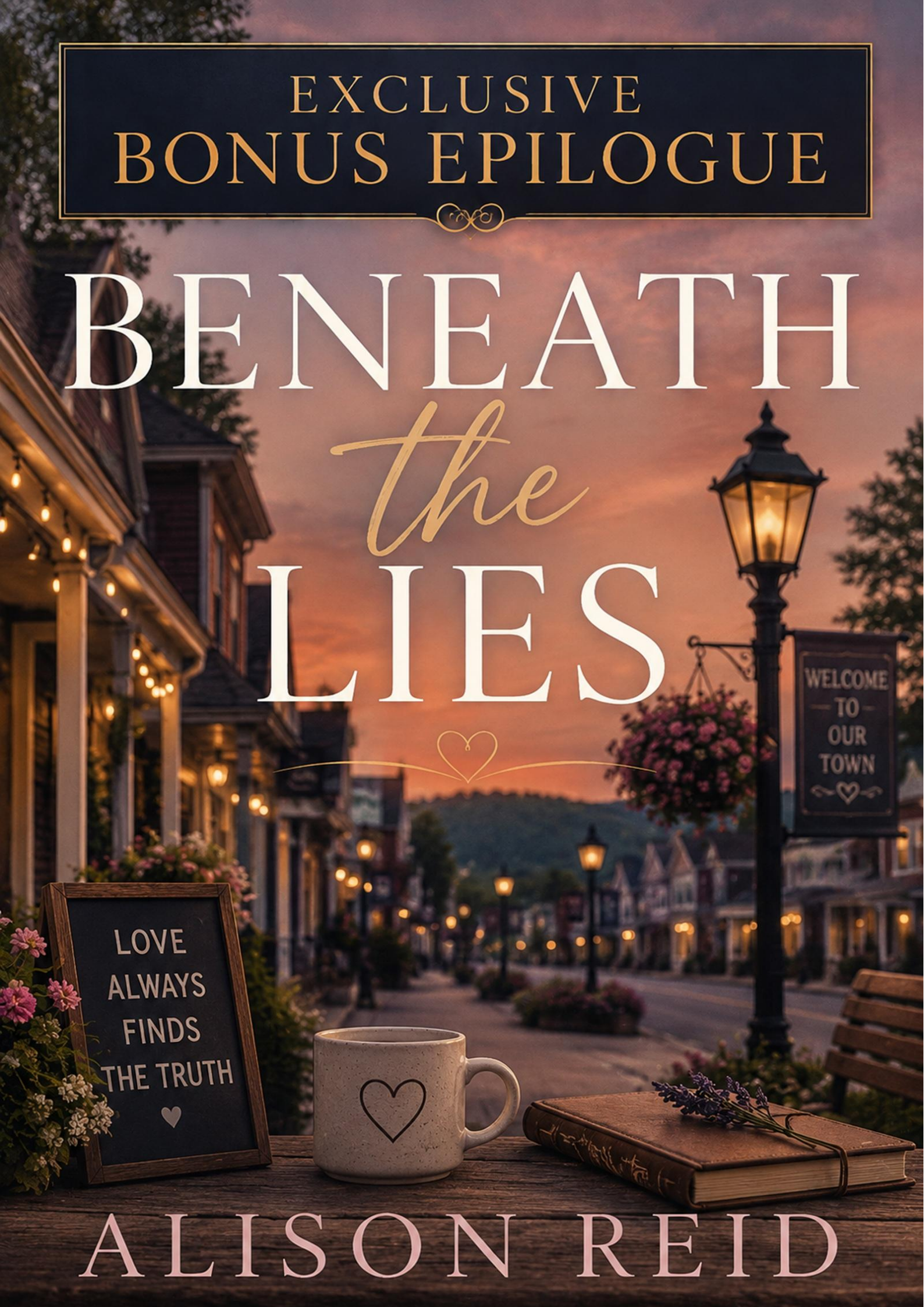
EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

BENEATH *the* LIES



ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Beneath the Lies

by Alison Reid

Twenty-Five Years Later…

Laughter filled the living room as an old comedy played across the television screen, the warm glow from the lamp beside the couch casting soft golden light through the house. Outside, rain tapped gently against the windows, turning the night quiet and intimate.

Lily curled comfortably against Nate's side beneath a throw blanket, one of his arms draped lazily around her shoulders while he absently stroked his thumb against her arm. Even after all these years, he still touched her like he needed the reassurance that she was really there.

Across from them, Mandy laughed as Eric dramatically quoted one of the movie's ridiculous lines in a terrible accent that made her snort into her glass of lemonade.

"Please stop," Mandy groaned through laughter, resting a protective hand over her very pregnant stomach. "You're going to make me pee myself."

Eric grinned shamelessly and leaned over to kiss her temple. "That sounds like a you problem, sweetheart."

Mandy rolled her eyes affectionately before glancing toward Lily. "I blame you and Dad for this, by the way."

Lily blinked innocently. "For what?"

"For making me think ridiculously devoted men actually exist." Mandy pointed accusingly at Eric. "Now I'm stuck with one."

Nate chuckled quietly under his breath.

Eric looked deeply offended. "Stuck? Wow. That's cold."

"You adore me," Mandy informed him.

"I absolutely do."

Their easy affection filled the room with warmth. Over the years, Eric had become family in every sense of the word. He and Marc were close—more like brothers than brothers-in-law—and Eric fit into the Cahill family so naturally it was impossible to remember a time before him.

The front door suddenly opened. Marc walked inside. The moment Lily saw him, her smile faded slightly.

At twenty-two, Marc looked so much like Nate it could still catch her off guard sometimes. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, with the same intense hazel eyes that gave away more emotion than he probably realised. Usually, he carried himself with easy confidence.

Tonight, he looked shattered. His jaw was tight. His expression pale and drawn. And he barely glanced at anyone as he walked into the room.

Nate straightened almost immediately beside her. "Marc?"

Marc stopped briefly near the couch, dragging a hand through his hair. "Hey."

Lily's chest tightened. Something was wrong. Mandy noticed it too.

Her expression softened instantly as she slowly pushed herself upright from the couch. "Okay," she said gently, already reaching for Eric's hand. "I think we should head home."

Marc looked up quickly. "No, you don't have to leave."

"We do," Mandy said softly.

Eric squeezed Marc's shoulder as he stood. "Call me later if you need me."

Marc nodded once, though tension still radiated from him.

Mandy moved toward him carefully and wrapped her arms around him without hesitation. Even heavily pregnant, she still hugged him like she had when they were kids.

"You okay?" she whispered.

Marc exhaled shakily. "Not really."

Her face softened further. "Talk to them."

He gave a small nod. After saying goodbye, Mandy and Eric grabbed their things and headed toward the front door. Nate walked them out while Lily quietly muted the television.

At the doorway, Mandy paused and looked back into the house, concern lingering in her eyes.

"Tell Ava to call me when she gets out of class tomorrow," she said lightly, trying to ease the heaviness in the air.

Lily smiled faintly. "I will. Your sister's probably forgotten we exist now that she's away at college."

"She definitely has," Marc muttered distractedly from the living room.

That at least earned the smallest flicker of a smile from Mandy before she and Eric finally disappeared out into the rainy night. The front door closed softly behind them.

Silence settled over the house. And Nate looked at his son carefully.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

Marc remained standing in the middle of the living room for several long seconds, tension radiating from him. Nate closed the front door and walked back inside while Lily watched their son carefully from the couch.

"Marc," she said gently, "sit down, sweetheart."

He finally dropped heavily into the armchair opposite them, elbows braced on his knees as he dragged both hands through his dark hair. For a moment, nobody spoke. The comedy still played silently on the television, forgotten entirely now.

Nate leaned back slightly beside Lily, studying his son with calm focus. "Talk to us."

Marc stared down at the floor. His jaw worked once before he finally spoke.

"I think Rebecca's cheating on me."

The words landed heavily in the room. Lily felt Nate go completely still beside her.

Marc let out a harsh breath and laughed bitterly under it, though there was no humour in the sound. "God. Saying it out loud somehow makes it sound even worse."

Lily's heart clenched. Rebecca had been part of their lives for years now. Sweet, intelligent, warm. She adored Marc with a kind of quiet steadiness Lily had always trusted instinctively.

"What happened?" Lily asked softly.

Marc rubbed a hand over his face. "I don't know. She's just… different lately."

"Different how?" Nate asked evenly.

"She's distracted all the time. Protective of her phone. Leaving rooms to answer calls." He swallowed hard. "And tonight…"

His voice tightened.

"Tonight what?"

Marc stared toward the dark television screen. "One of the guys at work said he saw her having dinner with another guy in Asheville last week."

Lily frowned immediately. "Rebecca works in Asheville sometimes."

"I know that," Marc snapped, frustration bleeding through before he exhaled sharply. "Sorry. I know."

Nate remained calm. "Did your coworker know who the man was?"

Marc shook his head once. "No. But apparently they looked… close."

Silence stretched. Rain continued tapping softly against the windows. Lily exchanged a glance with Nate and immediately saw it there in his eyes—that old memory. That old wound.

Marc leaned forward, voice rough now. "We've only been engaged two months. What if I'm being an idiot? What if everybody sees something I don't?"

Lily's chest ached for him. Because twenty-eight years ago she had watched another man she loved destroy himself with the exact same fear. Nate rested his forearms against his knees, his gaze steady on his son.

"Marc," he said quietly, "have you actually seen Rebecca do anything unfaithful?"

"No."

"Has she lied to you?"

"I don't know."

"That's not what I asked." Nate's tone remained calm. "Has she lied to you?"

Marc hesitated.

"No."

"Then right now all you have are rumours and assumptions."

Marc looked away, jaw tight. "Dad—"

"No." Nate's voice sharpened slightly for the first time. "Listen to me carefully."

The room fell silent. Lily barely breathed. Because she knew exactly where this was going.

Nate held Marc's gaze steadily. "Rumours can destroy lives if you let them."

Marc blinked.

Nate continued quietly, every word carrying weight. "Gossip. Half-truths. People assuming they know what they saw." He shook his head once. "I let that poison my relationship with your mother once. I nearly lost her because I listened to everyone except the woman I loved."

Marc stared at him. Lily felt emotion rise suddenly and fiercely in her chest. Even after all these years, hearing Nate acknowledge it still affected her.

Marc frowned slightly. "What happened?"

Nate leaned back slowly in the chair, exhaling through his nose. For a moment, his gaze drifted toward the rain-streaked windows, as though he could still see the ghosts of those years standing there waiting for him.

"We'd been engaged for about a week," he said quietly. "Then someone came to me and told me—to my face—that Lily had slept with him."

Marc blinked hard, immediate disbelief flashing across his features. "What?"

He looked straight at Lily.

"Mum would never do something like that."

His expression twisted with confusion. "Surely you didn't believe it."

Nate gave a humourless laugh under his breath.

"Unfortunately," he said quietly, "I was stupid."

Lily's chest tightened painfully. Even now, hearing the regret in his voice could undo her.

Marc stared at his father. "But… why would you even think that about Mum?"

“Because I was hurt,” Nate admitted honestly. “And angry. And because when people are scared of losing someone, they sometimes believe the worst instead of trusting the person standing in front of them.”

He rubbed a hand slowly across his jaw.

“The man who lied to me was convincing. He acted proud of it. Confident.” Nate’s mouth tightened bitterly. “And I let someone else’s words become more important than Lily’s character.”

Marc looked stunned. Lily stayed quiet beside Nate, their fingers still intertwined tightly on the couch. Nate glanced toward her then, softer now. Sadder.

“The insane part,” he said quietly, “is that your mother spent the entire argument trying to convince me she was innocent… while accusing me of cheating on her too.”

Marc frowned. “You cheated?”

“No,” Nate said immediately.

“And neither did she.”

Silence settled heavily through the room. Rain tapped steadily against the windows while the muted television flickered forgotten light across the walls.

Marc stared between them slowly. “So, what happened?”

Nate’s jaw tightened slightly.

“We broke each other’s hearts because we were both too hurt to listen properly.”

Lily swallowed hard beside him.

“She left town the next morning,” Nate continued quietly. “And for years… I thought she betrayed me.”

Marc looked horrified now. “Dad…”

Nate shook his head once. “Do you know what I eventually realised?”

"What?"

"That trust isn't tested when things are easy." His voice lowered. "It's tested when someone hands you a reason to doubt the person you love."

The words landed heavily. Marc looked down at his hands. And Lily watched understanding slowly begin to settle across their son's face. Marc sat quietly for several long seconds, staring at the floor as everything settled around him. Then he exhaled roughly and scrubbed both hands over his face.

"I need to talk to her."

"Yes, you do," Nate said firmly.

Marc looked up at him.

"And when you do," Nate continued calmly, "leave the anger here first. Don't walk in there already convinced she's guilty."

Lily squeezed Nate's hand gently before looking at their son.

"And just listen, sweetheart," she said softly. "Really listen."

Emotion tightened unexpectedly in Marc's expression. Lily's heart ached for him suddenly—not because he looked angry anymore, but because he looked afraid. Afraid of being hurt. Afraid of losing someone he loved. The exact same fear that had once destroyed her and Nate.

Marc let out a shaky breath. "What if she tells me it's true?"

Nate was quiet for a moment before answering honestly.

"Then you deal with the truth together."

Marc frowned slightly.

"Together?"

Nate nodded once. "Even heartbreak deserves honesty."

Silence settled again. Then Lily stood slowly from the couch and crossed the room toward her son. She cupped his face gently between her hands the same way she had since he was little.

“Rebecca loves you,” she said softly. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you for years.”

Marc’s throat worked.

“But if something’s wrong,” Lily continued gently, “don’t let rumours decide your future for you.”

His eyes drifted briefly toward Nate. Understanding flickered there now. A different perspective. Maybe even wisdom.

Marc finally nodded once. “Okay.”

Nate rose from the couch then and walked over, gripping the back of Marc’s neck briefly in the quiet, familiar gesture he’d done since Marc was a teenager.

“Whatever happens,” Nate said quietly, “you don’t walk through it alone.”

Marc swallowed hard and nodded again. And Lily looked at her husband standing beside their son, emotion swelling painfully in her chest. Because twenty-eight years ago Nate had been a young man destroyed by doubt and pride.

Tonight, he had just saved his son from making the same mistake.

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Later that night, the house had gone quiet.

Rain still fell softly outside, the steady sound drifting through the darkness while warm lamplight glowed dimly across their bedroom. Nate slid into bed beside Lily and immediately pulled her into his arms. It was instinct after all these years.

She moved willingly against him, settling half over his chest while his arm wrapped securely around her waist beneath the blankets. He pressed a slow

kiss against her mouth, lingering there for a moment before brushing another against her forehead.

"You've been quiet," he murmured.

Lily rested her chin lightly against his chest, her fingers tracing absent patterns over his T-shirt.

"I was thinking about tonight."

Nate's hand moved slowly up and down her back. "Marc?"

She nodded.

"For a second," she admitted softly, "it felt like we were looking at ourselves twenty-five years ago."

Nate exhaled quietly.

"Yeah."

Lily tilted her head enough to look at him properly in the low light. Even now, all these years later, she could still see traces of the man he had once been beneath the older, steadier version of him. The man who had once broken both their hearts.

"You handled it well tonight," she whispered.

His expression tightened slightly.

"I handled it badly twenty-eight years ago."

Lily's chest ached.

"Nate—"

"No." He shook his head faintly. "I did." His thumb brushed gently against her waist. "I loved you more than anything in the world, and instead of trusting you, I let fear get inside my head."

Lily swallowed hard. Even after all this time, hearing his regret still affected her.

"You were hurt too," she said softly.

“I know.” His voice lowered. “But you deserved better than the way I treated you back then.”

Emotion rose thickly in her throat. She shifted slightly higher against him, brushing her fingers through his hair.

“We were young,” she whispered.

Nate looked at her quietly for a long moment.

Then he gave a faint, almost disbelieving huff of laughter. “You know what’s terrifying?”

“What?”

“Our son looked exactly like me tonight.”

That made Lily smile softly.

“He did.”

“He even had the same angry pacing thing.”

“You still do that.”

“I absolutely do not.”

Lily laughed quietly under her breath. Nate’s expression softened as he watched her. God, after all these years, that sound still undid him. His hand slid gently along her back as his gaze held hers in the darkness.

“I meant what I said tonight,” he murmured.

Lily’s smile faded slightly at the seriousness in his tone.

“What part?”

“If I had listened to you back then…” He shook his head faintly. “We would’ve had three more years together.”

Her heart squeezed painfully.

“Nate.”

“I still hate that I lost any time with you.”

Lily's eyes burned unexpectedly. She leaned down and kissed him softly, slowly, pouring years of love and forgiveness into the touch. When she pulled back, his forehead rested against hers.

"You found me again," she whispered.

His arms tightened around her immediately.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "And I'd crawl through hell before I ever lost you again."

Lily smiled softly, emotion warming her eyes as she leaned down and kissed him.

"I love you."

Nate kissed her back slowly, one hand sliding into her hair.

"I love you too."

She looked at him for a moment, then a mischievous spark appeared in her expression—the same one that still completely destroyed his ability to think clearly after all these years.

"Well," she murmured lightly, "I think you should show me just how much you love me."

Nate's eyes darkened instantly.

"Oh?"

Lily smiled innocently against his mouth. "Mm-hmm."

A low laugh escaped him before he suddenly rolled them over, careful but effortless, until he was hovering above her beneath the soft bedroom light.

"With pleasure, Mrs. Cahill."

Lily laughed softly as he lowered his mouth to hers again, the kiss deeper this time, slower, filled with the kind of intimacy only built through years of love, heartbreak, forgiveness, and devotion.

Outside, rain continued falling gently against the windows.

Inside, wrapped safely in each other's arms, Nate held the woman he had loved for more than half his life—and thanked God silently that somehow, against all odds, they had found their way back to each other.

* * * * * * * *

The call came just after midnight.

Lily jolted awake at the sound of her phone ringing on the bedside table beside her. Nate stirred instantly, years as a doctor making him alert within seconds. Lily grabbed the phone.

"Mandy?"

"Mum," Mandy gasped breathlessly. "I'm in labour."

Lily sat bolt upright. "Oh my God."

In the background, Eric's voice sounded calm but excited while Mandy groaned dramatically.

"She says this is all my fault," Eric informed her.

"It absolutely is your fault," Mandy snapped between breaths.

Nate was already climbing out of bed, dragging on jeans. "How far apart are the contractions?" he asked loudly.

"Five minutes!" Mandy yelled.

Nate immediately switched into doctor mode. "Hospital. Now."

"We're already going!"

The call ended moments later in a rush of panic, excitement, and Mandy threatening violence against both Eric and childbirth in general.

Forty minutes later, Nate and Lily hurried through the hospital entrance together. Lily's heart pounded the entire way. Her baby was having a baby. The

thought still felt surreal. Mandy had already been taken into delivery by the time they arrived, and Eric was inside with her.

So, Nate and Lily settled into the waiting area outside the labour ward. Lily barely sat still for more than thirty seconds at a time.

Nate eventually handed her a cup of coffee. "You're pacing."

"I know I'm pacing."

"You're making the nurses nervous."

"I don't care."

Nate huffed a quiet laugh.

Hours seemed to crawl by painfully slowly. Every time the labour ward doors opened, Lily's head snapped up immediately.

Finally, Eric stepped out. His hair looked slightly dishevelled now, his shirt wrinkled, exhaustion and excitement fighting across his face.

Lily stood instantly. "How is she?"

Eric let out a breathless laugh. "Still threatening to divorce me."

Nate nodded solemnly. "Normal labour behaviour."

"She's okay," Eric assured them quickly. "She's in a lot of pain, but everything's progressing normally."

Relief loosened something tight in Lily's chest.

"How's Mandy handling it?" Nate asked.

Eric grimaced. "At one point she told me if I touched her again she'd break my hand."

Lily winced sympathetically.

"Fair."

Eric smiled tiredly. "She asked me to come update you both before they move her again."

Before Lily could answer, movement near the elevators caught her attention. She looked up. And immediately smiled. Marc walked into the waiting area holding Rebecca's hand tightly. Relief washed through Lily almost instantly. Rebecca looked nervous but happy, her fingers intertwined with Marc's while he guided her toward them. Lily crossed the room without hesitation and hugged Rebecca tightly before kissing her cheek.

"Oh, thank God," she murmured affectionately. "You scared us."

Rebecca laughed softly. "I know."

Nate's gaze shifted toward Marc. Their son looked completely different tonight. Lighter. Calmer. Happy. Nate lifted an eyebrow slightly. Marc rubbed the back of his neck, already recognising the look.

"We talked."

Nate nodded once. "Good."

Marc glanced toward Rebecca, his expression softening immediately.

"She wasn't cheating on me."

Rebecca looked horrified. "I still can't believe you thought that."

"In my defence," Marc muttered, "you were acting suspicious."

Rebecca gave him an incredulous look. "Because I was trying to figure out how to tell him that I am pregnant!"

Silence. Then Lily gasped loudly. Eric blinked. Nate stared.

"You're what?" Lily squealed.

Rebecca laughed now while Marc grinned helplessly.

"I found out last week," Rebecca admitted softly. "I was worried about how Marc would react."

Lily's expression immediately softened.

"Oh, sweetheart."

She crossed the small waiting area and hugged Rebecca tightly again, emotion and relief written all over her face. Nate clapped Marc hard on the shoulder beside him.

"Well," he drawled dryly, "that explains a few things."

Marc laughed quietly under his breath while Rebecca smiled sheepishly.

Lily pulled back just enough to cup Rebecca's face gently. "You're having a baby," she whispered, already emotional. "Oh my God."

Rebecca nodded, laughing nervously now. "Apparently."

Nate shook Marc's hand firmly before immediately pulling him into a rough one-armed hug.

"Congratulations, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

Then Lily hugged Marc too, and for a moment he looked completely overwhelmed by all the emotion directed at him.

"You're going to be an amazing father," Lily told him softly.

Rebecca blinked rapidly beside him, visibly emotional now too.

Nate smiled warmly at her then. "Congratulations, Rebecca."

"Thank you."

Eric grinned from beside them. "Guess the family's growing fast."

"That's because none of you people know how to relax," Nate muttered.

Rebecca laughed while Marc slipped his arm around her waist again automatically, protective and proud all at once.

Rebecca shook her head. "And for the record," she added, "the dinner in Asheville was with my half-brother."

Marc winced.

"He was only in town for one day," Rebecca continued. "I hadn't seen him in nearly a year."

Lily looked toward Marc knowingly.

Marc sighed dramatically. "Yes. I know. Dad was right."

Nate folded his arms. "I usually am."

"Oh, don't encourage him," Lily muttered.

Eric laughed softly while Rebecca leaned into Marc's side, and Marc immediately wrapped an arm around her protectively. Then Eric glanced back toward the labour ward doors and straightened slightly.

"I better go," he said.

Lily smiled warmly at him immediately. "Yes," she said gently. "Go to your wife."

The word seemed to hit Eric for a second.

Wife.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I should."

Before heading back through the doors, he paused beside Marc and clapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Congratulations, man."

Marc grinned helplessly. "You too."

Eric disappeared back into the labour ward moments later, and silence settled briefly over the waiting area again. Rebecca leaned lightly against Marc's side while Lily watched them both quietly, emotion warming her chest.

Then Nate glanced toward the labour ward doors again and muttered dryly, "You know, I delivered babies for thirty years and waiting out here is still making me nervous."

Lily laughed softly under her breath and slipped her hand into his.

* * * * * * * *

The next few hours passed slowly.

Rebecca and Marc eventually sat beside them while Nate paced occasionally despite pretending he wasn't anxious. Lily caught him checking the clock more than once and smiled to herself every time.

"You're worse than me," she whispered at one point.

"I absolutely am not."

"You are."

Nate sighed. "Fine. Maybe slightly."

Around three hours later, the labour ward doors finally opened again. Everyone looked up immediately. Eric stepped out. And the moment Lily saw his face, tears filled her own eyes instantly. He looked completely overwhelmed. Emotional. Happy beyond words.

His eyes were glassy as he walked toward them, laughing softly under his breath like he still couldn't quite believe what had just happened. Lily stood immediately, one hand flying to her chest. Eric looked straight at Nate and Lily.

"You have a grandson," he said thickly.

For one perfect heartbeat, nobody moved. Then Lily burst into tears.

"Oh my God."

Nate closed his eyes briefly, emotion hitting him hard and fast before he pulled Eric into a fierce hug.

"How's Mandy?" he asked roughly.

Eric laughed shakily. "She's exhausted. But she's good. They're both good."

Lily was crying openly now, covering her mouth with her hand as Rebecca hugged her tightly beside her.

Marc looked stunned for a second before grinning widely. "A boy," he said softly, almost to himself.

Eric nodded, still emotional. “Seven pounds. Loudest kid I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“That’s Mandy’s genetics,” Nate muttered thickly, earning watery laughter from everyone.

Then Eric looked back toward the labour ward with complete awe written across his face.

“I held him,” he whispered. “I actually held my son.”

Lily completely lost it again at that. Nate wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his side while emotion burned heavily in his own chest.

Twenty-seven years ago, Lily had walked into a hospital and become a mother through devastating loss. Tonight, surrounded by the family they had built together, they had become grandparents. And standing there holding Lily close while happiness and love filled the waiting room, Nate realised something quietly overwhelming.

After everything life had taken from them… somehow it had still given them this.

— The End —

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