

Chapter Three



Olivia

““Be a photographer,’ they said. ‘It’ll be fun,’ they said.” Sarah laughs, carrying two glasses to my front porch.

“Thanks for the assist, by the way.” She takes a seat beside me on the steps.

“No problem.” I take a long sip of the delicious lemonade that surely exceeds my daily sugar allowance. I’ll burn off the calories with an extra mile on my morning run tomorrow.

“Hi, Liam,” Sarah calls across the cul-de-sac.

He scowls our way, then skates past on his board.

Sarah muffles a laugh, but my face flushes. I’m embarrassed that he’s so unfriendly to everyone.

Mia grabs a handful of sidewalk chalk from the garage and drops to her knees. “Since those boys destroyed your signs, we could use some of my drawings in your photos, Sarah,” she suggests as she sketches flowers on the concrete slab. “Maybe have them pose sitting next to them?”

“You know, that’s not a bad idea.” Sarah winks.

Adoration shines on Mia’s face.

I watch them, the familiar mix of gratitude and something quieter that I don’t like to name filling me.

While Mia is my ray of sunshine, Liam is ... more difficult.

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I learned from my child and adolescent development classes to expect some attitude from my preteen. But his surly nature runs deeper than that. He's mad at his father, mad at me, and mad at the world.

He saw too much too young. That day at Mark's office didn't only end my marriage. It changed my son.

Everything in him feels ... broken open. And I haven't figured out how to help him put it back together.

"Don't worry," Sarah says, patting my shoulder and pulling me out of my spiral.

I search her face. "About what?"

"Liam will come around."

I nod, though I'm not sure I believe it yet.

"Dave suggested the other night that maybe Liam would like to learn how to play golf."

"I don't know." I shrug. "All he wants to do is skateboard and play video games."

Sarah lifts an eyebrow. "Dave can be persuasive."

I glance toward Liam, hoping for a glimpse of my lighthearted boy, even if only for a second. But he averts his eyes and stares straight ahead as he skates by. The small rejection lands harder than it should.

Our conversation lags, and we sit in silence, enjoying the gentle breeze as the sun sets.

Sarah tilts her glass, and the ice clinks against the sides. After taking the last sip of her lemonade, she rises. The humidity has kinked the auburn tendrils around her face.

I love her hair, but she doesn't. No matter what I've tried, neither rollers nor curling irons can give my straight blonde hair waves or curls. Funny how we always want the opposite of what we have.

"I'll watch the kids tomorrow?" she asks, brushing off the seat of her pants.

"Yes, just for a few hours." I blush, thinking of how I'm once again dependent on Sarah and Dave for childcare. "If that's okay?"

"Of course. We love spending time with them," Sarah reassures. "Last class, right?" She lifts her lips into an encouraging smile.

"Yes." I sigh in relief at no longer having to pay for classes and for

receiving a raise. More importantly, this means I can provide a better future for my kids without my parents' financial support.

"We're proud of you, Olivia."

Her words land deeper than she probably realizes.

"We're planning to make homemade pizzas and go to the pool tomorrow—with your permission, of course."

"The kids will love it. Thank you." My voice catches. What did I ever do to deserve such wonderful neighbors? More than neighbors—friends.

I stand to hug her.

Palming her forehead, she takes a step back. "Oh, I almost forgot. The girls invited you to book club on Thursday night."

I glance at my kids. I would love to go, but I know I'm going to have to decline.

Before I can answer, Sarah adds, "I've already cleared it with Dave. He said Liam and Mia can hang out with him."

I crinkle my nose. "I don't know ..." The words come out slowly. Dave and Sarah already do so much for us. I don't want to impose any more than I have to.

"I won't take no for an answer," Sarah says. "Dave will watch them at your house. He even bought a controller and hopes to persuade Liam to play some video games with him."

"Let me ask the kids." I glance at Liam skating on the other side of the cul-de-sac.

Mia jumps up and down beside me. "Please, Mom? We like hanging out with Mr. Dave." Her eyes sparkle. Small light-brown freckles pepper the bridge of her nose and her cheeks.

I look over at Liam again.

He stops skating and studies me.

"What do you think?"

He pushes his long toffee-brown bangs from his eyes and shrugs. "Whatever."

But I see a spark of interest in his eyes.

I blow out a breath. "I guess I'm going to book club with you." I smile, excited to be included. "What book are we reading?"

Without a response, Sarah bolts down the sidewalk and disappears into her home. Within minutes, she returns with a

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paperback. "I bought two, hoping you'd say yes." She chuckles, then hands me the book.

I check the title, then flip it over, scanning the back. "Hmm. I've not heard of this one, but I haven't had a lot of time to read anything other than textbooks. This will be a nice change."

Sarah raises an eyebrow, a mischievous gleam in her emerald-green eyes. "Oh, it promises to be good."