

Extended Epilogue

Eddie

I'm in the bedroom, catching my breath after a painting session. The whole idea of finishing the painting while Lawliss is out today is to surprise her with the finished product when she gets back. I miss her already. Can you blame me? She had been gone for more than half the day. I always feel like a piece of me is missing when she steps out of my sight for a second. My eyes always wander around to see her. If someone had told me five years ago that I'd be living this fulfilled life, with Lawliss as my wife and kids at the same time, free of grudges and restless thoughts, I would have laughed in their faces.

Standing up, I stretch and then head towards the living room, because with kids, silence usually means trouble. And sure enough, I arrive just in time to catch them mid-battle.

Lily, my two-year-old daughter, is trying to snatch a sharpener from Alex, my son, who refuses to let it go. They're locked in a full-on tug-of-war, tiny fists gripping tightly.

Why they're fighting over a sharpener of all things is beyond me. We have plenty, triple, if not quadruple, of everything they will need but apparently, this one is special.

I lean against the doorway, watching. "What do we have here?" I ask after a few seconds of silence.

Alex turns his head toward me, his face lighting up like he's been saved. "Daddddy! Lily wants to take my sharpener!"

Lily pouts, crossing her arms. A replica of my eyes blue, staring back at me. "No! It's for me!"

It's moments like this that make me wish Lawliss was here. These situations? They feel like a trial brought before a judge, and choosing one side is like betraying the other. Lawliss has

adopted a way to deal with their antics which is beyond me. She keeps saying I'm spoiling them. Her parent and even Josh agree because I give them everything they ask for. I even left Lily to destroy the Alovera plant the other day because I didn't have it in me to tell her to stop.

I step forward and crouch down, gently ruffling Alex's hair before turning to Lily. "Is the sharpener really yours, sweetie?"

Her lip trembles. Her mouth wobbles and I know what's coming, and it happens.

The floodgates open. Tears roll down her cheeks, her little chest rising and falling in deep, hiccupping sobs. And just like that, my heart shatters.

Before I can even reach for her, Alex sighs. His little shoulders drop as he steps forward and, without a word, he hugs his sister and presses the sharpener into her hands.

I blink.

Well. That was unexpected.

Before I even get the chance to process what just happened—BANG!

The front door swings open with force, and I look up just in time to see Janette striding in like she owns the place.

"Can you imagine what Daddy just said—" she starts, mid-rant, not even checking if anyone's listening before launching into whatever drama she's carrying today.

It's a routine at this point. Being neighbors with the Duas means they can just ding in whenever they feel like it. And honestly? I don't mind. If they ever did hesitate before barging in, that would be the real concern.

I cross my arms, smirking. "What did your father do this time?" Lately, all her complaints are about how her father treats her like she is a baby when she is old. Mind you this girl is now about to start Junior high but to her, she has already graduated in advance.

“So he got home today...” she continues, then sits on the sofa, while she picks Lily up to sit on her lap. Lily just relaxes into her like she usually does.

“Mhmm..” I say taking the seat opposite her and opening my arms for Alex to walk to me. He does and sits beside me. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and he leans in.

“Then he decided we would be going to the children’s park for my birthday!” Janette throws her hands up, clearly exasperated. “And when I told Mum I wanted a new lip gloss, he went into full-blown professor mode about how he ‘can’t see me growing up so soon.’”

She shakes her head, adjusting Lily on her lap as if the weight of this tragedy is too much to bear.

“I asked for lip gloss, Uncle Ed. Lip gloss! Not red lipstick. Not a nose ring. Just plain lip gloss! Like, what does he think I’m going to do? Open a nightclub?!”

I chuckle, and she groans. “I mean, he does own nightclubs, so why can’t I open one if I wanted to?”

She exhales dramatically, waving a hand. “Anyway, I came here for fresh air before he starts planning a tea party for my sweet sixteen.”

I swear, I think I’d be worse if I were in her father’s shoes because I definitely can’t picture Lily at that stage yet.

I shake my head, about to say something—but I stop myself, knowing exactly what her response will be. She’ll just say, “Don’t defend him, Uncle Ed.”

Instead, I glance at the clock. It’s almost six. Lawliss will be back soon.

I’ve got a mini gift for her since today is our wedding anniversary. We have two: The first was the day we met again and I decided we were getting married (the one that nearly cost me to lose her). And the second being what she terms our official wedding.

Today is the first one. The personal one. And I want to do something small for her. I turn to Janette. “Why don’t you help me bake a cake for your aunt? That might help you... you know, calm down.”

She narrows her eyes at me, clearly seeing through my plan. Then, she puts Lily down and chuckles.

“I know what you’re doing,” she says—but she still walks toward the kitchen anyway. I laugh softly and follow her with Lily and Alex trailing behind me.

Lawliss

My heartbeat rises the moment I step into the house and find candles lit on both sides with a trail of flowers leading to the kitchen. Blinking back the tears that threaten to spill—which has been happening more often—I walk ahead following the direction the candle takes me. My chest tightening in the best way.

My husband, Eddie.

Eddie has been the best husband I could ever wish for. I remember being so afraid our marriage would fail, it took me almost two years before agreeing to a wedding and here we are. We’ve been together for five years and still counting.

Dropping my bags on the couch, I walk to the kitchen pretending not to be excited about whatever Eddie has in store for me.

“Honey” I call out.

“Honey! Where are you?” I try again. I know he likes it when I call him that, so I do.

Before I enter the kitchen, Lily comes running toward me, both hands carefully holding a small cake.

I stop in my tracks, taking in the tiny, flickering candles and the words "Happy Anniversary" written across the frosting in slightly messy lettering.

I crouch down, smiling as she proudly lifts it up to me.

"I can't believe you did this," I say raising my head to face Eddie who's just staring at me with a smirk on his face.

"Blow it! Blow it!" Lily says and claps when her face—which is the same as her dad's—lights up and I laugh while doing exactly what she told me to do.

"Happy Anniversary Mummy," Alex says as he delivers a frame wrapped bigger than his hands.

"Thanks, sweetie," I take it from him and place a kiss on his head.

"Happy Anniversary, Aunt Liss," Janette says and comes to hug me.

"I guess this is my cue to leave before you two start being lovey-dovey like mom and dad." She shakes her head as if the thought alone puts her off, and I start laughing.

I haven't stopped smiling or laughing since I came home and this has been my life since I married Eddie.

Of course, I pick little fights with him and he lets me win. Let's be the main word.

Janette leaves taking Alex and Lily with her. The moment they're gone, I walk straight toward Eddie and wrap my arms around his neck. As soon as I reach him, he pulls me in, his arms wrapping securely around my waist.

"I love you so much...I—" My voice catches, and I choke up.

Eddie tightens his hold on me, his embrace warm, steady, unshakable.

"Shhh," he whispers, cupping my face, wiping the tears I hadn't even realized had fallen.

His eyes soften. "I love you more. You know that, right?"

I nod then he leans in.

Our lips clash—hungry, desperate, familiar. His tongue teases mine, taking control, deepening the kiss as he lifts me effortlessly and sets me on the kitchen counter. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer. I wrap my legs around his waist.

I feel everything. The love, the years, the way he still makes me feel like the only woman in the world. We finally break apart, breathless.

I laugh softly, my chest rising and falling as I reach for the frame.

“So, what’s this?” I ask, tilting my head at him.

Eddie just raises a brow—his way of saying, Check it. I smile... then turn it over.

I gasp.

It’s a painting of our first time together in Poland when he proposed to me on his yacht. I remember telling him I wish we had a photographer or a picture of it one evening when we were lying in bed. He remembered.

My chest tightens as I stare at the painting.

“Thank you so much,” I whisper, my fingers gliding over the canvas, tracing the memory he captured.

“I love it.”

Eddie smiles. “I’m glad you like it.”

I turn to him, my heart too full, too overwhelmed. “Ask me for whatever you want for your anniversary gift. You’ll get it.”

His eyes lock onto mine, filled with something deep, something certain.

He doesn’t hesitate.

“It’s you I want, Lawliss. It’s always been you.”

And that’s another moment I confirm for the millionth time that he’s my forever.