s again, no longer because she needed reassurance, but because she had chosen him as the person beside whom she would face whatever came next. Neither of them noticed the car parked across the road, its headlights briefly illuminating the wet pavement before disappearing into the London night.

Somewhere inside Silver Maple, a forgotten name had just become active again.

Elias Vane had vanished from the publishing world.

But someone had been using his name as recently as 2025.

And Richard Hawthorne had just opened the door to his file.



Chapter 19

A KISS IN THE RAIN

The bakery was unusually quiet that morning, with only the soft clink of cups and the distant rumble of London traffic slipping through the front windows as Peter sat near the glass with his coffee. Lily moved between the counter and the display shelves, pretending to be absorbed in arranging the pastries, though she had already glanced at him several times and caught him smiling at her. She finally folded her arms, raised an eyebrow and tried to hide the smile tugging at her own mouth.

“Peter, why are you smiling at me like that?” Lily asked, resting one hand against the counter while curiosity softened the tiredness beneath her eyes.

Peter lowered his cup and looked at her with quiet amusement. “Because you finally stopped worrying for at least five minutes.”

Lily gave an exaggerated sigh, though her eyes betrayed her. “I still worry, you know.”

Peter leaned back slightly, his expression warm. “Then I’ll worry with you.”

For a moment, Lily forgot the photograph, Silver Maple and every unsettling question waiting for them. There was something

wonderfully ordinary about the exchange, something that reminded her of the days when Peter had simply been the man who drank two sugars in his coffee and listened to her complain about rejected chapters. She added the usual cinnamon without thinking, then froze when Peter noticed.

“You remembered,” he said, glancing from the cup to her face.

“You order the same thing nearly every morning,” Lily replied, attempting a careless shrug. “It would be rather embarrassing if I couldn’t remember.”

Peter’s mouth curved into a teasing smile. “Perhaps I keep ordering it because I like the person who makes it.”

Lily’s fingers stopped moving, and the faint colour rising into her cheeks made Peter realise too late what he had said.

“I meant the coffee,” he added quickly.

Lily narrowed her eyes, amusement returning to her expression. “Of course you did.”

Peter gave a quiet laugh, and she turned away before he could see how pleased she was. Their little exchange should have been meaningless, yet Lily carried it with her for the rest of the morning, because she was beginning to understand that love did not always arrive with grand declarations. Sometimes it appeared in remembered cinnamon, familiar smiles and the comfortable knowledge of how another person liked his coffee.

The warmth did not last uninterruptedly, for Peter’s phone vibrated against the table while he was reviewing the notes from their investigation. His expression changed almost at once, and Lily recognised the look before he had even spoken, because she had learned to read the smallest movements of his face when something connected to Silver Maple appeared.

“Richard accessed Elias Vane’s historical records again, didn’t he?” Lily asked, approaching him slowly.

Peter looked up, surprised by how quickly she had understood. “Yes, and I still don’t know what he’s looking for.”

Lily’s fingers curled around the edge of the counter. “Do you think he’s trying to erase something?”

“I think,” Peter replied carefully, “that whatever Richard is afraid we’ll discover, he doesn’t want us finding it first.”

He hesitated before continuing, remembering the promise he had made never to hide uncomfortable truths from her again. Lily noticed the hesitation, but Instead of becoming frightened, she reached across the counter and took his hand.

“Whatever happens, we’ll find out together,” she said.

Peter looked down at their joined hands, and something deep inside him shifted. She was no longer asking him to shield her from difficult things, nor was she surrendering her decisions to him; she was choosing to stand beside him, and that difference mattered more than he could explain.

“You’ve changed,” Peter murmured.

Lily gave him a questioning look. “Is that a compliment?”

“It is.”

“Good,” she said softly. “Because I’m rather fond of who I’m becoming.”

Later, a customer recognised Lily from the author photograph that had appeared beside a review of her debut novel, and Lily found herself signing a copy while trying not to appear overwhelmed by the attention. As the customer thanked her and walked away, a memory from five years earlier returned with

surprising clarity: rejection notices glowing on a laptop screen, an untouched cup of tea beside her and the awful certainty that perhaps Daniel had been right to believe her dreams were impractical. Yet when she looked across the bakery and saw Peter waiting without interrupting her conversation, the memory no longer possessed the same power.

Peter had been there when she doubted herself, she realised, and he had remained when she finally succeeded. He had never asked her to become smaller so that he could feel important, nor had he claimed responsibility for the words she had written herself. The thought brought a quiet ache to her chest, but this time it was gratitude rather than grief.

That afternoon, Daniel happened to pass Butter & Bloom and stopped when he saw Lily through the window. He watched her laugh at something Peter had said, and for a moment the old memories returned with uncomfortable force, reminding him of the woman he had once loved and the future he had failed to value while he still possessed it. Yet what struck him most was not jealousy but the peace in Lily's face, because she looked nothing like the woman who had once waited for him to recognise her worth.

Daniel stood there for another moment before quietly stepping away from the window. He understood, perhaps later than he should have, that loving someone could sometimes mean accepting that their happiness no longer included you.

By the time the bakery closed, clouds had gathered over Portobello Road, turning the late light silver above the rooftops. Lily locked the front door while Peter waited beside her, and the first drops landed against the pavement with a soft, scattered rhythm.

“London waited until we closed,” Lily said, looking upwards.

Peter glanced at the darkening sky. “London has terrible timing.”

She laughed, but the rain suddenly came down with such force that they hurried beneath the bakery awning, Lily shielding her face while Peter caught the door before the wind could slam it. Her hair became damp around her temples, and when she shivered, Peter immediately removed his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

“You’re going to get soaked,” Lily protested, looking at him with surprise.

Peter shrugged. “I’d rather be wet than watch you freeze.”

Her smile slowly faded, replaced by an emotion she could no longer disguise. The rain hammered against the pavement, cars rushed past in shining streams and the world seemed to retreat behind a curtain of water, leaving only the two of them beneath the narrow awning.

“Peter,” Lily whispered.

He turned towards her. “Yes?”

She swallowed, gathering courage from somewhere deep inside herself. “I’m scared.”

His expression softened immediately. “Of the rain?”

Lily shook her head, her eyes becoming bright. “Of losing you.”

Peter became still, as though the words had reached a place in him that no professional success or difficult investigation ever could. Lily looked away, embarrassed by her own honesty, but once she had begun, she could not make herself retreat.

“I don’t know when it happened,” she admitted, rubbing her thumb nervously against the sleeve of his jacket. “Somewhere between the coffee, the walks, the arguments, the stories and all those conversations where you somehow made everything feel less frightening, you became the person I look for when something happens.”

Peter’s voice was barely above the rain. “Lily...”

“I’ve spent years believing that loving someone meant eventually losing myself,” she continued, her voice trembling. “Daniel taught me that trust could leave you standing alone, and I promised myself I would never become that vulnerable again.”

Peter took one careful step closer but did not touch her. “I’m not Daniel.”

“I know,” she whispered, finally looking into his eyes. “That’s what frightens me.”

He waited.

Lily drew a shaky breath. “Because you’re good to me, and I don’t know what to do with something that doesn’t hurt.”

Peter’s eyes glistened, and for once his careful restraint could not conceal what he felt.

“I love you,” he said.

The words were simple, almost painfully ordinary, yet Lily felt them like the opening of a door she had been afraid to touch. Peter continued before fear could make him retreat.

“I love the woman who argues with me about books, the woman who forgets to eat when she’s writing, the woman who pretends not to worry and then worries twice as much as everyone else. I don’t want to rescue you, Lily, and I don’t want you to

become someone different because of me; I only want the chance to share the life you're already building."

Her lips trembled.

"What are you asking me for?"

Peter held her gaze. "A place in your future."

Lily closed her eyes as tears escaped despite her attempt to stop them. When she opened them again, the fear was still there, but it no longer stood alone.

"I think I've been trying not to love you," she confessed.

Peter smiled sadly. "You don't have to be brave all at once."

She stepped closer.

"Are you still going to wait?"

"Until you're ready."

Lily looked at him for another heartbeat before closing the distance between them. Their first kiss beneath the bakery awning was gentle, hesitant and almost shy, carrying none of the urgency that fear had once taught her to expect from love. When they separated, Lily rested her forehead lightly against his, and the rain continued falling around them as though London itself had decided to give them privacy.

"I'm still scared," she whispered.

Peter smiled.

"So am I."

A small laugh escaped her through the tears. "That's reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be."

She squeezed his hand. "Then we're both terrified."

"Together," he replied.

They walked towards Lily's home beneath one umbrella, their hands intertwined and their shoulders occasionally brushing as they crossed the wet pavement. Neither spoke of marriage or forever, because neither needed to; after everything they had survived, choosing tomorrow was enough. At her door, Lily turned towards him, and the smile she gave him was quieter than the one she had worn inside the bakery but far more certain.

"Goodnight, Peter."

"Goodnight, Lily."

She entered, then looked back once before closing the door. Peter remained beneath the streetlamp for several seconds, smiling towards the rain, while upstairs Lily touched her lips and realised that her first thought was no longer about the man who had broken her trust.

It was Peter.

The following morning, sunlight slipped through Lily's curtains, and she woke with an unfamiliar lightness in her chest. She reached for her phone, expecting perhaps a message from Peter, and smiled when she saw his name on the screen.

Then another notification appeared.

UNKNOWN NUMBER.

A photograph loaded.

Lily's smile disappeared.

The image showed Peter and Julia standing together several years earlier, close enough to suggest a familiarity Lily had never

seen before. Her heartbeat quickened as she enlarged the picture, searching their expressions for an explanation that the photograph could not provide.

A message appeared beneath it.

“Ask Peter what really happened between him and Julia.”

Lily stared at the words until her fingers went cold.

A second message arrived.

“You trusted him before knowing the truth.”

She lowered the phone slowly, the memory of the previous night’s kiss colliding painfully with the photograph in her hand. Her heart wanted to believe Peter without hesitation, but the wounds left by Daniel had taught her that trust was precious precisely because it could be manipulated.

She looked towards the window, where London was beginning another ordinary morning.

Yesterday, she had finally chosen love.

Today, someone was trying to make her afraid of it.

Lily whispered his name, her voice barely audible.

“Peter... what aren’t you telling me?”

The phone vibrated once more.

This time there was no photograph.

Only six words.

You don’t know the whole story.

Chapter 20

THE PHOTOGRAPH



The morning after their first kiss should have felt like a beginning, yet Lily stood behind the counter of Butter & Bloom with her phone trembling lightly in her hand. The happiness she had carried home beneath the rain had vanished beneath a single photograph, and the sight of Peter standing beside Julia years earlier had awakened a fear she had hoped was finally buried. She enlarged the image again, searching the faces for some harmless explanation, but the closeness between them made her stomach tighten whenever she looked at it.

“Not again,” Lily whispered, her thumb resting against the screen as an old memory rose painfully from the past.

Five years earlier, she had stared at Daniel’s messages with the same cold sensation spreading through her chest. She had trusted him because she believed love meant refusing to doubt the person beside you, only to discover that silence could hide an entire world from someone who thought she knew it. Now, after finally allowing herself to love Peter, the anonymous photograph threatened to make that old fear breathe again.

Peter entered Butter & Bloom carrying the same quiet confidence he had worn the previous morning, unaware that Lily

had spent the night fighting a battle entirely inside her own mind. He placed his keys beside the till, glanced towards her and immediately noticed that her usual warmth had been replaced by a guarded stillness. His blue eyes narrowed slightly, not with suspicion but with concern, because he had become familiar with the difference between Lily being tired and Lily pretending she was fine.

“Good morning,” Peter said, studying her face carefully as he removed his coat. “You look as though you spent the entire night arguing with a thought that refused to surrender.”

Lily forced a faint smile and tucked the phone beneath the counter. “Perhaps I did, and perhaps the thought won.”

Peter remained silent for a moment, watching the tension in her shoulders before asking gently, “Did something happen?”

She wanted to place the photograph in front of him immediately, yet another part of her feared that asking the question would somehow change everything. Her fingers tightened around the phone, and she hated herself for wondering whether Peter had once looked at Julia the way he had looked at her beneath the rain. She finally lifted her eyes, trying to find courage in his expression.

“I received something this morning,” Lily admitted, her voice quieter than usual. “I need a little time to understand what I’m looking at before I ask you about it.”

Peter did not demand an explanation, and that restraint touched her more deeply than she expected. He simply nodded, pulled out the chair beside the counter and gave her the space she had asked for without turning cold or defensive.

“Take whatever time you need,” he replied, folding his hands together. “But don’t carry something alone merely because you’re frightened of my answer.”

Lily stared at him, her heart giving a painful little twist. For a moment, she nearly showed him the photograph, but the fear of looking foolish held her back, and she hated that old instinct almost as much as she hated the photograph itself.

Throughout the morning, ordinary things began to look suspicious to her. When Peter smiled at a customer, Lily wondered whether he had once smiled at Julia in precisely the same way, and when his phone vibrated against the table, she found herself glancing towards it before immediately looking away. The realisation embarrassed her so much that she slipped into the small storage room and shut the door behind herself, pressing both hands against the wooden shelf while she tried to steady her breathing.

“No,” she whispered to her reflection in the darkened window. “I’m doing it again.”

She closed her eyes and remembered Daniel, remembered the shock, the unanswered questions and the terrible humiliation of discovering that she had trusted a version of someone who had never been completely honest with her. But Peter had never given her a reason to believe he was Daniel, and if she punished him for another man’s betrayal, she would be allowing the past to control a future she had only just begun to build.

When Sophie arrived, she needed only one glance at Lily to know that something was wrong. She placed her leather planner on the counter, tilted her head and gave Lily the sort of look that made excuses feel rather pointless.

“You look as though someone cancelled Christmas, your birthday and your book launch all at once,” Sophie said, trying to coax a smile from her.

Lily almost laughed, but instead she unlocked her phone and silently passed it across the counter. Sophie studied the photograph for several seconds before looking back at her friend, her expression becoming gentler.

“They definitely knew each other,” Sophie said carefully.

“That isn’t what frightens me,” Lily replied, lowering her eyes.

Sophie handed the phone back. “Then what does?”

Lily swallowed. “What he hasn’t told me.”

Sophie understood immediately, because Lily wasn’t angry. She was frightened of becoming vulnerable enough to be hurt again, and that distinction made all the difference.

“You don’t look jealous,” Sophie said softly. “You look terrified of being wrong about someone you love.”

Lily’s eyes filled with tears, though she blinked them away. “I don’t want to accuse Peter of something simply because someone sent me a photograph.”

“Then don’t accuse him,” Sophie answered. “Ask him.”

Kevin arrived a few minutes later and immediately sensed the unusual silence hanging over the bakery. He looked from Lily to Sophie and then towards the phone in Lily’s hand, his expression becoming theatrically suspicious.

“Right,” he said, dropping into a chair. “Why does everyone look as though we’re about to investigate a murder?”

Sophie folded her arms. "Because you're incapable of entering a room normally."

Kevin ignored the remark and glanced at Lily. "Is this about Peter?"

Lily's eyes widened, while Sophie gave him an impressed look.

"How did you know?" Lily asked.

Kevin shrugged. "Because whenever Peter walks in, you suddenly remember how to smile."

Lily's mouth opened, then closed again.

Kevin grinned. "Uh-huh. Thought so."

He paused, searching for the word he wanted, then snapped his fingers in frustration. "This is... suspicious... complicated... emotionally disastrous... what's the word?"

Sophie laughed despite herself. "You're doing it again."

"I'm aware," Kevin muttered.

"Awkward?" Sophie suggested.

Kevin shook his head. "No."

"Difficult?"

"No."

Lily finally smiled. "You mean complicated."

Kevin pointed at her. "Exactly."

The little joke broke some of the heaviness in the room, but Kevin noticed the sadness returning to Lily's eyes and became serious. He did not ask for details, because he understood that sometimes protecting someone meant knowing when not to pry.

Peter returned shortly afterwards, and the instant he stepped inside, he recognised the silence. His gaze moved from Kevin to Sophie, then settled upon Lily, whose fingers were wrapped tightly around her phone.

Peter pulled out the chair opposite her and sat down.

“Someone sent you something,” he said quietly.

Lily looked at him. “How did you know?”

Peter studied her expression before answering. “Because you’re looking at me as though you’re trying to decide whether I’m still the man you believed I was yesterday.”

Her eyes shimmered.

“I don’t want to accuse you.”

“Then don’t accuse me,” Peter said, leaning forward slightly. “Ask me.”

Lily placed the photograph on the table.

Peter looked at it once and immediately recognised the occasion. His face did not harden with anger, nor did he attempt to take the photograph away; instead, he exhaled slowly, as though he had been expecting the past to eventually knock upon the door.

“Julia and I met at university,” he explained. “She was one of the people who stayed beside me when my father was ill, and over the years we became extremely close.”

Lily’s voice trembled. “Were you ever together?”

Peter held her gaze. “No.”

She looked down at the photograph.

“But did she love you?”

There was a pause.

“Yes,” Peter admitted. “I think she did. I was young, and perhaps I was too foolish to understand what she was feeling at the time.”

Lily’s heart tightened, but she forced herself to listen.

Peter continued, “She mattered to me, Lily. She still matters to me as a friend, but I never promised her a relationship, and I never wanted her to believe that our friendship meant something it didn’t.”

Lily slowly lifted her eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Peter’s expression softened. “Because I didn’t think it mattered anymore, and I was wrong. If something from my past can be used to hurt what we have now, then you deserve to know about it.”

Lily’s shoulders finally relaxed.

“I was afraid,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“I kept thinking about Daniel.”

Peter reached across the table but stopped before touching her, leaving the decision with her.

“I’m not Daniel,” he said. “And you don’t have to pretend you’re fearless for me.”

Lily placed her hand over his.

“No,” she replied. “But I need to learn how to trust without becoming blind.”

Peter’s fingers gently closed around hers. “That’s something we can learn together.”

Later, Julia met Lily privately at the hotel lounge. She looked composed as always, but there was a tired sadness beneath her eyes that Lily had never noticed before.

Julia did not wait for an accusation.

“I loved Peter,” she said.

Lily remained silent.

Julia looked towards the window, watching London traffic move beyond the glass. “I loved him for years, and I spent far too much time believing that if I waited long enough, perhaps one day he would look at me differently.”

Her smile was faint and sorrowful.

“He never promised me anything.”

Lily studied her carefully. “Do you still love him?”

Julia took a slow breath.

“Perhaps some part of me always will,” she admitted. “But love does not give me ownership of another person’s future.”

Something inside Lily softened.

For the first time, Julia wasn’t a rival standing between her and Peter. She was simply another woman who had loved someone deeply and discovered that love could not always be answered in the way one hoped.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Lily said.

Julia smiled.

“You haven’t.”

She reached into her handbag and removed an old envelope.

“There is something else you should see.”

Lily noticed the handwriting immediately.

Her breath caught.

“That’s my father’s writing.”

Julia nodded.

“He once gave this letter to Peter’s family.”

Lily opened it with trembling fingers.

Inside was a single sentence:

Never trust the person who controls the ending.

The room seemed to become unnaturally quiet.

Lily read the sentence twice.

“Why would Dad write this?”

Julia’s expression changed. “I don’t know, but I think the photograph was meant to distract you.”

Lily’s pulse quickened.

“From what?”

“From whatever that sentence is pointing towards.”

That evening, Lily found Peter outside Butter & Bloom. The jealousy that had consumed her that morning had disappeared,

replaced by something more serious and far more difficult to ignore.

“You don’t have to trust me because I love you,” Peter said when he saw her expression. “Trust me because I’ve given you the truth, even when it wasn’t comfortable.”

Lily stepped closer.

“I was afraid.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want my past deciding who I love.”

Peter smiled gently. “Then don’t let it.”

She took his hand.

This time there was no hesitation.

Their reconciliation was quiet, without dramatic promises or grand declarations, because the strongest proof of their relationship was not the kiss they had shared the night before but the conversation they had managed to have afterwards. Lily had questioned him instead of running, and Peter had answered without anger, proving that trust could be built through honesty rather than demanded through blind faith.

They stood together beneath the bakery’s warm light until Lily’s gaze returned to the letter.

“One question,” she said.

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Anything.”

“Who sent the photograph?”

Before he could answer, his phone vibrated.

An unknown message appeared.

You are looking in the wrong place.

Another message followed.

Ask Peter's father what happened to David Potter's final chapters.

Peter's face changed.

Lily immediately noticed.

"Peter?"

He slowly looked at her.

"I think this is bigger than Julia."

He opened the attached file.

An old photograph appeared on the screen.

David Potter stood outside Silver Maple Publishing beside Peter's father and Richard Hawthorne, all three men captured beneath the same stone entrance that had appeared in the older records.

Lily stared at the image.

"Our fathers knew each other."

Peter said nothing.

Then Lily noticed the handwriting on the back.

The two men who knew where the ending was hidden.

Her eyes moved to the final name.

Richard Hawthorne.

Peter's jaw tightened as understanding settled over him.

"The photograph of Julia was never the real story," he said.

Lily looked at him.

"It was bait."

The happiness of the previous night had not disappeared, but it had changed into something stronger. They were no longer two people protecting a fragile romance from an uncomfortable past; they were partners standing before a mystery that reached into both their families.

Lily slipped her hand into Peter's.

"Then we stop looking where they want us to look."

Peter squeezed her fingers.

"And start looking where they don't want us to."

Outside, London carried on beneath the cool evening air, unaware that two people standing beneath a bakery window had just discovered that their love story and a twenty-year-old publishing secret were becoming impossible to separate.

Lily looked once more at the photograph.

"I love you," she said quietly, "but I'm not going to let fear make my decisions."

Peter met her eyes.

"Good," he replied. "Because I want the woman who chooses me freely."

Her fingers tightened around his.

"Then let's find the truth."

And somewhere inside Silver Maple Publishing, an old record was opened.

The name at the top was David Potter.

Beneath it was another.

Peter Tennyson.

And beside both names, written in red ink, were four words that neither Lily nor Peter had yet seen:

DO NOT REOPEN THIS FILE.



Chapter 21

THE HIDDEN HEART

Peter placed the old photograph on the bakery counter, and for several seconds neither he nor Lily seemed able to look away from the two men standing outside Silver Maple Publishing nearly twenty years earlier. Lily recognised her father's face at once, yet it was the other man who unsettled her most, because Peter had gone pale the moment he realised that the stranger beside David Potter was his own father. The warm morning light coming through the bakery windows suddenly felt strangely cold against Lily's skin, and she drew the photograph closer as though the paper itself might surrender an explanation. "Peter... why is my father standing beside yours?" she asked, her voice steady only because she was forcing every trembling breath beneath it.

Peter stared at the photograph, his brows drawing together while an uncomfortable memory stirred somewhere beyond the reach of certainty. "I don't know, Lily, and that's precisely what frightens me," he admitted, turning the photograph carefully towards the light as though the angle might reveal something hidden in the background. Lily watched his face, searching for hesitation, deception, or some tiny expression that might suggest he already knew more than he was saying, yet what she saw was genuine confusion mixed with a growing determination. "Then

we're going to find out what happened," she said, placing her hand over his before fear could persuade her otherwise.

Peter looked down at their joined hands, and the simple warmth of her touch steadied something inside him that the photograph had unsettled. "Are you certain you're ready for whatever we uncover?" he asked, his voice gentle rather than protective, because he had finally understood that loving Lily meant standing beside her rather than deciding what she was allowed to endure. She swallowed, remembering the years she had spent protecting an idealised memory of her father because accepting his struggles had seemed too painful for the daughter who had lost him. "No," she whispered, meeting Peter's eyes with quiet courage, "but I'm finished allowing fear to choose which truths I am allowed to know."

Alicia was sitting near the old bookshelf when Lily showed her the photograph, and the retired teacher's expression changed so subtly that another person might have missed it. She removed her reading glasses, studied David's face, then looked at Peter with the sorrowful recognition of someone who had carried an uncomfortable memory for far too many years. "Your father came home frightened once," Alicia said, folding her hands in her lap as the recollection returned, "and I had never seen him like that before." Lily's breath caught when Alicia added, "He told me someone inside Silver Maple was taking manuscripts, but he begged me not to tell you because he wanted you to remember your father as a man who loved you, not as a man who spent his nights afraid."

"Why didn't you tell me when I was older?" Lily asked, and there was no anger in her voice, only the ache of discovering that people had been making decisions about her memories without

allowing her a voice in them. Alicia lowered her eyes, her fingers tightening around the edge of her cardigan as she answered, "Because sometimes adults mistake silence for protection, and I was frightened that telling you would make grief heavier rather than lighter." Lily looked towards the photograph again and slowly shook her head, feeling a strange mixture of sadness and affection for the woman who had tried to shield her. "Perhaps Dad deserved to be remembered as both," she said quietly, "the father who loved me and the man who was brave enough to fight for his work."

By late morning, Julia arrived at Butter & Bloom carrying a thin folder and the expression of someone who had already made a difficult decision. She placed a temporary archive authorisation beside Peter's coffee, explaining that her professional connections could give them limited access to Silver Maple's restricted records before the opportunity disappeared. "You didn't have to do this," Peter said, and there was genuine gratitude beneath the words, because he knew what it cost Julia to help him and Lily when her own feelings had once made their closeness painful to witness. Julia gave him a composed smile, then looked directly at Lily. "I know, Peter, but the truth matters more than my disappointment, and if David Potter's work was wrongfully hidden, then Lily deserves the chance to discover why."

Lily thanked her, and Julia's expression softened with a quiet acceptance that required no dramatic declaration. "Just promise me something," Julia said, folding the folder closed with deliberate care, "when you discover the truth, don't allow it to destroy the life you have built while searching for it." Lily understood the meaning behind the words, and for the first time she saw Julia not as the woman who had once loved Peter, but as someone who had chosen

to help despite having every reason to walk away. "I'll try," Lily replied, and Julia nodded before leaving them to their investigation.

Across the building, Kevin and Sophie searched through an old digital storage system while the bakery's ordinary sounds continued around them, making the investigation feel almost absurdly secretive. Kevin suddenly leaned towards the screen and pointed at a forgotten entry connected to David Potter's name, his expression brightening with the satisfaction of someone who had finally found something useful. "There's a storage reference here," he said, tapping the number with his finger, "B-17, transfer ledger, restricted material." Sophie leaned closer, her shoulder brushing his as she read the entry, and Kevin immediately forgot the complicated terminology he had been trying to explain.

"It's a... transfer... something," Kevin muttered, narrowing his eyes at the screen while Sophie tried not to laugh. "You know the word," she teased, watching his frustration with amused affection, and Kevin snapped his fingers several times before finally exclaiming, "Transfer ledger!" Sophie smiled at him, and for a brief moment the investigation vanished beneath the simple pleasure of having someone patiently wait while his mind caught up with itself. "There you are," she said softly, and Kevin's grin became slightly less foolish and considerably more tender.

The restricted archive beneath Silver Maple was colder than Peter remembered, with narrow aisles, metal shelving and rows of sealed boxes carrying decades of literary history. Henry Lawson waited near the entrance, his weathered face becoming noticeably pale when Peter mentioned David Potter, and he removed his spectacles before looking at Lily with a mixture of regret and recognition. "I wondered when someone would come looking,"

Henry admitted, his fingers resting upon an old brass key that seemed almost too small to carry the weight of the memory attached to it. Lily stepped closer and asked, "You knew my father?" and Henry answered, "I knew the writer, Miss Potter, and I knew he was becoming frightened for reasons that had nothing to do with whether his novel would sell."

Henry explained that David had begun documenting suspicious manuscript disappearances long before his own work vanished, and the evidence suggested that rejected ideas were sometimes appearing later under different authors' names. Lily listened without interrupting, though her fingers curled tightly around Peter's hand as each detail changed another part of the childhood memory she had cherished. "How many writers lost their stories?" she asked, her voice breaking slightly as she looked along the endless shelves. Henry lowered his eyes and replied, "I don't know, but your father believed the problem was larger than one stolen manuscript, and when he realised someone was watching the records, he entrusted one final box to a person he believed he could trust completely."

Peter's expression sharpened. "Who was that person?" he asked, stepping forward as Henry unlocked a narrow cabinet. Henry hesitated long enough for Lily to notice, then answered, "Your father never gave me the name, because he feared even the archives were no longer safe." The old key turned with a dry metallic click, and Henry pulled out a transfer ledger whose faded pages carried David's handwriting beside a storage reference that matched the number Kevin had discovered. "B-17," Peter whispered, while Lily felt her pulse begin to race.

The door to Storage Room B-17 opened with a reluctant groan, revealing a sealed manuscript box covered in dust and

marked with David's unmistakable handwriting. Lily approached slowly, and when she touched the lid her eyes filled with tears because the object felt less like evidence than a piece of her father returning from a grave she had never been able to visit. Peter stood beside her without speaking, allowing her to decide when the moment had come, and she finally whispered, "I don't know if I'm ready." He gently answered, "You don't have to be ready to feel everything, Lily, only ready to take the next step."

She looked at him, and something inside her settled. "I've spent years being afraid of losing people," she confessed, her fingers tightening around his, "but now I'm more afraid of never telling them how much they mean to me." Peter's eyes softened, and he leaned closer without taking the decision from her. "Then don't hide your heart anymore," he said, and Lily smiled through the tears gathering beneath her lashes. "I'm choosing you," she whispered, and Peter answered, "And I'm choosing you."

For one beautiful moment, the mystery became secondary to the quiet certainty between them, and Peter pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead before they turned towards the manuscript. Henry helped them break the old seal, and when the lid opened, Lily saw a thick completed novel resting beneath protective paper, its title immediately recognisable as the work her father had spent years creating. Her hand trembled as she touched the first page, and a broken little laugh escaped her when she whispered, "Dad... you came home."

Then Peter turned the title page.

His expression changed so abruptly that Lily's smile disappeared.

Beneath David Potter's name was another line.

Completed by: Peter Tennyson.

Peter stared at the words as though they belonged to someone else's nightmare, and the colour slowly drained from his face. "I didn't write this," he said, his voice barely audible, while Lily looked from the manuscript to him, desperately searching for the certainty she had possessed only moments before. "Peter..." she whispered, but he shook his head, visibly stunned. "Lily, I've never seen this manuscript before."

A folded sheet slipped from between the pages and landed on the floor.

Lily picked it up.

She recognised the handwriting before she even read the words.

David Potter.

Her eyes moved across the single sentence.

If you're reading this, the person who completed my story is still hiding among you.

The archive fell silent.

Peter stared at the note, then towards the old Silver Maple records, while Lily's fingers began to tremble around the paper. Somewhere beyond the archive door, footsteps sounded and stopped, followed by the faint click of a door closing. Lily instinctively moved closer to Peter and gripped his hand, but neither of them could ignore the terrible contradiction before them.

Her heart trusted Peter.

The manuscript accused him.

And for the first time since they had chosen one another, Lily could not tell which truth frightened her more.

Peter looked towards the corridor.

“Stay close,” he whispered.

Lily nodded, her eyes fixed upon the name beneath her father’s.

Peter Tennyson.

The lights flickered once.

Then again.

And somewhere in the darkness beyond Storage Room B-17, someone turned a key in a lock.



Chapter 22

THE NAME ON THE MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript lay open beneath the pale archive lamp, and Lily could not tear her eyes from the words beneath her father's name. Completed by: Peter Tennyson. The letters were perfectly clear, yet the man standing beside her looked as bewildered by them as she felt, his face drained of colour while one hand remained suspended above the page. "Peter... why is your name underneath my father's?" she asked, and though she tried to sound calm, the tremor in her voice betrayed the **fear** she had been fighting since the previous night. Peter swallowed, lowered his hand, and answered with quiet certainty, "I don't know, Lily, but I swear to you, I've never seen these pages before."

She looked at him for a long moment, remembering his patience beneath the rain, his hand in hers, and the way he had never once demanded that she trust him before she was ready. Yet the manuscript existed, the name existed, and the evidence sat between them with the cruel confidence of something designed to be believed. "You really didn't write it?" she asked, her fingers curling around the edge of the table while an old memory of Daniel's betrayal stirred painfully inside her. Peter took one

careful step towards her, then stopped before touching her, and said, “No, and I won’t ask you to believe me simply because I love you; I’ll help you discover why someone wants you to doubt me.”

For a moment Lily closed her eyes, fighting the instinct to retreat behind the emotional walls she had spent years building. The old fear whispered that she had trusted someone once and discovered the truth too late, but another part of her remembered Peter standing beside her through every frightening discovery without once treating her like something fragile. “I’m afraid,” she admitted, opening her eyes again, “but I’m not going to punish you for something we haven’t proved.” Peter’s shoulders loosened slightly, and when she finally reached for his hand, his fingers closed around hers with a quiet tenderness that said more than reassurance ever could.

Henry Lawson approached the manuscript with his old brass key still resting in his palm, and the retired archivist’s tired eyes narrowed as he examined the paper, binding, registration stamp and faded archive number. He handled every page with the care of a man who understood that paper could preserve both truth and lies for generations. “Something is wrong,” Henry murmured, running one finger along the binding before comparing it with the archive record. Peter moved beside him and asked, “What have you found?” Henry looked towards Lily and answered, “This manuscript was not placed here when I left Silver Maple, and that means someone added it years after David Potter died.”

Lily stared at him, stunned by the simplicity of the conclusion and the terrible implications behind it. “So the archive has been carrying a lie?” she asked, and Henry nodded slowly, his expression filled with regret for the part he had played by remaining silent for so long. “Not merely a lie,” he replied, “a

carefully constructed record, because whoever placed this here wanted future investigators to believe the manuscript had always belonged in this collection.” Peter’s jaw tightened as he looked again at his own name, and he said, “Then they weren’t trying to preserve my name; they were trying to create a trail that ended with me.”

The discovery forced Lily to sit down, and she opened her brown notebook without writing a word, simply staring at the blank page while her thoughts raced in every direction. She remembered her father’s voice from childhood, telling her that stories could be changed by people who feared the truth, and suddenly the old words felt less like literary wisdom and more like a warning meant for her. “What if someone planned this years ago?” she asked, her voice quieter now, and Peter crouched beside her chair so that she did not have to look up at him. “Then we find when it began, who had access, and why they chose my name,” he said, his gaze steady, “and we do it properly, without letting fear fill the gaps where facts should be.”

The digital archive produced the next shock before the afternoon had properly begun, for an access record appeared beneath Peter’s former employee profile. PETER TENNYSON — ARCHIVE ACCESS. Peter stared at the screen, his brow furrowing as he checked the date twice, then a third time, because the entry had been created long after he had left Silver Maple. Lily moved closer and whispered, “That’s your name.” Peter nodded slowly and replied, “I know, and unless I’ve somehow learned to travel through time, someone used credentials that should have been inactive.”

Kevin and Sophie were already examining the secondary security logs when Peter showed them the entry, and Kevin leaned

towards the screen with the determined expression of a student desperate to prove that he belonged in the investigation. "There's another layer here," he said, scrolling through the data before suddenly stopping with a frustrated frown. Sophie glanced at him and smiled despite herself. "You know what you're trying to say, don't you?" she asked, and Kevin snapped his fingers as though the missing word might fall from the ceiling. "It's the... the... oh, come on, I know this," he muttered, while Sophie folded her arms and patiently waited.

Kevin finally straightened with a triumphant grin. "Credentials," he announced, and Sophie laughed softly before pointing towards the screen. "Congratulations, Professor Potter, you've recovered your vocabulary." His amusement faded when he examined the timestamp beneath the access record, because someone had activated Peter's old credentials only recently. "This wasn't an accident," Kevin said, his voice losing its playful edge, and Sophie placed a reassuring hand against his arm. "Then don't rush," she replied, "we'll find out who did it before they get another chance to mess with the evidence."

Lily went to Alicia before the evening, carrying a photograph of the manuscript rather than the original because she was beginning to understand how carefully every piece of evidence needed to be preserved. Alicia studied Peter's name for several seconds, and something sorrowful passed through her eyes before she removed her glasses and folded them neatly in her lap. "Dad told you something about this, didn't he?" Lily asked, and Alicia hesitated long enough for Lily to understand that the answer was yes. "He once told me that paper could lie," Alicia finally said, her voice soft with an old sadness, "and if someone ever put

another man's name on his story, I was not to believe the paper until I had seen the evidence."

Lily lowered the photograph and looked towards the window, where the afternoon had become grey above the London rooftops. "Why didn't you tell me that before?" she asked, and Alicia reached across the table to take her hand. "Because your father wanted you to have a childhood, Lily, and I thought silence would give you peace," she answered, her eyes shining with regret, "but perhaps I confused peace with ignorance." Lily squeezed her fingers and whispered, "You were trying to protect me, Grandma, but I'm old enough now to decide what hurts me and what doesn't."

By late afternoon Peter was standing inside Richard Hawthorne's office, where the polished windows reflected the darkening London sky and the executive's calm expression seemed almost deliberately detached. "David Potter's manuscript was accessed using my former credentials," Peter said, placing a printed record on the desk, and Richard glanced down at it before returning his attention to Peter. "You worked here for years," Richard replied evenly, "so surely you understand that credentials leave records, and records can be complicated." Peter leaned forward slightly, his voice remaining controlled despite the irritation building behind his eyes. "Exactly, Richard, which is why someone using my credentials is not proof that I accessed the archive; it's proof that someone wanted the record to point towards me."

For the first time, Richard's composure shifted, only for a fraction of a second, but Peter noticed the tightening around his eyes. "Be careful," Richard said, leaning back in his chair, "accusations can become very expensive when they're made

without sufficient evidence.” Peter gave a humourless smile and gathered the documents from the desk. “Then I’ll collect sufficient evidence,” he replied, “and when I have it, you won’t need to worry about my accusations because the records will speak for themselves.” Richard watched him leave, and once the door closed, the controlled expression vanished from his face.

The encounter triggered an old memory as Peter walked through the Silver Maple corridor, one he had not thought about for years. During his first year at the company, a senior editor had once stopped him outside an archive and warned him never to leave his credentials active after completing restricted work. Young Peter had laughed and asked who would possibly want to use them, but the older man had looked at him with unsettling seriousness. You’d be surprised what people do when they have something to hide. Peter stopped walking as the memory ended, because for the first time the warning sounded less like routine security advice and more like something that had been waiting years to become relevant.

That evening Lily found him in Hyde Park, sitting beneath a tree while the first cool drops of rain touched the pavement. She approached without speaking, and Peter looked up with exhaustion written across his expression rather than the usual confidence he carried into professional rooms. “You found something,” Lily said, sitting beside him, and Peter nodded before telling her about the warning he remembered and the possibility that his credentials had been preserved deliberately. “I’m frightened that my past may be connected to this,” he admitted, looking down at their hands, “but I’m more frightened that you might think everything between us was built on a lie.”

Lily turned towards him, her expression softening as she listened to the vulnerability he rarely allowed anyone to see. “Peter, I don’t know what your father knew, and I don’t know who used your credentials,” she said, “but I know the man who stayed beside me when walking away would have been easier.” He looked at her silently, and Lily took his hand before adding, “I won’t ignore evidence for you, but I won’t abandon you because of evidence we haven’t understood.” Peter’s eyes became wet, though he blinked the emotion away with a faint smile and answered, “That’s all I’ve ever wanted from you.”

Later that night, Peter returned to his apartment and opened an old Silver Maple employment archive he had kept for reasons he could no longer remember. The records contained his resignation, department history and inactive credentials, but beneath them sat an unfamiliar entry marked LEGACY EXECUTIVE AUTHORIZATION — ACTIVE. Peter leaned closer, his breathing slowing as he read the identification number attached to the authorization. It belonged not to him, but to his father.

“Dad...” he whispered, staring at the screen as the weight of the discovery settled upon him.

His phone rang.

Unknown number.

Peter answered, but there was only silence on the line, followed by the faint sound of breathing.

“Who is this?” he asked, rising slowly from his chair.

A distorted voice finally spoke.

“Your father knew where the ending was.”

The call ended.

A photograph arrived seconds later.

Peter opened it with trembling fingers.

His father stood inside Silver Maple's restricted archive beside David Potter.

On the back, someone had written:

Ask your father why he chose to hide the final chapter.

Peter stared at the message until the words blurred.

Then another notification appeared.

YOU ARE NOT LOOKING AT THE RIGHT MAN.

Peter's phone slipped slightly in his hand.

A moment later Lily's name appeared on the screen.

He answered.

"Peter?" she asked, immediately hearing the strain in his silence. "What happened?"

Peter looked once more at the photograph of their fathers.

"I think," he said slowly, "my father knew far more about your father's missing ending than I ever imagined."

And somewhere across London, in a darkened office overlooking the same restless city, Richard Hawthorne closed his briefcase and smiled without humour.

The Investigation had finally reached Peter's family.

And whoever had written his name on David Potter's manuscript had not finished telling the lie yet.



Chapter 23

THE MAN WHO FINISHED IT

Peter had not slept, and by the time he reached Lily's home, the photograph of his father had become almost unbearable in his hand. Lily opened the door and knew at once that something had changed, for the usual steadiness in his face had been replaced by a tired uncertainty that made him look less like the composed editor she knew and more like a son frightened of discovering the truth about his own family. "You haven't slept, have you?" she asked, stepping aside, and Peter gave a faint shake of his head before answering, "My father's authorization code was used to access your father's manuscript, and I have spent the entire night wondering whether I have spent my life believing a version of him that wasn't true." Lily studied him for several seconds, then gently touched his arm and said, "Whatever he did, Peter, it belongs to his choices, not yours, so don't carry his guilt before we even know whether there is any guilt to carry."

They sat together at Butter & Bloom before the first customers arrived, with the photograph lying between their cups and the quiet clatter of the bakery preparing for another London morning. Peter kept rubbing his thumb along the photograph's worn edge, a small movement that betrayed the uneasiness he would never have shown across a publishing boardroom. "I keep thinking that

if I'd asked my father more questions when I was younger, I might have known what happened," he admitted, staring at the table rather than at Lily, and she reached across it until her fingers rested over his. "You were his son, Peter, not his investigator, and you don't have to inherit somebody else's mistakes merely because you share their surname," she replied, her voice gentle but firm enough to make him finally meet her eyes. Something inside him loosened, and for the first time that morning he allowed himself to believe that facing the past might be easier with someone beside him.

Julia's message arrived shortly afterwards, containing an old editorial reference she had discovered through her international publishing contacts. One name appeared repeatedly throughout the material: Dr Nathaniel Reed, a former literary critic whose essays on independent writers had once made him respected among London's literary circles. Peter recognised the name from his early years at Silver Maple and immediately called him, while Lily listened quietly beside him and watched the tension gather around his eyes. Nathaniel agreed to meet them at Notting Hill Public Library, though his hesitation before accepting the appointment suggested that the name of David Potter still carried a weight he had never managed to set down.

Nathaniel was waiting beside a tall window overlooking the library courtyard, his silver hair neatly combed and his marked-up manuscript resting beneath one hand. The moment Lily placed David's photograph before him, the retired professor removed his spectacles and stared at the familiar face with an expression that seemed to contain both affection and regret. "I wondered when somebody would bring David Potter's name back into my life," he said, carefully cleaning his glasses before looking towards Lily,

and she leaned forward as her heart began to beat faster. “You knew my father?” she asked, and Nathaniel answered, “I knew David, and I knew Elias Vane, which means I knew more about that publishing dispute than I ever had the courage to admit.”

Peter’s attention sharpened immediately, and he shifted forward in his chair as Nathaniel spoke the vanished author’s name. Elias Vane, Nathaniel explained, had not merely been another writer seeking publication but David’s closest literary ally, a young novelist who had become convinced that unpublished manuscripts were disappearing inside Silver Maple before similar ideas appeared under different names. “David believed someone within the company was stealing writers’ work,” Nathaniel said, his fingers tightening around the edge of the manuscript before he added, “and Elias believed him because he had begun finding patterns that were too consistent to dismiss as coincidence.” Lily’s throat tightened as she asked, “What happened to Elias?” and Nathaniel looked towards the rain beginning to mark the library glass before quietly replying, “He disappeared, and after that, David became afraid.”

The explanation left Lily with more questions than answers, particularly when Nathaniel revealed that Elias had believed David’s final manuscript was almost complete. Peter’s eyes narrowed as he considered the implication, because if David had already completed most of the novel, the story of somebody stealing the entire ending might have been deliberately simplified. “Then why would Dad say the ending had been taken from him?” Lily asked, her fingers tightening around her brown notebook, and Nathaniel remained silent long enough to make the silence itself feel like an answer. At last he said, “Because sometimes hiding something feels exactly like losing it, Miss Potter, and David had

begun to understand that a manuscript could disappear without a single page being destroyed.”

Before they could ask what he meant, Peter’s phone vibrated with a message from Silver Maple’s legal department. A formal notice accused him of unauthorised access to confidential company records and warned that further attempts to obtain restricted material could result in legal action, and Lily read the document twice before looking up with disbelief. “They’re trying to frighten you into stopping,” she said, her irritation finally breaking through her composure, while Peter folded the letter carefully and replied, “Perhaps, but if they wanted me frightened, they should have remembered that fear tends to make me very curious.” Lily gave him a look that was almost amused despite everything and said, “Then we’re in trouble, because apparently curiosity is contagious.”

Kevin and Sophie spent the afternoon searching public records for references to Elias Vane, and Kevin’s usual humour disappeared when he discovered an unusual cross-reference buried beneath an old literary database entry. “There’s a reference to Elias’s...” he began, then stopped with his eyebrows drawn together as though his mind had suddenly locked a door against the exact word he needed. Sophie folded her arms and smiled, saying, “Take your time; your brain clearly knows the answer, even if your mouth has decided to go on strike,” and Kevin sighed before snapping his fingers in frustration. “Pseudonym,” he finally exclaimed, but his grin vanished when the record displayed a chilling note: ELIAS VANE — ALTERNATE IDENTITY UNKNOWN.

That discovery changed the atmosphere between them, and Sophie leaned closer to the screen while Kevin read the record

again to make certain he had not misunderstood it. "Why would a missing author have an unknown alternate identity?" she asked, and Kevin swallowed before answering, "Maybe because someone wanted him to disappear without actually disappearing." Sophie looked at him with a mixture of admiration and concern, then quietly said, "You're becoming rather good at this." Kevin smiled, though his expression softened when he replied, "I only care because Lily's involved, and because I don't want the people I love thinking I'm just the idiot who tells jokes when things become frightening."

By late afternoon, Lily and Peter walked along Portobello Road beneath a sky turning steadily darker, while shopkeepers began pulling down shutters and the first fine drops of rain settled upon the pavement. Peter had become unusually quiet, and Lily knew the reason without needing to ask, for every step seemed to carry him closer to the question of what his father had known. "You're still thinking about him," she said, and Peter nodded before admitting, "What if my father really was involved, Lily, and what if everything I've admired about him has been built around a lie?" She stopped walking and turned towards him, taking his hand before answering, "Then we'll face that truth too, because your father's choices aren't yours, and neither your love for him nor mine for you requires us to pretend otherwise."

Peter looked at her for several seconds, his expression softened by something deeper than gratitude. "And if the truth changes how you see me?" he asked, his voice quieter than before, and Lily stepped closer until there was no distance left between them except the uncertainty neither could control. "Then I'll remember the man standing here," she replied, "the man who told me the truth when it was uncomfortable, who never forced me to trust him, and

who stayed when walking away would have been easier.” Peter gently squeezed her hand and whispered, “You make it very difficult to be afraid,” to which Lily smiled and answered, “Good, because I’m frightened too, and apparently we’re rather foolish if we think courage means feeling nothing.”

That evening, Peter returned to his apartment and opened the old Silver Maple records once more, determined to understand how his father’s authorization code had remained active after all those years. The search produced an entry he had never seen before, buried beneath obsolete security data: ACTIVATION DATE — 2019, followed by a classification that made his stomach tighten, SUBJECT: PETER TENNYSON — SUITABLE IDENTITY. He stared at the words, remembering that 2019 had been the year he left Silver Maple, and the realisation struck with such force that he had to grip the edge of his desk. Someone had not merely stolen his credentials; someone had deliberately selected his identity years before Lily ever discovered David’s manuscript.

Peter immediately called Nathaniel, but the professor’s reaction was unlike anything Peter had expected, because the moment he described the record, Nathaniel’s voice became strained. “Delete that file,” Nathaniel said, and Peter froze with his hand still resting over the keyboard before asking, “Why would you tell me to destroy the only evidence we’ve found?” There was a long silence before Nathaniel answered, “Because that code was used once before, Peter, and the last time it appeared in the records, David Potter disappeared from Silver Maple’s system.” Peter felt the room grow strangely cold as he asked, “When was that?” and Nathaniel whispered, “The week David vanished from the publishing records.”

The call ended, leaving Peter alone with the rain tapping against his windows and the screen glowing in the darkness like a warning he could no longer ignore. Lily's name appeared on his phone, and when he answered, she immediately recognised the strain in his silence and asked, "Peter, what happened?" He looked at the words **SUITABLE IDENTITY** once more before turning the laptop towards the window as though the truth might somehow become easier to understand from a different angle. "Someone used my identity to hide Elias Vane," he finally said, and on the other end Lily stopped breathing for a moment before replying, "Then we haven't been searching for a missing man at all."

Peter's eyes narrowed as another line appeared beneath the file, one that had not been visible seconds earlier.

CURRENT LOCATION: LONDON.

His heart struck hard against his ribs.

Lily's voice became almost a whisper.

"Peter... where?"

He stared at the address.

Then came the final message.

DO NOT LET RICHARD FIND HIM FIRST.

Peter stood abruptly.

"Lily," he said, reaching for his coat, "we have to move."

"Where are we going?"

He looked towards the rain-darkened city beyond the window.

"To find Elias Vane."

And somewhere in London, behind the lights of an old bookshop whose name had not appeared in any Silver Maple record for nearly twenty years, a man turned the sign from OPEN to CLOSED.

He had been waiting.

And now, after two decades of silence, somebody had finally found him.



Chapter 24

ELIAS VANE

The address on Peter's phone led them to a narrow stretch of Portobello Road where modern shopfronts stood shoulder to shoulder with buildings that seemed to remember another London. Lily paused beneath the faded sign of an old bookshop, her fingers curling around the strap of her bag as she studied the dusty windows and the dark interior beyond them. "Are you certain this is the place?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady while Peter glanced once more at the address and then at the brass number beside the door. "No," he admitted with a faint, tired smile, "but I'm certain somebody connected to Elias Vane wanted us to find it, and at this point that's the closest thing we have to certainty."

Lily looked at him and noticed the strain he had been carrying since discovering his father's connection to the hidden records. Instead of allowing him to retreat behind that familiar calmness, she slipped her hand into his and gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze, silently reminding him that neither of them had to walk into the unknown alone. "Whatever happens inside, you don't disappear behind your professional face," she said, raising an eyebrow when he almost smiled, "because I'm rather fond of the man underneath it." Peter's expression softened, and after a

moment he squeezed her hand in return before saying, "And I'm rather fond of the woman who keeps frightening me by being braver than I am."

The brass bell above the door gave a tired little chime when they entered, and the smell of old paper, leather and dust immediately surrounded them with the quiet intimacy of a forgotten library. Lily slowed near the first shelf, running her fingertips lightly across several worn spines while something about the room tugged at a memory she had not expected to find there. She remembered sitting beneath her father's desk as a child, listening to the turning of pages while David worked late, and when she had once asked why he kept so many old books, he had smiled and replied, "Because some stories disappear when nobody remembers them." The recollection settled heavily in her chest, and she realised that perhaps she had spent years trying to remember her father without ever understanding what he had been trying to preserve.

Peter noticed her silence and remained beside her rather than rushing her towards the counter. Behind the desk stood a framed sheet of handwriting, yellowed by age, and Lily's breath caught when she recognised the unmistakable curve of David's letters among the faded notes. Beneath it lay a small handwritten card, and when Lily lifted it, her fingers began to tremble because only one sentence had been written across the paper: For the daughter of the man who refused to forget. Peter leaned closer, his brows drawing together as he asked, "Lily, do you know what this means?"

She turned the card over, but there was nothing else, and the emptiness somehow frightened her more than another explanation might have done. "How did they know I would come here?" she whispered, looking towards the shadowed corridor at the rear of

the shop as though somebody might emerge with an answer. A quiet voice came from behind the shelves, calm but aged by years of silence, and said, "Because David knew you would eventually become brave enough to look for him." Lily froze, while Peter instinctively moved half a step nearer to her, his attention fixed upon the figure approaching through the dim light.

The man who appeared was older than the photographs Lily had seen, with grey hair, tired brown eyes, a short beard and thin spectacles resting upon a weathered face. His dark-brown wool coat looked worn at the sleeves, and there was something deliberately ordinary about him, as though he had spent years learning how not to attract attention. He stopped several feet away and studied Lily with an emotion he seemed reluctant to reveal, before finally saying, "You have your father's eyes." Lily swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat and answered, "Are you Elias Vane?"

The man's expression changed at the sound of his own name, as though twenty years had passed in a single breath and yet had never truly passed at all. He nodded slowly, resting one hand against the edge of an old bookcase for support while Lily stared at him with disbelief, curiosity and an unexpected compassion. "I knew your father," Elias said, his voice roughened by years of keeping difficult memories locked away, "and I knew him better than almost anyone outside his family." Peter stepped forward, his gaze sharpening as he asked, "Then tell us why you disappeared."

Elias looked towards the rain beginning to gather against the shop window before answering, "Because David asked me to." Lily's mouth parted slightly, and she shook her head as though the answer had struck somewhere deeper than she expected. "My father asked you to vanish?" she whispered, and Elias gave a weary nod before explaining, "He knew somebody was watching

him, and he believed that if I remained visible, I would become another way to reach his family.” Lily lowered her eyes, fighting the tears gathering there, because suddenly Elias’s disappearance no longer looked like cowardice but like a sacrifice made for people he barely knew.

Elias led them towards a narrow sitting area at the back of the shop, where three mismatched chairs surrounded a wooden table marked by years of use. He explained that David and he had discovered suspicious patterns within Silver Maple Publishing, including manuscripts that disappeared during editorial review and ideas that later appeared under other names. “David wasn’t merely angry about losing a book,” Elias said, his fingers tightening around his teacup, “he was frightened because he realised that somebody inside the company could erase a writer’s work and make the writer look like the problem.” Lily stared at him, and when she finally asked, “Was that why Dad became afraid?” Elias answered, “It was one reason, but his greatest fear was what might happen to you and Alicia.”

Lily’s eyes filled, and she pressed her lips together until the emotion became almost painful to contain. “Why didn’t he tell me?” she asked, her voice cracking despite her attempt to remain composed, and Elias looked at her with the sadness of a man who had carried that question for decades. “Because you were his daughter,” he replied quietly, “and he wanted your memories of him to contain birthdays, books, arguments about bedtime and all the ordinary things a child deserves, rather than fear, suspicion and the knowledge that grown men were frightened of what he had discovered.” Lily wiped beneath one eye and gave a small, broken laugh before saying, “He always thought protecting me meant deciding what I was allowed to know.”

Elias did not correct her, because he understood that some truths required tenderness before they could be accepted. When Lily finally asked the question that had haunted her since childhood, “Did someone steal Dad’s ending?”, Elias remained silent for several seconds before shaking his head. “No,” he said, meeting her gaze directly, “your father didn’t lose his ending, Lily, and nobody stole those final chapters from him.” Peter leaned forward, his voice becoming firmer as he asked, “Then where are they?”

Elias looked towards a locked cabinet at the far end of the room, and something in his expression told Peter that the answer had been waiting there for years. “David hid them,” Elias said, and Lily’s breath caught as the pieces of her father’s behaviour suddenly began to rearrange themselves in her mind. She remembered the locked drawers, the unfinished conversations and the strange way Alicia had sometimes gone silent whenever David’s final novel was mentioned. “Where?” Lily asked, rising slightly from her chair, but Elias only shook his head and replied, “Not here, because David knew Silver Maple would search every place they associated with him.”

Peter then asked the question that had been troubling him since the archive discovery, his expression hardening when he mentioned the phrase Suitable Identity. Elias listened without interruption, but the man’s face changed when Peter explained that his own identity had apparently been used to conceal Elias’s existence. “Why was my name placed beneath David’s manuscript?” Peter asked, his jaw tightening, “and why did somebody choose me?” Elias studied him for a long moment before saying, “Your name wasn’t chosen because of you, Peter.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed. “Then why?” he demanded, and Elias’s gaze softened with something that looked almost like

sympathy. "Because your father once helped David," he answered, leaving Peter completely still, and for several seconds the room seemed to contain nothing but the faint ticking of an old wall clock. "My father helped him?" Peter finally asked, and Elias nodded before adding, "Your father wasn't the villain in this story, but he understood that some truths were dangerous enough to require protection."

Peter lowered his eyes, and a memory from childhood returned with startling clarity: his father placing a fountain pen into his hand and saying, Never let a company decide who you are. At the time Peter had laughed and asked why anyone would try, but his father had answered with unusual seriousness, Because powerful people sometimes need other people to carry their mistakes. Peter closed his eyes briefly, realising that words he had once dismissed as parental wisdom now sounded like a warning deliberately left behind.

Lily watched him struggle and quietly placed her hand over his. "You don't have to solve your father's entire life tonight," she said, and Peter looked at her with an exhaustion he rarely allowed anyone to see. "What if I discover he made terrible choices?" he asked, and Lily's fingers tightened around his as she answered, "Then we'll face those choices as his, not yours, because I won't judge you for a past you didn't create." Something warm passed through Peter's expression, and he whispered, "You keep choosing me when you have every reason to be frightened."

Lily gave him a small smile, though tears still glistened in her eyes. "I'm not choosing you because your family was perfect," she replied, stepping closer, "I'm choosing you because every time the truth becomes frightening, you still walk towards it." Peter gently touched his forehead to hers, careful and unhurried, and for a moment the mystery surrounding them seemed to fall away. "Then

I suppose I'll keep walking," he murmured, and Lily answered softly, "Good, because I'm coming with you."

Elias watched them from across the shop, and the sadness in his eyes suggested that their affection reminded him of a promise he had carried for far too long. He reached into a locked drawer and removed a small brass key, placing it carefully upon the table between them. "David gave me this," he said, and Lily stared at the familiar silver-maple emblem engraved around a tiny star before whispering, "I've seen this in Dad's journal." Elias nodded slowly and replied, "Then your father was already preparing you long before you understood what he was preparing you for."

Lily reached for the key, her fingers trembling as she closed them around the cold metal. "What does it open?" she asked, but Elias's gaze moved towards Peter before returning to her, and his answer came with deliberate caution. "The place where David kept the final chapters." Peter's expression sharpened, while Lily felt hope rise inside her despite everything they had learned, but before either could ask another question, Elias stopped them with a raised hand. "There is one thing you must understand," he said.

Lily turned back. "What?" Elias's face had become grave, and the warmth that had filled his voice earlier disappeared beneath the weight of an old promise. "I wasn't the person David trusted with the final chapters," he said, and Lily felt the hope inside her falter. Peter's eyes narrowed as he asked, "Then who was?" Elias hesitated before answering, "Someone who promised David that Lily would never know the truth until she was ready."

Lily stared at him, her mind racing through every person who had stood beside her throughout the years. "Who?" she asked, barely above a whisper, but Elias only looked at her with an expression filled with pity and replied, "The person your father

trusted is someone you already know.” Lily’s thoughts immediately turned towards Alicia, and Peter saw the change in her face without needing to ask the name she was afraid to say. Outside, soft rain began falling over Portobello Road, and Elias quietly added, “Your grandmother may know more about the final chapters than she has ever told you.”

Neither Lily nor Peter moved for several seconds.

The key rested inside Lily’s trembling hand.

Her father’s secret had survived nearly twenty years.

And now she knew where to begin.

“Grandma,” Lily whispered, her voice carrying more sorrow than anger.

Peter stood beside her and gently took her free hand.

“Then tomorrow,” he said, “we ask her for the truth.”

Lily looked towards the rain-darkened street.

For the first time, she understood that some secrets were not buried because people wanted to forget them.

Some were buried because somebody had promised to protect the people they loved.

And tomorrow, she would discover whether Alicia had kept that promise—or whether the promise had become another secret of its own.



Chapter 25

THE TRUSTED PERSON

The small brass key lay in Lily's palm as she stood outside Alicia's sitting room, its silver-maple emblem catching the pale light through the corridor window. She could hear the quiet ticking of the grandfather clock beyond the door, yet her own heartbeat seemed louder, because Elias Vane's final words had turned a lifetime of certainty into one unbearable question. Peter stood beside her, silent and patient, watching the tension gather around her mouth without trying to push her towards an answer she was not ready to hear. Lily swallowed, lifted her eyes to him and whispered, "Elias said my father trusted someone I already know, and I think that person is Grandma."

Peter's expression softened, and instead of reaching for the door, he covered Lily's hand with his, giving her a moment to steady herself. "You don't have to decide what Alicia did before you hear why she did it," he said quietly, his voice carrying none of the suspicion that had followed them through the Silver Maple investigation. Lily looked down at their joined hands, grateful that he was not trying to become the hero of a family story that belonged to her. "And If she lied to me?" she asked, her eyes shining with the fear of another betrayal, and Peter answered, "Then we'll deal with the truth, not with everything your fear is telling you."

Lily opened the door, and the familiar warmth of Alicia's sitting room greeted her with the smell of tea, old books and lavender polish, but the comfort she usually felt there was absent. Alicia sat beside the window with a book resting unopened upon her lap, and the moment her eyes fell upon the brass key, the colour seemed to leave her face. She did not ask where Lily had found it, nor did she pretend not to recognise the emblem, and that silence told Lily more than any hurried explanation could have done. Lily stepped inside, closed the door gently behind her and said, "Grandma, you know what this is."

Alicia removed her glasses and folded them carefully, buying herself a few seconds before answering the question she had feared for nearly twenty years. Her fingers trembled against the armrest, and when she finally looked at Lily, there was neither anger nor defensiveness in her expression, only the exhausted sadness of someone who had carried a promise for too long. "Your father gave me that key," she confessed, her voice barely above a whisper, and Lily felt something inside her tighten as she asked, "When?" Alicia lowered her eyes and replied, "Before he died."

For a moment Lily could not move, because the sentence had transformed the little brass object from a clue into a piece of her childhood she had never been allowed to understand. She remembered being eight years old and watching David pack books into a wooden box, her small hands resting against the edge while she tried to discover what he was hiding from her. "Daddy, what's inside?" she had asked, and David had closed the lid before drawing her into his arms and saying, "Something important, sweetheart, but nothing will ever be more important than you." Now, sitting across from Alicia, Lily realised that perhaps the secret had never been about choosing a manuscript over her, but

about keeping the manuscript away from anyone who might use it to reach her.

Alicia rose slowly and walked towards an old wooden cabinet that Lily had seen hundreds of times without ever imagining what rested behind its locked doors. She removed a small key from beneath a porcelain bowl, unlocked the cabinet and brought out a weathered package wrapped in faded brown cloth, placing it on the table with both hands. The envelope inside carried David Potter's handwriting, and the sight of those familiar letters struck Lily so deeply that she pressed her fingers against her lips to stop herself from sobbing. "He told me never to open it unless you became a published author," Alicia said, her eyes filling with tears, "because he believed the writer you would become would finally be strong enough to understand the truth."

Lily stared at the sealed pages while Peter remained near the doorway, deliberately giving her the distance she needed. She glanced towards him, almost expecting him to step forward and help, but he simply offered a small nod that told her the decision was hers. "You aren't coming closer?" Lily asked, her voice trembling, and Peter shook his head with a gentle smile as he replied, "This belongs to you, Lily, and I won't take away a moment that your father intended for you." She breathed slowly, wiped away a tear and answered, "Thank you," before carefully breaking the seal.

The pages inside were filled with David's handwriting, each line carrying the rhythm Lily remembered from childhood evenings when he had written while she drew beside him. She touched the first page with trembling fingers and began reading, but after several paragraphs her tears fell freely because the words were not merely a manuscript; they were proof that her father's

voice had survived. “He finished it,” she whispered, and Alicia nodded with a sorrowful smile before correcting her gently, “Most of it.” Lily looked up sharply, and Alicia’s hesitation told her the truth before the words came.

“One chapter is missing,” Alicia admitted, and the fragile relief inside Lily collapsed into renewed frustration. She looked at the stack of pages, then at the woman who had guarded them for twenty years, and her voice hardened despite the tears gathering in her eyes. “You had this all this time,” she said, clutching the manuscript against her chest, “and you watched me search for answers while the ending was sitting in your house.” Alicia did not defend herself, because she knew that some explanations sounded like excuses when spoken too quickly.

“Yes,” Alicia said, her voice breaking slightly, “I could have told you, and perhaps there are days when I wish I had been brave enough to ignore your father’s instructions.” Lily’s jaw tightened as anger fought with grief, because she wanted to accuse Alicia of betraying her yet could not forget the woman who had raised her with unwavering love. “Why did you choose silence?” she asked, and Alicia looked towards the photograph of David on the mantel before answering, “Because your father believed someone was watching his family, and he was terrified that the moment you knew about the manuscript, you would become part of the danger surrounding it.”

Lily turned away and stared through the window, her reflection blurred by the moisture gathering in her eyes. For several seconds she said nothing, because she understood the reason without being ready to forgive the years of silence, and that distinction mattered more than either woman wanted to admit. “You weren’t protecting the manuscript,” Lily finally whispered, her shoulders trembling

as she turned back towards her grandmother, “you were protecting me.” Alicia nodded, and when Lily crossed the room and embraced her, Alicia held her tightly, both of them crying quietly over a secret that had cost them years they could never recover.

Peter remained outside in the hallway until Lily emerged, giving her family the privacy their conversation deserved. When she finally stepped beside him, her eyes were swollen but calmer, and he did not ask whether she had forgiven Alicia because he understood that forgiveness was not a button that could simply be pressed after an explanation. “You don’t have to tell me everything,” he said, brushing his thumb gently across her knuckles, and Lily gave him a tired smile as she answered, “I thought secrets always meant betrayal.” Peter looked towards the street and then back at her before saying, “Sometimes secrets mean fear, and sometimes they mean love that doesn’t know how to speak honestly.”

Lily rested her head against his shoulder as they walked towards Portobello Road, letting the ordinary noise of London slowly pull her back into the present. A bus rolled past, a newspaper vendor called out to passing pedestrians, and somewhere nearby a street musician played an old tune that seemed almost absurdly peaceful after the morning they had endured. Peter did not try to solve Alicia’s decision for her, nor did he ask Lily to forgive faster simply because he understood the reason behind the silence. Lily tightened her fingers around his and whispered, “Thank you for letting me feel angry without telling me how I should feel,” and Peter answered, “Your heart isn’t a problem I need to fix.”

Across town, Kevin walked beside Sophie after meeting Lily briefly, but his usual humour had disappeared beneath an

awkward nervousness that Sophie recognised immediately. He had been trying to say something for half an hour, yet every time he opened his mouth, the sentence seemed to escape before it reached his tongue, and finally he stopped beneath a shop awning and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sophie, I know I'm not brilliant at serious conversations," he began, forcing a nervous laugh, "but there's something I've been trying to tell you for ages." Sophie smiled patiently and said, "Then stop trying to make it perfect and just tell me."

Kevin took a breath, looked directly into her eyes and decided that hesitation was no longer protecting him. "I don't want you to be just my friend anymore," he admitted, his face turning red as he tried not to look away, "because somewhere along the way, you've become the person I look for first." Sophie's teasing expression disappeared, replaced by genuine warmth, and she reached for his hand before he could retreat behind another joke. "I've been waiting for you to say that," she whispered, and Kevin blinked in surprise before laughing softly, "You could have saved me three weeks of nervous suffering."

Their laughter carried briefly into the street, creating a small pocket of ordinary happiness in the middle of a mystery that seemed to grow darker every day. Kevin began explaining the significance of David's hidden package, but midway through his explanation he frowned and searched for a word that had suddenly vanished from his mind. "It's like... narrative... something that hints at what's coming later," he muttered, tapping his forehead while Sophie watched with amused patience. "Foreshadowing?" she offered, and Kevin snapped his fingers with a delighted grin as he replied, "Exactly, that bloody word has been hiding from me all afternoon."

Later, Grace Morgan examined David's recovered pages beneath the soft light of her conservation desk, comparing the handwriting with authenticated entries from his old journals. She carefully studied the pressure of the ink, the distinctive shape of his letters and the tiny habits of punctuation that a forger would struggle to reproduce consistently. "These pages were written by David Potter," she confirmed, and Lily closed her eyes as a quiet sob escaped her because certainty was sometimes more powerful than hope. Peter stood beside her, looking at the photograph they had recovered earlier, and his expression changed when he noticed the date written beneath David's name.

October 2006.

The photograph showed David standing beside Richard Hawthorne outside Silver Maple, both men looking towards the camera with expressions that seemed strangely formal. Lily took the photograph from Peter and studied Richard's face, remembering his earlier claim that he had barely known her father. "He lied," she said, her voice quiet but firm, and Peter nodded as his jaw tightened. When Lily turned the photograph over, a handwritten sentence waited on the back: He knew exactly where the ending was hidden.

Peter stared at the words, and the room seemed suddenly colder despite the warm evening outside. Lily looked at him, her earlier pain giving way to a sharper determination, because Alicia's secret had hurt her but Richard's lie pointed towards something deliberate. "The missing chapter isn't the only thing he was hiding," Peter said, and Lily closed her fingers around his hand before answering, "Then tomorrow we find out what else he knows." Peter gave her a faint smile and asked, "Together?" Lily looked directly into his eyes and replied, "Always."

That night, Lily placed David's surviving manuscript on her desk and turned slowly towards the final page. At the bottom, beneath the last paragraph, David had written a sentence that made her blood run cold: The final chapter must never be trusted to the person who controls the ending. She leaned closer and noticed another mark beneath his handwriting, where a name had been partially scratched away, leaving only three visible letters: RIC.

Her phone vibrated.

Lily froze.

An unknown message appeared on the screen.

You found the pages. But you still don't have the ending.

A second message arrived before she could breathe properly.

Ask Elias who wrote the missing chapter.

Peter, standing nearby, noticed the sudden change in her expression and crossed the room. "Lily, what happened?" he asked, and she silently handed him the phone. His eyes moved across the messages, then towards David's manuscript, and the certainty they had gained during the day began slipping away again.

The final chapter had not been destroyed.

Someone had it.

And somewhere in London, someone knew exactly why.

Chapter 26

THE LAST CHAPTER



The final surviving pages of David Potter's manuscript lay across Lily's kitchen table, their edges softened by age and their handwritten lines carrying a voice she had spent years believing she would never hear again. Morning light rested upon the paper, yet neither Lily nor Peter paid attention to the quiet London beyond the window, because one question had followed them from Alicia's house through every mile of their investigation. Lily touched the final page with the tip of her finger and whispered, "This is Dad's handwriting, Peter, so why is the last chapter missing?" Peter stood opposite her, his hands resting against the back of a chair, and answered with measured certainty, "Because someone wanted the story to remain unfinished." Lily lifted her eyes towards him, determination replacing some of yesterday's hurt, and said, "Or someone wanted us to believe it was."

Peter came around the table but stopped before touching the manuscript, remembering that David's pages represented something deeply personal to Lily rather than merely another piece of evidence. His gaze moved across the ink, following the neat handwriting until it reached the empty space where the final chapter should have begun. "Then we find the person who knows

the difference,” he said, his voice quiet but firm, and Lily felt a strange steadiness return to her chest. She reached for his hand, threading her fingers through his, and asked, “Together?” Peter squeezed her fingers and replied, “Together, always, until we know exactly what happened.” The promise was simple, but Lily understood its weight, because for the first time love was not asking her to forget the truth; it was giving her the courage to face it.

By late morning they were back at Elias Vane’s old bookshop, where the brass bell above the door gave its familiar chime as they entered. Elias was waiting behind the counter, and the moment his eyes fell upon David’s manuscript, his guarded expression changed into something almost sorrowful. He removed his spectacles, rubbed them with a cloth and looked towards Lily as though he had been expecting this moment for years. “You found it,” he murmured, and Lily placed the pages carefully upon the counter before answering, “You knew there was another chapter, Elias.” His shoulders lowered beneath the weight of an old confession, and after a long silence he said, “I knew more than I told you.”

Lily’s expression tightened, though she kept her voice controlled, because she had learned that anger often concealed the question that mattered most. “Who wrote the missing chapter?” she asked, and Elias looked first at her, then at Peter, before finally lowering his gaze to David’s pages. “I did,” he said. The words seemed to stop the air inside the shop, and Lily remained completely still while Peter’s eyebrows drew together in stunned disbelief. “You wrote it?” Lily asked, almost afraid of the answer, and Elias nodded slowly before saying, “Your father asked me to finish his story if he could not.”

The confession opened a door to the past that Elias had kept locked for nearly twenty years, and his voice became quieter as he remembered the final meeting he had shared with David. David had placed several pages into his hands, his face carrying a weariness Elias had mistaken for ordinary exhaustion. "If they stop me, finish the story," David had told him, and Elias had tried to laugh away the seriousness of the words. "Don't talk like that, David," he had replied, but David had only smiled with that familiar patience Lily remembered from childhood. "Writers prepare for endings, Elias," he had said, and Elias now admitted that he had not understood how literal those words were until it was too late.

Lily listened without interrupting, though tears slowly gathered along her lower lashes as she imagined her father preparing for a future he desperately hoped would never come. Elias explained that David had completed most of the novel before Silver Maple began closing doors around him, and that the final chapter was too important to leave in the company's hands. "He believed they would destroy anything that exposed what they were doing," Elias said, his fingers resting heavily upon the manuscript, "so he asked me to preserve the ending and disappear if necessary." Lily swallowed hard and asked, "And you disappeared for nearly twenty years because of him?" Elias looked at her with tired eyes and answered, "Because I was afraid, Lily, and I have spent every year since wondering whether fear made me a coward."

Peter stepped closer, his expression no longer suspicious but thoughtful, because Elias's confession explained why the man had abandoned a promising literary career. "You tried to expose Silver Maple," Peter said, and Elias nodded. Contracts were withdrawn, invitations vanished, and publishers who once praised

his work suddenly stopped returning his calls. Elias had not been physically imprisoned, yet the professional world had quietly closed around him until disappearing became easier than fighting people with greater money and influence. Lily looked at him with compassion and said, "You protected Dad's story." Elias shook his head. "Too late," he answered, his voice carrying the regret of a man who had survived when his friend had not.

Peter then placed the Silver Maple manuscript before him and turned it towards Elias. The second title page carried the words that had haunted him since the archive discovery: Completed by: Peter Tennyson. Elias stared at the name, and genuine surprise crossed his face. "That wasn't there when I saw David's original," he said immediately. Peter's jaw tightened as the final piece began settling into place. "Someone added my name after the fact," he said, and Lily watched him carefully, understanding that the false authorship was not merely an attack upon his career; it was an attempt to place the blame for David's missing ending upon the one person whose identity could still be traced through Silver Maple's old systems.

Meanwhile, Kevin and Sophie had spent the afternoon buried in digital records, surrounded by printed archive logs and notes spread across a café table. Kevin scrolled through an old database until he suddenly stopped, his expression changing from amusement to concentration. "There," he said, turning the laptop towards Sophie, "Peter's employee credentials were used after he had already left that department." Sophie leaned closer, scanning the dates before asking, "Can the system identify who actually logged in?" Kevin shook his head and sighed. "It only records the account," he said, then hesitated while trying to explain the technical problem. "It's basically an authentication..." He

stopped, shut his eyes and tapped his forehead in irritation. Sophie smiled. "You're searching for the word again." Kevin snapped his fingers when it finally returned. "Credential," he announced, and Sophie laughed softly. "There he is."

The discovery reached Peter within minutes, and when he saw the records his face became hard with concentration. Someone had not merely placed his name upon David's manuscript; someone had deliberately used his old access credentials to create a believable trail. "They didn't steal my name," Peter said, staring at the screen, "they used it." Lily watched him for a moment before taking his hand beneath the table. "And now we know why," she replied. Peter looked at her, frustration still visible in his eyes, but her presence prevented the anger from becoming reckless. "I want whoever did this to answer for it," he admitted, and Lily squeezed his hand as she said, "Then let the truth do the accusing."

Julia's contribution came shortly afterwards, arriving in the form of a secured archive report from one of her international publishing contacts. She had discovered that Richard Hawthorne personally authorised an emergency access request connected to David Potter's records, and the request had been linked to Peter's old employee credentials. When Peter read the document, his expression became still rather than surprised. "Richard," he murmured, while Lily studied the evidence beside him. Julia's voice came through the phone, calm but serious. "The records are incomplete, but there is enough here to show that someone with executive authority deliberately opened the archive." Peter closed his eyes briefly and answered, "Then Richard wasn't simply protecting Silver Maple's reputation; he was protecting something inside it."

The revelation should have brought satisfaction, yet Lily felt only a quiet ache as she looked at her father's handwriting. She remembered being a little girl struggling to write her own name while David patiently guided her fingers across the page. "Don't worry about making it perfect," he had told her, smiling as she frowned at the crooked letters. "Just make it yours." The memory settled inside her with surprising clarity, and she realised that David had never wanted her to become a replacement for him. He had wanted her to become Lily, even if the truth about his life eventually became painful.

That evening, Lily and Peter walked through Hyde Park beneath a sky slowly gathering storm clouds. Peter had been unusually silent, and Lily could tell that the false manuscript still troubled him more than he wished to admit. "You're blaming yourself," she said, and he looked towards the trees before answering, "My name is on your father's book, Lily." She stopped and turned towards him, her expression firm but tender. "Not because you put it there," she replied, and when Peter asked, "What if my family was involved in what happened to your father?" she held his gaze and answered, "Then we'll discover that truth too."

Peter looked at her for several seconds before speaking again. "What if you learn something about my father that changes the way you see me?" His voice carried an honesty that made Lily's chest ache, because she knew that fear was not really about his father; it was about losing the woman he had finally allowed himself to love. She stepped closer and said, "I don't need you to have a perfect past, Peter, and I don't need your family to have one either." Her fingers closed around his, and she added, "I need you to be honest with me, and you have been."

Peter's expression softened, and some of the tension finally left his shoulders. "Then I can promise you that," he said, and Lily smiled before resting her forehead briefly against his. Their closeness was quiet and unhurried, built not upon escape but upon everything they had survived together. Lily whispered, "I used to think love meant keeping someone safe from painful truths." Peter gently brushed his thumb across her hand and answered, "Sometimes love means standing beside someone while the truth hurts." She looked into his eyes and smiled. "Then stay beside me."

Later that evening, they returned to Butter & Bloom, where the bakery was quiet after closing. Lily sat beside Peter beneath the warm glow from the front window, and for several minutes neither spoke because the day had exhausted them both. At last Lily rested her head upon his shoulder and whispered, "Do you know what frightens me?" Peter turned slightly towards her. "What?" She smiled faintly through her tiredness. "After everything we've discovered, I still want tomorrow with you." Peter's eyes warmed as he answered, "That's not something to fear, Lily; that's something worth protecting."

She lifted her head and looked at him, and there was no uncertainty in her expression now. "Then I choose tomorrow," she said, and Peter gently kissed her, brief and tender, before resting his forehead against hers. There was no need for grand promises, because their relationship had already survived suspicion, jealousy, family secrets and evidence designed to separate them. Their love had become less about perfect happiness and more about choosing one another when happiness was difficult. Lily smiled and whispered, "Whatever happens next, we face it together."

The following moment shattered the calm.

Peter arrived at Silver Maple with Julia's evidence, expecting Richard Hawthorne to be waiting in his office. Instead, the office door stood open, the lights were on, and the desk had been stripped almost completely bare. A security officer hurried towards him, visibly uncomfortable, and said, "Mr Tennyson, Mr Hawthorne left about twenty minutes ago." Peter's expression hardened. "Did he say where he was going?" The officer shook his head and produced a sealed envelope. "No, sir, but he told me to give you this if you arrived."

Peter opened the envelope.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

You found the truth about the manuscript.

He turned it over.

But you still don't know why David Potter had to die.

Lily read the words over his shoulder, and the colour slowly drained from her face. Before either could speak, Peter found another line beneath the first.

If you want the rest of the story, come alone.

Peter stared at the message, his instincts immediately warning him that this was not an invitation but a trap. Lily reached for his hand before he could move. "You're not going alone," she said. Peter turned towards her. "Lily—" She shook her head, her determination stronger than the fear in her eyes. "We started this together," she whispered, holding his gaze, "and we're finishing it together."

Outside, thunder rolled somewhere beyond the London skyline.

Richard Hawthorne had vanished.

The manuscript mystery was finally beginning to collapse.

But now there was a far more dangerous question waiting for them.

Why had David Potter died?

And what was Richard willing to do to make sure Lily and Peter never discovered the answer?



Chapter 27

THE TRUTH WE CHOOSE

Lily had spent most of the night staring at Richard Hawthorne's letter, yet the words had not become any less frightening with repetition. The accusation hidden inside it was worse than the manuscript itself, because for the first time the question was no longer who had altered David's story, but whether David had been forced into a silence from which he had never returned. Peter stood beside the kitchen window, reading the same page again, his expression controlled although the tension in his shoulders betrayed how deeply the possibility troubled him. Lily folded the letter carefully and placed it beside her father's photograph, then whispered, "He said Dad had to die, Peter, and I can't pretend that sentence doesn't matter." Peter turned towards her, his blue eyes serious, and replied, "It matters, but it isn't the same as proof." Lily tightened her fingers around the photograph and answered, "Then let's stop being frightened by the question and find the evidence."

Peter reached across the table and took her hand, his thumb resting gently against her knuckles while the morning traffic began stirring beyond the bakery windows. "We have David's manuscript, Elias's testimony, the archive records, my compromised credentials and Richard's authorisations," he said,

speaking with the calm precision that returned whenever uncertainty threatened to overwhelm him. Lily studied his face and saw something different from the man who had once tried to protect everyone by carrying every burden alone. He was still worried, but he was no longer asking her to remain behind while he faced the danger himself. “And if the evidence proves something terrible?” she asked, her voice quieter than before. Peter held her gaze and answered, “Then we face something terrible together, rather than allowing fear to invent an answer for us.”

By the time they reached the London Metropolitan Police interview office, Elias had already provided his statement, and Detective Maya Thompson was reviewing the documents inside a quiet consultation room. She examined David’s correspondence, the original manuscript pages, the altered Silver Maple copy and the records showing Peter’s credentials had been used without his knowledge. Maya turned towards Peter and said, “Your name appears in the historical record, but the access dates contradict your employment history.” Peter nodded once and replied, “Because I wasn’t the person who accessed it.” Lily watched carefully as Maya continued examining the evidence, because she understood that this time she could not protect Peter merely because she loved him. “And you’re prepared to confirm that the publishing record was manipulated?” Maya asked, looking towards Lily. Lily drew a steady breath and answered, “Yes, because I don’t want him protected from the truth; I want the truth established properly.”

Elias sat opposite them with his hands folded tightly together, and when Maya asked him about David’s final months, the older man seemed to retreat into memories he had spent years refusing

to touch. "David discovered that manuscripts were being redirected through the company," Elias explained, his voice roughening as he spoke, "but he wasn't reckless enough to accuse anyone without evidence." He described the names, submission dates, correspondence and copies David had secretly preserved, explaining how one name began appearing repeatedly in documents that should never have been connected. Richard Hawthorne. Lily's eyes lowered towards the table as the name settled between them, and she whispered, "Dad knew him." Elias nodded slowly. "He knew what Richard was becoming," he said, and the sadness in his expression made Lily understand that David had not merely been fighting for a book. He had been fighting against a system that had learned how easily an ordinary writer could be silenced.

Peter then opened a separate folder containing the letter from his father, the paper creased from being handled repeatedly. He read the first lines silently before his jaw tightened, and Lily immediately noticed the change in him. "What does it say?" she asked gently. Peter swallowed before answering, "My father suspected that Silver Maple was manipulating submissions, but he never discovered who was responsible." His voice faltered for the first time. "He tried to protect several authors, but he was afraid that accusing the wrong person would destroy innocent people along with the guilty ones." Lily reached across the table and placed her hand on his shoulder, allowing him a moment to breathe before saying, "Perhaps your father wasn't part of the darkness." Peter looked at her, his eyes unexpectedly bright. "Perhaps," he murmured, "he was trying to keep a little light alive."

News of the investigation spread through London before the afternoon had properly settled, and reporters gathered outside Silver Maple as the company prepared a formal statement. Employees who had once whispered about missing manuscripts began speaking openly, while lawyers searched through old contracts and security records that had been ignored for years. Richard Hawthorne's name appeared repeatedly in the reports, and the polished reputation he had built over decades began collapsing beneath evidence that could no longer be quietly buried. Yet Richard himself remained missing, leaving behind unanswered questions that made the situation more unsettling rather than less. Lily stood across the street with Peter and watched photographers gather outside the publishing house. "It feels strange," she said, "watching everyone finally care about something Dad carried alone." Peter looked at her and replied, "Sometimes the truth needs one person brave enough to keep holding it until other people are ready to see it."

Later, Lily returned to Butter & Bloom after the bakery had closed, carrying David's photograph inside her brown leather notebook. She sat at one of the small tables near the window and looked at the man she had spent years remembering as a quiet father who wrote late into the night. "I thought you failed," she whispered, her voice breaking as tears gathered along her lashes. "I thought you couldn't finish your book because perhaps it wasn't good enough, or perhaps you simply gave up." She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand and gave a small, sorrowful laugh. "But you were fighting for it all along." Alicia appeared quietly from the kitchen and sat beside her without interrupting, understanding that some grief required company rather than advice.

After a long silence, Alicia reached for Lily's hand and held it between both of hers. "Your father never wanted you to carry his unfinished life," she said, her voice gentle with years of affection. Lily looked towards her and asked, "Then why did he leave the manuscript for me?" Alicia smiled sadly. "Because he wanted someone to remember that it existed, and because he believed you would eventually become strong enough to decide what should happen to it." Lily lowered her eyes, tracing the edge of the photograph with one finger. "Do you think I should publish it?" she asked. Alicia did not answer immediately, and when she finally spoke her words were simple. "That decision belongs to you, Lily; loving your father does not mean surrendering your future to his."

The words stayed with Lily long after Alicia left the room, because they gave her something she had not realised she had been searching for. David's story could be honoured without becoming a prison, and remembering him did not require her to spend the rest of her life repairing everything that had been broken before she was old enough to understand it. She opened her notebook and wrote a single sentence beneath the date: My father's ending is not my beginning. The words looked almost too simple, yet when she read them again, her breathing became easier. For years she had believed that finding David's truth would complete her life, but now she understood that truth was only giving her permission to live beyond it.

Across town, Julia stood outside Silver Maple with Peter while the final legal documents were being delivered. She watched him look towards Lily across the pavement and smiled with an acceptance that carried no bitterness. "You know," she said, "I used to think losing you would be the worst thing that could

happen to me.” Peter looked at her, concern softening his expression. “Julia, I never wanted to hurt you.” She raised a hand gently, stopping the apology before it could become another burden. “I know,” she said, her eyes shining slightly. “But I spent years waiting to be chosen, and eventually I realised I had forgotten to choose myself.” Peter gave her a quiet smile. Julia glanced towards Lily and added, “She’s good for you, Peter, and you’re good for her.” This time, when Julia walked away, she did not look back.

At the Riverside Café, Kevin sat opposite Sophie with an untouched cup of tea cooling between his hands. He had spent several minutes trying to explain David’s literary legacy when he suddenly frowned and tapped his forehead. “It’s basically literary... um...” Sophie leaned back with an amused smile. “You’re doing it again.” Kevin closed his eyes and sighed. “I know the word, Sophie; it is somewhere in my head refusing to come downstairs.” She laughed softly, and after another moment his face brightened. “Symbolism!” he announced triumphantly. “There you are,” Sophie replied, shaking her head. Kevin laughed with her, but when the amusement faded he looked at her more seriously. “Sophie, there’s something else I’ve been trying to say.” She waited patiently, and he finally admitted, “I don’t want to be just your friend anymore.”

Sophie became quiet, studying the nervous expression that had replaced Kevin’s usual playful confidence. “I think I’ve fallen in love with you,” he continued, his voice unsteady but sincere, “and I’m terrified that saying it will change everything between us.” Sophie reached across the table and took his hand, her smile growing warmer. “Kevin, you’ve already changed everything,” she said. His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Is that good?” he asked.

Sophie laughed softly. "It's very good." She squeezed his fingers and added, "I've simply been waiting for you to catch up." Kevin stared at her for a second before laughing in relief, and the ordinary warmth between them felt like a small victory after so many days of secrets and suspicion.

When Peter finally walked Lily home, London had become quieter, the streets carrying the soft hum of buses and distant conversations. Lily looked tired but peaceful, and Peter noticed that the fear which had once followed every discovery had begun to loosen its hold upon her. He stopped outside her door and said, "You don't have to decide about the novel tonight." Lily turned towards him with a thoughtful expression. "I know," she replied, "but I think I've decided something more important." Peter waited without pressing her. She reached for his hand and said, "I want you in my future, but I don't want you to choose that future for me." A smile appeared on Peter's face as he answered, "Then I'll walk beside you while you choose it."

Lily leaned closer, resting her head against his shoulder for a moment before whispering, "I spent so long thinking love meant needing someone to save me." Peter gently touched her hair and replied, "You never needed saving." She lifted her face towards him, her hazel eyes calm now. "Perhaps," she said, "I only needed someone willing to stay." Peter smiled. "Then I'm staying." Their embrace was quiet and unhurried, carrying none of the desperation that had once surrounded their relationship. They were no longer two people clinging to one another because the past frightened them; they were two adults choosing each other because the future mattered.

The next morning, Lily received an official letter from Silver Maple's new leadership. She opened it at the bakery counter while

Peter stood nearby, and her eyes widened as she read the offer. The company wanted to publish **The Last Spring Before Forever**, credited to David Potter and completed by Elias Vane, while asking Lily to become the official literary representative of her father's estate. For several seconds she said nothing, because the letter represented everything her younger self had once dreamed of for David. Peter watched her face carefully and asked, "What are you going to do?" Lily folded the letter and looked towards her father's photograph. "I don't know yet," she admitted. Peter nodded. "Then take your time."

Lily smiled faintly, holding the letter against her chest as the bakery slowly filled with the ordinary sounds of London beginning another day. "For once," she said, "I don't want someone else deciding how my father's story should end." Peter looked at her with quiet pride. Lily opened her notebook and wrote beneath yesterday's sentence: **My story belongs to me.** Then she closed it and looked towards the sunlight falling across the bakery window. David's story had finally been heard, Peter's name had been cleared, Elias had released the guilt he had carried for years, and Richard's carefully protected world was collapsing. What remained was no longer a mystery to solve, but a choice to make.

Lily looked at Peter and smiled.

"I think," she said softly, "I'm ready to choose my own ending."

And for the first time since David's disappearance, she understood that an ending did not have to mean goodbye.

Sometimes, an ending was simply the first quiet step towards a new beginning.



Chapter 28

A NEW BEGINNING

Lily stood beside the bakery window with the publishing contract resting between both hands, while the pale London morning slowly awakened beyond the glass and the first customers began passing along Portobello Road. She had read the offer three times, yet the name **David Potter** still seemed strangely intimate beneath the formal lettering of Silver Maple Publishing, as though a piece of her father had somehow travelled across twenty years to ask her one final question. Peter stood a few steps away, giving her the quiet space she needed, and the patience in his expression reminded her that he had never once asked her to choose the answer he wanted. Lily lowered her eyes to the contract, breathed slowly, and said, “You know what frightens me, Peter?”

Peter moved closer, but stopped before touching her, his concern visible in the slight tightening around his eyes. “Tell me,” he replied, his voice gentle enough that she felt no pressure to hide what she was thinking. Lily ran her fingertips over the edge of the paper and looked towards David’s photograph, remembering the father who had once written at the kitchen table while she coloured beside him. “If I publish this book, everyone will know his story,” she said, swallowing the ache in her throat, “but they won’t know

him the way I did.” Peter watched her carefully before answering, “Then don’t publish it because the world wants it, Lily; publish it only if you believe David would have wanted his story remembered honestly.”

She looked at him for several seconds, and something inside her finally became still. For years she had imagined this moment as a grand victory, complete with applause, newspaper headlines and the satisfaction of proving that her father had not failed, but standing there with the contract in her hands felt nothing like victory. It felt quieter, almost sacred, because she finally understood that David had never been desperate for fame and had never needed strangers to declare him important. Lily smiled through the moisture gathering in her eyes and whispered, “Dad didn’t want everyone to admire him, Peter; he only wanted someone to listen.”

Peter smiled, and the warmth in his expression carried none of the pity she had once feared from people who knew about David’s disappearance. “Then let them hear him,” he said, “but let the choice remain yours.” Lily took a steady breath, uncapped the pen and placed its nib against the signature line, her fingers trembling only slightly as she wrote her name. When she finished, she stared at the signature for a moment and realised the trembling had not come from fear at all. It had come from finally accepting that she was no longer the little girl waiting for someone else to explain her father’s life.

At the publishing office, the new director greeted Lily with professional courtesy rather than the theatrical excitement she had expected from someone holding such a valuable manuscript. The contract was explained carefully, including Elias Vane’s completion, Lily’s authority over the literary estate and the

agreement that David's original pages would not be altered merely to make the novel more commercially convenient. Lily listened to every clause, asking questions whenever something seemed unclear, because she had learned during the investigation that trust was strongest when it stood beside evidence rather than replacing it. Finally, she closed the folder and said, "I will allow my father's novel to be published, but not as a scandal, not as a curiosity and certainly not as a product built around the tragedy of his death."

The director nodded with genuine respect and replied, "Then we'll publish the novel on those terms." Lily signed the final document, and when the pen left the page, she felt an unexpected ache beneath her ribs. She had imagined that finishing David's story would feel like closing a door, but instead it felt like opening one she had been afraid to approach for years. Outside the office, Peter was waiting beneath the stone entrance, and when Lily walked towards him with the signed contract in her hand, his smile told her he already understood what she had chosen.

"You did it," Peter said, his eyes moving from the contract to her face. Lily shook her head with a faint laugh and answered, "No, I chose it." Peter's expression softened because he understood the difference, and he reached for her hand only after she offered it first. "That's even better," he said, squeezing her fingers gently, "because nobody gets to write your decisions for you anymore."

That afternoon, Lily sat at home with David's manuscript open before her while Alicia rested quietly in the armchair nearby. The final pages carried the weight of twenty years, yet the words themselves were surprisingly peaceful, and Lily could almost imagine her father sitting across the room correcting a sentence with the same patient concentration she remembered from

childhood. She reached the dedication page and paused, remembering the day she had once asked him what happened when a story ended. David had smiled and told her that another person got the chance to begin a new one, and now, after all these years, Lily finally understood that he had perhaps been speaking to the woman she would eventually become.

She picked up her pen and began writing, her handwriting becoming steadier with every sentence: **For my father, David Potter. You taught me that stories deserve courage, that failure is not the end, “and that even unfinished stories can survive. This ending belongs to you.** This beginning belongs to me. Lily stopped when the final full stop appeared, and tears slipped quietly down her cheeks without the old bitterness that had once accompanied memories of David. Alicia came closer and placed a trembling hand against her granddaughter’s cheek, her eyes shining as she read the dedication. “Your father would have loved that,” she whispered, and Lily answered through a fragile smile, “I wish he could have read it.”

Alicia embraced her, holding her for a long moment while the room remained still around them. “Perhaps he already knows,” she said, and Lily closed her eyes against Alicia’s shoulder, allowing herself to believe that love did not require proof for every beautiful thing. She had spent years believing that remembering David meant reopening the wound of losing him, but now the memory felt different, softer and more complete. When she finally pulled away, she looked at Alicia and said, “I don’t think I’m saying goodbye to him anymore.” Alicia smiled through her tears and replied, “No, darling; you’re simply learning how to carry the good parts forward.”

Elias arrived later carrying the original completed manuscript in a worn leather case, and for once there was no guardedness in his manner. He placed the manuscript carefully into Lily's hands, his fingers lingering briefly on the cover as though he were surrendering something precious. "Your father trusted me with these pages," he said quietly, "and for twenty years I believed protecting them meant hiding them." Lily looked at him with compassion rather than accusation and replied, "You protected them until someone was ready to hear them." Elias's eyes became wet, and when she added, "Now don't disappear again," he gave a small, almost boyish smile and answered, "Perhaps it is time I stopped hiding too."

Meanwhile, across London, Peter sat alone in his flat with an old university notebook open before him and his father's fountain pen lying beside it. The first pages contained an unfinished short story he had written years ago, full of crossings-out, awkward sentences and ambitious ideas that had never reached an ending. He had always told himself that abandoning the story had been practical, because editing other people's books was safer than risking his own, but Lily had taught him that safety could sometimes become another word for surrender. He uncapped the fountain pen and stared at the blank continuation before writing, **Every ending leaves behind a door.**

Peter paused after the sentence, surprised by how ordinary it looked, and then smiled because ordinary beginnings were still beginnings. Lily entered quietly and found him writing, her expression brightening when she realised what he was doing. "You're finally finishing it," she said, leaning against the doorway with unmistakable pride. Peter looked up and replied, "Maybe

I'm finally allowing myself to start it properly," and Lily laughed softly before crossing the room to read the first paragraph.

At an international publishing office, Julia received the offer that would take her into a new chapter of her own career. She read the contract twice before signing, then sat back and let herself breathe, because for the first time in years her next decision had nothing to do with Peter. She called Lily afterwards, and when Lily answered, Julia said, "I've accepted the position." Lily smiled immediately and replied, "Then congratulations." Julia looked through the window at London's busy streets and admitted, "It feels strange not wondering what Peter would think," to which Lily answered warmly, "Perhaps that's how you know it's finally yours."

At Butter & Bloom, Sophie had spent the afternoon arranging a small celebration, and Kevin was attempting to help without becoming an obstacle. He carried a box towards the counter, stopped suddenly and frowned, trying to explain what they were preparing. "It's like a publication... ceremony... the word is right there," he muttered, tapping his temple in irritation. Sophie folded her arms and smiled knowingly before saying, "You're searching again, aren't you?" Kevin snapped his fingers a moment later and announced, "Launch!" Sophie laughed and replied, "Finally," before taking his hand and adding, "And after this launch, you owe me a proper date."

Kevin stared at her, surprised, before his grin spread across his face. "Tomorrow?" he asked, almost boyishly hopeful, and Sophie squeezed his fingers while answering, "Tomorrow." He laughed beneath his breath, and for once he did not need another joke to hide his happiness. Their relationship had begun without

grand declarations or impossible promises, simply with two people deciding that whatever came next was worth discovering together.

As golden evening settled over London, Lily and Peter walked through Hyde Park with their hands joined, the paths quieter beneath the fading light. There was no photograph waiting in an envelope, no hidden archive, no anonymous warning and no unanswered question following them through the trees. Lily looked at Peter and smiled before asking, "Do you ever wonder what would have happened if we had never met?" Peter considered it with a playful seriousness before replying, "Probably a much less complicated life." Lily laughed and nudged his shoulder, saying, "That's a terrible romantic answer," and Peter smiled as he added, "But it would also have been a much less meaningful one."

They continued walking until Lily stopped beside a quiet bench and looked towards the city beyond the park. "I don't want an easy life," Peter said, turning towards her, "I want a life where we can tell each other the truth, even when it's difficult." Lily watched him for a moment, her expression softening as she recognised the man standing before her was no longer merely the editor who had helped uncover her father's mystery. He was the person with whom she wanted to build ordinary mornings, difficult afternoons, quiet evenings and all the imperfect days between them. "Then let's build it," she said, and Peter answered, "One page at a time."

Later that night, Lily placed David's completed manuscript on her desk and set her own brown notebook beside it. Two books sat together, one carrying the weight of the past and the other waiting for a future that had not yet been written. Peter placed his unfinished notebook beside hers, and Lily looked at the two empty pages with a smile that was almost peaceful. "We're really doing

this,” she whispered, and Peter took her hand before answering, “Yes, but we don’t have to know every chapter tonight.” Lily picked up her pen and looked towards the blank page.

“What are you going to write?” Peter asked, his voice warm with quiet curiosity. Lily thought of David, Alicia, Elias, the years she had lost to unanswered questions and the future she had finally reclaimed for herself. Then she smiled and replied, “Something worth remembering.” She lowered the pen and began writing while Peter opened his own notebook beside her. Outside, London continued beneath the evening sky, trains passing in the distance and windows glowing across the city, while inside that small room two writers quietly began again.

Lily paused after her first sentence and looked towards Peter. “Dad’s story finally has an ending,” she said, her voice carrying gratitude rather than sorrow. Peter closed his notebook for a moment and answered, “And yours?” Lily looked down at the fresh page, then back at the man beside her, and a peaceful smile appeared. “Mine,” she said, “is just beginning.” She returned to the page, and this time she did not look back.

*** THE END ***

