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Second Chance Summer



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Chapter One

So, this was what it was like to be dead.

Lily had to admit, she thought there'd be lights and a tunnel in the afterlife, not this syrupy darkness. Even the Almighty must be struggling with their energy bills.

'Lily! Boss! Are you OK?' The voice penetrating the darkness was not that of a supreme being unless they had a strong Brummie accent. Richie's voice cut through the bizarre mixture of thoughts that had been swirling through Lily's semi-conscious mind. Why was her PA using his panicked tone as if she very much *wasn't* going to be OK?

She opened her eyes to find herself lying on the carpet in her office with her PA staring down at her. 'W–what happened?' she said, feeling very groggy.

'I don't know. You kind of just . . . crumpled.'

Crumpled? How was that possible? Lily didn't crumple. She wasn't a crumpler. Never had been. She was strong, resilient. She was the embodiment of the metal metaphor: Woman of Steel. That's what a journo had dubbed her a few years ago and it had stuck.

Richie's eyes seemed huge – wide with alarm behind his trademark red-framed glasses. 'Are you OK, hun?'

'Yes. I'm fine. I'm getting up.'

'Don't you dare move! I'm calling an ambulance.' Richie rested a hand on her shoulder. 'You might have hit your head. You probably did – you collapsed. Right in front of me.'

'I don't need an ambulance.'

Lily slowly sat up, wincing at the ache in one temple.

Richie was on his knees next to her, tutting. 'Go easy, hun.'

'Why do you keep calling me "hun"?' she murmured. 'You never call me that.'

'Because you said you'd sack me after the first time I tried it.'

'I was obviously joking.'

'Were you?' He raised an eyebrow. 'It's better than "bab", which my nanna calls everyone.'

'If you dare to call me "bab", I really will sack you,' Lily said, smiling as she spoke, even though it made her forehead throb.

He exhaled with relief. 'Sounds like you're feeling better.'

'I am.' Lily attempted another smile but it turned into a grimace. She'd either hit her head or she had the mother of all headaches. 'Thanks for helping me. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

'I know what I'd do without *you*: have a much easier time and be able to see my boyfriend occasionally.'

'I am very, very grateful,' Lily said, before fixing him with pleading eyes. 'Have you told anyone about – about *this*?' she asked.

'Not yet,' Richie said warily. 'I'd have called the company first-aider but she's gone home.'

'Good! I don't want anyone to know that I'm not . . . feeling one hundred percent.'

'Lily, you're not even ten percent. At least let me call Étienne.'

'No!' Lily said, horrified at the thought of her brother-in-law, an A&E consultant in a nearby hospital, being dragged into her office. 'I'm sure he's too busy saving genuinely sick people.'

She also didn't want anyone knowing she'd collapsed, particularly not with the deal that was sitting in her inbox – a deal that could, potentially, affect the future of everyone at this company, including Richie.

'And you're sure you're not sick?' he said. 'You can fire me if you like, but if you don't get checked out by a doctor, I might resign anyway.'

Richie stood and glared at her, hands on hips. It reminded Lily of the time her mum had come home to find she'd 'repurposed' the dining-room table by painting it purple and green. Well, how was ten-year-old Lily to know it had been a family heirloom?

Twenty-three years later, her parents would be equally horrified – and be on their way to London in a flash – if they knew she'd been taken ill. Since the loss of her sister, Cara, Lily daren't even admit to a sniffle or her mum had palpitations. Cara had died in a car accident two years before and losing her had turned the Harper family's lives upside down. They now knew all too well how fragile life was.

'Do *not* call *anyone* about this. I'll speak to Étienne myself . . . when I've got up off the floor. By the way, can you

have a word with the cleaning team, please? There's a mouldy muffin under the desk and the skirting board is thick with dust.'

Richie rolled his eyes. 'Glad to see you're feeling more like yourself.'

He held out his hand to her, which Lily accepted. She still felt weak and woozy. Her blood sugar must be low. The last thing she'd eaten was a chocolate bar that she'd grabbed as she'd dashed out of her Shoreditch penthouse at six that morning. Since then, she'd been glued to her computer.

As she lowered herself gingerly into her chair, Lily spotted the empty mug on her desk: one thing she *had* had a lot of was espresso . . .

'I just need something to eat. Would you mind having a takeout sent in, please?'

'I've got some dried fruit and nuts in my drawer. I'll fetch them and a glass of water. As for a takeout, you're surely not thinking of carrying on working here after your funny turn?'

'I did *not* have a funny turn. I'm not ninety.'

'It looked like a funny turn – my nanna has them sometimes.'

I'm not your nanna, Lily was about to reply before guilt wormed its way in. Richie was only trying to help. He was a fusspot, a bit of a young fogey, but had a quality that Lily prized more than gold: fierce loyalty. She probably – certainly – didn't deserve it. Any CEO would kill to have him and she knew he'd had several approaches but had stayed with her. She needed to make sure it stayed that way.

Richie folded his arms defensively. 'I'm just looking

out for you and the company. I'm your PA – I'm paid to assist you personally, and if you won't look after yourself, I will!'

'Wow, who knew you could be so fierce?' Lily smiled. 'OK, I'll have the water and nuts, thank you, and then I'll *think* about going home.'

Richie went to fetch her supplies while she rested her head on the back of the chair, secretly grateful for the support. She blinked: the bookshelf opposite her desk still looked a little fuzzy but she wasn't going to let on to her PA. She'd hardly glanced up from her screen all day, she'd been so focused on weighing up the pros and cons of the business opportunity that had been presented to her.

A supermarket chain was interested in teaming up with the Lily Loves brand; it was the biggest thing yet to have happened to her precious business, which had grown in ways she could never have imagined when she'd first started selling her own handmade jewellery and accessories from a market stall as a teenager.

Soon, her arty friends were asking her to sell their products too because they didn't have the time, the confidence or the skills. Lily, however, loved talking to customers and helping her friends, and gained a small commission every time she sold an item.

Gradually, she'd realised that curating and selling other people's pieces was where her real strength lay so she'd moved her business online and sales had exploded. Now she had a London office, a team of staff and scores of talented craftspeople under her Lily Loves banner.

The business had grown steadily, but she was faced with a dilemma.

The supermarket chain that was interested in featuring her branded gifts in their stores wanted thousands of items, from mugs and placemats to tea towels and trinket boxes. There was no way the individual craftspeople she worked with could meet the demand, which meant the supermarket would have to stock mass-produced items.

On the other hand, they were offering a lot of money to use the Lily Loves brand on the products, with the promise of much more if the venture took off. Who knew? If it was a success, Lily Loves might be stocked in other retailers, increasing profits and enabling her to invest in and help the artisans who'd originally inspired her to set up the company.

It would mean Lily Loves could expand and secure its future. However, it also meant she'd have to make compromises on what the brand stood for: high quality gifts, individually made with love.

Lily was torn in two over whether to accept the offer – and she didn't have long to decide, as they wanted an answer soon. Whilst she deliberated, she was certain of one thing: the supermarket could not find out the CEO of Lily Loves was prone to fainting at inopportune moments. And after her recent TV fiasco, she couldn't afford any more negative PR.

'Here's your snack!'

Though she could feel the stress pulsing through her veins, Lily forced a smile as Richie put the glass of water and

a bowl of trail mix in front of her. He insisted on watching over her like a mother hen.

'The colour's coming back into your cheeks,' he said with satisfaction a couple of minutes later, making Lily smile. She really *did* feel better. The earlier episode had only been a blip after all.

When he left the room to call his boyfriend and say he'd be late – again – Lily took her chance. She turned back to her desktop, determined to get a bit more work done before she finally went home.

'Oh, God . . . not again . . .'

What she hadn't admitted to Richie was that her memory of the minute or so before she'd fainted had been completely wiped out. She'd only recalled that something unpleasant had happened that had caused her to leap from her chair and shout out.

Now she knew exactly what it was. The social media site she'd been looking at was still open on her Windows tab and her name was fifth on the list of trending stories.

#LilyHarper

A news story about something completely unrelated had reignited an X thread about her. She'd thought it was old news and the harpies had moved on to trash someone else's reputation, but no, there she was again. Trending. Public Enemy number one. 'Ruthless bitch' and 'spiteful cow' were among the least awful phrases used to describe her. Some of the abuse was unprintable, including threats and language that made her feel physically sick again.

And all because of a momentary lapse of judgement six months previously.

The vicious comments seemed to leap out at her, bringing nausea to her throat and sweat trickling down her back. She mustn't look. If she fainted again, Richie would piggyback her to A&E himself. How could people be so vile, so vicious . . .

Sinking back in her chair, Lily moaned softly. Her head throbbed but she couldn't tear her eyes away.

The screen went blank.

'Oh, no!'

She thumped at the esc key. 'Richie! What's happened to the computer?'

'Bonjour.'

A very tall, stern-looking man stood behind the monitor, holding up a cable with a plug visible at one end of it.

'Étienne! I could have been halfway through a billion-pound deal.'

'Were you?'

'No, actually, I was—' Knowing her visitor wouldn't approve of her doom scrolling, Lily stopped herself. She massaged her temples. 'What are you doing here?' She arched an eyebrow, hopefully in an ironic way, then winced. 'As if I don't know. Did Richie call you? Oh, God, you weren't *at* work, were you?'

'No, I was on my way home.'

'I wish you hadn't come. I'm sorry you were called out . . .'

She glanced over to the door expecting to find her PA peering through the crack, but he'd made himself scarce.

Her brother-in-law, however, had dropped the cable on the floor and perched on her desk, staring at her.

Étienne could look spectacularly stern: anyone who didn't know him to be the kindest of men might be a little intimidated by his serious expression and the tribal tattoos adorning most of his visible skin.

'Someone needs to save you from yourself,' he said, his face softening into concern. 'What would Cara have said if she'd seen you like this?'

'I've no idea.'

'She'd have told you to stop working yourself into an early grave.'

'Pshh,' Lily snorted, then regretted it. 'I'm only thirty-four. I don't smoke, I have a couple of glasses of wine a week, and I exercise. Usually.'

Truth was, she hadn't troubled the gym for weeks and her exercise consisted of dashing between Tube stations. Lately she'd had to forgo even that activity as she'd spent several nights sleeping on her office couch.

'Cara would want you to be happy. To live well.' Étienne's eyebrows knitted together in the way her sister had always said made her want to drag him off to bed. Being honest, Lily only thought it made him look cross, not brooding, but then she wasn't the one who'd fallen for him hook, line and sinker while working in a nursing placement on a remote French Polynesian island.

'It's not fair to put words into Cara's mouth when she can't speak for herself. And you might be a doctor but you're not *my* doctor.'

He didn't smile. This was serious, thought Lily. 'Me being your doctor would certainly be unethical but that doesn't mean I can't give you my advice. I heard what happened – you passed out, didn't you?'

'I wouldn't say that . . .'

'Did you lose consciousness?'

'Not completely. Things went a bit woozy, I'll admit, like a veil had been drawn across my eyes.'

'So, you *did* lose consciousness?'

'No. I *crumpled* according to Richie, but he does have a sense of the dramatic.'

'I'd trust his account of what happened a lot more than I'd trust yours,' Étienne said tartly. 'Sounds like vasovagal syncope.'

'Vaso-syn-what?' Lily asked. 'Is it serious?'

'Vaso-vagal-syn-co-pe,' Étienne enunciated slowly. 'It means fainting.' He rolled his eyes. 'Look, if you've been hunched over the computer for hours without proper food, you probably fainted when you jumped up suddenly. Stress doesn't help. Added to which, you look pale and worn out.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Thanks, I love you too, Étienne.'

'You're welcome. You've told me often enough you're always busy, always "on" and always at the office. Richie says you've been sleeping here and you haven't been eating properly.'

Lily gasped. 'Richie said that? You do know he works for me? That he's signed an NDA?' She was joking but was still shocked that her PA had called Étienne. To be fair, he was

her emergency contact, but she felt bad that he'd had to rush over to see her.

'He cares about you. We all do.'

'I'm fine,' Lily said, though Étienne's words were hitting home. She had been working round the clock, and she'd missed quite a few important family events in the past few weeks alone – something she wasn't proud of, but her business was all-consuming. People were counting on her. And yet, as hard as she worked, it was impossible not to let *other* people down.

'Lily?'

Étienne frowned down at her, his warm brown eyes full of concern. 'If you carry on like this, you'll get completely burned out and there may not be a way back.'

'Work has been busy. Challenging. I'll admit, I'm a bit knackered.'

He sighed deeply. 'For once in your life, listen. You can describe what happened – and is happening to you – any way you like. Lack of sleep, not looking after yourself, not eating properly, pressure of work, stress – unresolved grief . . .'

She snorted. 'Unresolved? It's been over two years.'

'That's not a long time and Cara's accident would have floored anyone. Losing a sister is a huge shock and you practically carried on as normal.'

Normal. Tears stung the back of her eyes. What was a normal way to react when your beloved sister was killed in a car accident at the age of thirty-seven?

'Don't give me any clichés about me blotting out the pain with work and not dealing with it adequately,' she said,

painful memories giving her tone a sharp edge she hadn't intended.

'Dealing with it *adequately*?' The way he flinched made her instantly regret her words. ' "Adequately" is not a word I'd use to describe the way I felt about losing Cara.'

'Étienne, I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to be insensitive. Maybe I am a bit tired . . .'

'It's up to you,' he said briskly, choosing not to answer her or let her off the hook. 'You're smart – or at least I thought you were. Work it out for yourself – you clearly don't need me or any medical professional. I have other patients who welcome my help. I came here on my way home from a particularly shitty shift in A&E.'

Lily noticed the slate-blue smudges under his eyes, the lines around his mouth, the exhaustion. 'Oh, God, I am so sorry. Look, let me give you a cliché that we can both agree on. We all deal with that stuff in our own way and – maybe you're right. I do need a break.'

He picked up his bag. 'You do what you want. I'm going to take the girls home, stuff my face with pizza and watch *Frozen*. Again.'

'The girls – the girls are *here*?'

'Yes. They're in the chill-out room downstairs watching your corporate video and eating their own weight in those mini biscuit packets you provide for the staff.'

'What? Why? I—' She let out a groan of horror. 'Oh My God. I was supposed to pick them up from *The Lion King*, wasn't I? And take them to meet the cast afterwards and for dinner?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Étienne. I am so sorry. I must apologise to the girls. Oh, God. How did I forget?'

'Because you had more important things on your mind?'

'No. Yes. I am sorry.'

'It's an overused word.'

'I mean it. I'll make it up to them.'

'No need. Their nanny took them. They still met the cast and she brought them here in a cab after I'd heard you were taken ill. They can do without dinner, but they did miss *you*.'

'Please can I see them?'

'Richie's gone to fetch them.'

Before Lily could offer up another word, two six-year-olds hurtled into the office like an explosion in a Haribo factory. Amelie and Tania were dressed in frocks of pineapple yellow and peppermint green, their hair flying behind them. They were impossibly pretty, a combination of their father's French Polynesian heritage and Cara's English rose looks.

Amelie launched herself at Lily. 'Auntie Lily! We missed you but Daddy said you weren't feeling very well.'

Lily's head throbbed afresh but she pulled her nieces to her. 'All the better for seeing you. I'm so sorry I forgot to meet you.'

Tania looked at her solemnly. Lily swallowed a lump in her throat. She looked so much like Cara. 'You aren't going to die like Mummy, are you?'

Lily choked back tears. Her heart was so full, it felt as if it might burst. 'No, poppet, I'm not. I'm not going anywhere, I promise you.'

She gathered the girls against her, for her own sake as much as theirs, because the world was shifting beneath her. In this moment, the only thing holding it together was them; their warmth, their life force, and through them, the memory of her late sister. Étienne was right. Cara would have wanted her to stay well; to stay alive – for the twins.

Over their shoulders, she saw Étienne and Richie looking at her. Her brother-in-law was tight-lipped. Richie was dabbing his eyes with a tissue.

'I suppose a nice holiday would do me good,' she said.

Richie jumped in. 'Shall I book something?'

'Yes,' Lily said. 'I think you ought to. Somewhere quiet and peaceful and restful, away from all of this for a couple of weeks.'

Richie was already on his way out of the office. 'I'm on it now!'

'Make sure it's got decent WiFi though!' Lily called after him.

The girls released her. Tania sat in Lily's Herman Miller chair and started twirling round.

'Can I play with your toy?' Amelie said.

'Of course,' Lily said, smiling as her niece took the retro stress-relieving pendulum off the desk and started crashing the metal spheres into each other.

Étienne gave her a peck on the cheek. 'Well done,' he said. 'The first step is always the hardest.'

'Well, I'm not as stubborn as I look,' Lily said to a raised eyebrow from her brother-in-law. 'Shall we get out of here? I could join you for pizza at your place?'

'That sounds like a very good idea. You can watch *Frozen* again while I fall asleep.'

'I can't wait,' Lily said, adding earnestly, 'really. It will be wonderful to spend the whole evening with you all. It's been too long . . .'

Étienne touched her arm. 'I know. Come on, let's all go home.'

With a farewell to Richie, Lily shrugged on her suit jacket and, for the first time in months, left the office before it was dark. Today had been a wake-up call – one that she needed to heed for the sake of the company's future.

A week or two of pampering at a nice spa resort would soon set her to rights and then, refreshed and revived, she could get straight back to the office. Even better, she might be able to carry on catching up with emails and keeping her potential new client in the loop in between massages and cocktails.

It was such a brilliant idea, she was amazed she hadn't thought of it before.