

## Chapter One of *Bella Lucia*

“Bella Lucia.” She whispered the words, and a tear slid down her cheek as she thought about her hopes of becoming a mother and fears of never realizing that dream. Her heart ached with the pain of barrenness.

She heard her husband call for her from inside the bedroom. “Honey, where are you?”

“I’m out on the balcony. I couldn’t sleep.”

He came outside. She felt his breath on her neck. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you have to ask?” Immediately, she regretted her tone. She sniffled, trying to hold back tears as she faced him. “It’s hard, you know, hearing Kari’s news.”

Lucas’s features softened and he reached out to embrace her. “It’s gonna happen, Gwen. You’re going to have a baby. Bella Lucia, remember.”

She pulled back and tried hard to smile. “I know, our beautiful light. Six years is a long time to wait.”

Lucas kissed her lightly on the lips. Tingling warmth flooded her body at his touch. *Yes, six years is a long time, but our love keeps growing stronger.* She pulled aside, needing answers. “Am I a bad person for feeling jealous about Kari being pregnant?”

He brushed back her hair. “Of course not. It’s normal to feel this way, Gwen. We’re all human. As long as you don’t let it affect your behavior, you’ll be fine.”

She chuckled through her tears. “Hmm, maybe that’s why God brought us together—I have my own live-in psychologist.”

“If we have too many sessions like this, I may have to start charging you.” Gwen dodged his attempts to tickle her, and she raced back into the bedroom. Lucas grabbed her playfully, running his hand along her shoulders. “Let’s make a baby now.”

She backed away, smiling. “It’s not the right time of the month.”

He kissed her. “Well, we can practice anyway.” She succumbed to his kisses, and for the moment, thoughts of Bella Lucia fled to the back of her mind.

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As Gwen sat in the outside café waiting for her best friend, Kari, she almost began to regret meeting her there that day. She lacked her usual patience to hear her friend's constant chatter, especially more so because the conversation would be centered on baby talk. God dropped a gentle reminder into her heart to accept His peace, but tears still threatened to pour from her eyes. She hated feeling this way. *I should be so happy for Kari right now, but when will it be my turn?* The most frustrating aspect of this situation, in Gwen's mind: Kari had gotten pregnant after only one year of marriage.

*How can so many babies be born into this world by mothers who don't want them, and so many are aborted, yet women like me who desperately want a baby can't conceive?* She sighed, sipping chamomile tea. As she stared out across the street, she saw the familiar form of her friend walking toward the table. *Here goes nothing, Lord. Please help me to be gracious and happy for her.* Gwen forced a smile and waved, then stood up as Kari reached the table.

They hugged. "You look great. How are you feeling?"

Kari lovingly touched her belly. "Fine, but dealing with some morning sickness."

Gwen offered encouragement as they sat down. "Hopefully the nausea won't last too long."

"I read how for most women, it usually stops after the first trimester."

"Well, you're just starting your second trimester, so I'm sure you'll feel better soon."

The waitress came by to take their orders. When she left, Gwen and Kari chatted about the coming baby. Gwen held up fine throughout the conversation until Kari asked the question. "How are you doing?"

Gwen glanced out at the street again. "Me? I'm fine. Book sales are picking up."

Kari reached across the table and touched her hand. "How long have we known each other?"

Tilting her head, she leaned back against the metal chair. "Umm, let's see, since kindergarten."

"Right...so we know each other extremely well. Now why are you lying to me?"

“Lying?”

Kari leaned her elbows on the table. “Yeah, I know what’s wrong, but you need to say it.”

“Since when did you take up psychology? Did Lucas call you?”

“No, he didn’t, but I’m sure you had a rough night, and I’m sorry.”

Gwen struggled to hold back tears. She did not want to cry in front of her friend. “I’m fine. It’s just hard for me, right now. I’m so happy for you and Mike, but sometimes it feels like it’s never going to happen for Lucas and me.”

“It will happen. Just keep believing.”

Gwen wiped a tear away. “I want to be joyful for you guys, but just know I will probably have more tears along the way.”

“You’re my best friend, Gwen. I understand, and we’ll make it through this together.” The waitress returned with their wraps and drink refills, asked if they needed anything else, then left. “You know, you need to find some sort of distraction,” Kari added. “I’ll help you find something.”

“It’s gonna have to be a big distraction to get my mind off getting pregnant.”

“Maybe you should get involved with a kids’ ministry.”

“A kids’ ministry? Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. Why?”

“Because I thought I was trying to get my mind off of having children, and now you want me to surround myself with kids?”

“It could help.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, at least talk to Lucas about it tonight. There has to be something to distract you.”

Gwen chuckled. “Yeah, he’ll say he can distract me.”

“A good distraction, but we need something more intellectually stimulating to get your mind off it.”

“I’ll pray about it.”

“You’d better, because I’m calling you in a few days to check up on you.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

They chatted more and finished their lunches. Kari glanced at her watch. “I can’t believe time flew so fast. I have to be at my doctor’s appointment in thirty minutes.”

The familiar pang tried to erode her peace, but she pushed past it. “Yeah, I’ve got to get back to my laptop... You know, deadlines and all.” They said good-bye, and Gwen walked Kari back to her car, then headed toward her own. She kept thinking about finding something to distract her. She decided to discuss the topic with Lucas later on tonight.

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Gwen added diced cubanelle peppers to the simmering tomatoes. Cooking came naturally for her, and it helped take her mind off life’s stresses. She loved the yield from their vegetable garden. They grew eggplant, a variety of peppers, green and golden zucchini, broccoli, and Juliet tomatoes. The thought of installing a hydroponic garden in their basement so they could grow vegetables all year long became more appealing, especially with the current downturn in the economy. She always kept an eye out for ways to save money.

She lifted the bamboo cutting board over the sauce and scraped the diced onions, garlic, and celery—and chopped basil and parsley—into the sauce. Stirring it, she shook in just the right amount of seasoning and a little bit of olive oil. One last ingredient for the perfect homemade marinara sauce: a few tablespoons of tomato paste. Now, to let it cook.

The front door opened, and she welcomed her husband with a smile as he walked inside. He nuzzled her neck with his smooth cheek—she loved his clean-shaven face. “Mmm, smells delicious, my dear. Do you need a hand with dinner? I just have to call Rick before I can help.”

“I’m fine. The only things left are the pasta and salad.”

“Can’t wait to taste the sauce!” He kissed her on the cheek.

“I’ll be right back to clean the lettuce.”

Gwen watched her husband walk down the hall to the home office they shared. She marveled at how God had brought this loving man into her life. She wanted to bring up her conversation with Kari to Lucas tonight, and she wondered how he would feel about the subject. After stirring the sauce again, she put on a pot of water to boil and added a pinch of salt and some olive oil. Then she began setting out two place settings on the large mahogany table with its eight noticeably empty chairs. Picturing a few small children sitting with them, she sighed and then went back to the kitchen to make Lucas’s favorite drink, pomegranate soda.

A moment later, he came into the kitchen and got to work on the salad. “So how was your day?”

“It was good. I had lunch with Kari. I’ve almost completed the edits on my manuscript and did more online marketing for *Blind Date*.”

He cut the lettuce and put it in the salad spinner. “So how was lunch?”

She listened to the noise of the spinning and tried to decide how to answer. “It was nice,” she said finally.

“Are you sure?”

“Kari’s my best friend. She knows me well and figured me out without me saying a word.”

Lucas laughed. “Maybe she should work for me.”

“I’m sure she’d love that. You’d probably psychoanalyze her all the time.” She took the salad bowl from his hands and dressed the lettuce with balsamic vinegar, olive oil, and seasonings.

He shut the burner off and drained the pasta. After they sat down and he prayed a blessing for the meal, Gwen offered up Kari’s suggestion. “She thinks I need to get involved in something to distract my mind right now.”

Lucas leaned closer. “I can distract you, if you’d like.”

“Watch your shirt, honey. You’re going to get sauce on it.”

“Oh, what’s a little sauce gonna hurt?”

She rolled her eyes. “I care because I have to do the laundry.”

He finally moved away from his plate. “Let’s get back to the distraction topic. I have some ideas.”

“We’ve been married too long, because that’s exactly what I told Kari you’d say...how you could distract me.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be all bad, right?”

“I’ll take you up on those ideas,” she replied in between bites. “But maybe there’s something to Kari’s suggestion.”

Lucas took a sip of red wine. “And what does she propose you do?”

“She thinks maybe I should get involved in a children’s ministry.”

Watching him, she imagined smoke coming from his ears as the wheels seemed to turn in his mind. “What a great idea.”

“You don’t think it would be too hard? I mean being around little kids.”

“It might help. At least think about doing it. We’ll pray about it tonight.”

“Okay, doctor’s orders. I’ll think about it.”

“This could be good for you.”

They finished eating, and Gwen anticipated curling up on the sofa with Lucas. They picked a few shows from their DVR to watch before heading to bed. She enjoyed spending time with her husband, and she loved how he liked being a homebody with her.

They made such a great pair. The love in their home was strong, and she knew deep in her soul that God called her to motherhood. Her heart was filled with love to shower on a baby. She longed to hear giggles and the pitter-patter of little feet traipsing around their home.

What would it feel like to trip over building blocks strewn across the floor? Theirs was a grown-up home just waiting to be filled with toys and baby stuff. She needed to trust. One day at a time, they'd get through this.