

BOOK TWO

A dark, moody floral arrangement featuring several blue and purple flowers with prominent stamens, surrounded by black petals and dark foliage. The background is a deep teal color with soft, glowing bokeh lights. The title text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

A  
PESSIMIST'S  
GUIDE  
TO  
LOVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
JENNIFER HARTMANN



A PESSIMIST'S GUIDE TO  
LOVE

HEARTSONG DUET  
BOOK TWO

JENNIFER HARTMANN

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## CHAPTER 1

LUCY

*Age 13*

*THE NIGHT SHE NEVER CAME BACK*

**A** scream wakes me from the dead.  
At first I think it's the fever—I've been fighting a respiratory infection for days. I don't feel sweaty or shivery, but screams like that don't happen in real life.

It was just a fever dream. A nightmare.

I roll over, burrowing deeper into my bed covers.

That's when I hear it again.

*"No! No, please, no!"*

My eyes pop open as I jolt into a sitting position and glance at the window beside my bed. Raindrops slither down the glass, the wind making a loud shrieky sound, almost like it's screaming right along with the lady.

A storm rages. My heart races.

Something is wrong.

I toss off the blanket and slide out of bed, adjusting my cotton nightgown as I pace to the window. The tree branches are jerking back and forth to the storm, doing a spooky dance. Angry wind causes one of them to smack against the siding, and I jump back, frightened.

*"My baby! My baby!"*

Swallowing down my fear, I rush forward and press my nose to the glass pane. Police lights catch my attention first. Blue and red. Blurred by the drizzle. Squad cars are parked along our neighborhood street, right in front of the Bishop house.

And Mrs. Bishop is collapsed in her driveway, clinging to a policeman's ankle.

My whole body starts to tremor with something far worse than a fever.

*Emma. Cal.*

*Oh no, oh no, oh no.*

I don't think.

I don't grab a coat or shoes or an umbrella—all I do is run. I shouldn't be running into the rain right now, still weak and fever-drained, but I can't help it. My bare feet pound the stairsteps as I fly out of the house, the harsh wind and furious rainfall almost knocking me over.

It's trying to keep me inside.

It doesn't want me to find out why Mrs. Bishop is sobbing in her driveway, begging for her baby to come back.

Maybe I should listen to it, but I don't. I keep running, straight through the grass, to my favorite house on the left. Relief swims through me when I see Cal standing near his front porch.

*He's okay. Cal is okay.*

"Cal!" I shout over the booming sky. "Cal, what's going on?"

I'm out of breath already. My heart is thundering louder than the storm.

I slow down when my lungs feel wheezy, coming up beside Cal on the lawn. My white cotton nightgown is drenched, and the bottom of my foot stings after stepping on a stone. Mrs. Bishop starts wailing again as an officer crouches down to comfort her, and I pop a hand over my mouth, a feeling of dread sinking to the pit of my stomach.

I glance around and find Mr. Bishop sitting in the soggy grass with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth.

Returning my attention to Cal, I'm afraid to ask him what's wrong. I'm afraid to know the truth.

*Where is she?*

*Where's Emma?*

I think I know, I think I know, but I don't want to know.

Cal finally glances at me with a look I'll never forget. Not for the rest of my life. Dark brown hair is matted to his forehead as the rain pours down, his

eyes glazed and haunted. When lightning flashes, brightening the sky in muted yellow, he says to me in a low, low voice, “She’s gone.”

The air leaves me in a sickly rush of breath.

“G-gone?” I stammer, my bottom lip wobbling as I start to shake all over. Maybe I misheard him. Maybe the wind mixed up his words. “What do you mean? She was going to Marjorie’s. She’s at Marjorie’s.”

I insist it. I need it to be true.

*She’s not gone, she’s just at Marjorie’s.*

Cal looks away, staring down at the grass. “I should’ve been with her. It’s my fault.” Swinging his head back and forth, he balls his hands into fists at his sides. “Holy shit, Lucy. Holy shit...she’s *gone*. She’s gone, and it’s all my fault.”

No, I don’t believe it.

*I refuse.*

Tears prickle behind my eyelids. My throat burns with strangling disbelief. “No...no, Cal, she’s fine.” I look around the yard, at the lights, at the anguish, at the rain falling down like grief.

She’s not fine. This isn’t fine.

Rage and sorrow take over my body, and I lunge at him, pounding my fists against his chest. “You’re lying! Take it back. Please take it back...” He catches my wrists, lifting his chin in slow motion, his eyes reflecting every awful thing I’m feeling inside. All he does is shake his head, left to right, right to left, his features twisting with horror.

I’m so hysterical, I think my heart might give out.

I never thought it would outlast hers.

“No!” I scream and beg, pleading for anything but this. Tears mingle with raindrops as he grips my arms, but the fight has already left me. He’s not lying. I wish he was lying, but he’s not. “Not her, Cal. Not Emma. Not Emma.”

He lets go of my wrists and grabs me, pulling me to his chest.

We both break as my hands uncurl and latch onto his wet t-shirt, our legs buckling beneath us. We fall into a shattered heap on the front lawn, and he wraps his arms around me.

“Lucy, Lucy, Lucy,” he repeats my name, over and over, like he’s clinging to it. Clinging to me.

Shaking and weeping, I hold him so tight, just in case he tries to leave me, too.

That's when another arm grabs me. Someone hauls me away from Cal, and I watch as my friend falls forward, his fingers fisting the grass blades, head bowed with grief as a growl of mourning falls from his lips.

"No! No, let me go!" I shriek, kicking my legs and reaching for Cal. "Let me go, he needs me!"

"Lucy, sweetheart, it's okay. It's going to be okay."

It's Dad.

Dad is carrying me away from my friend.

But Cal needs me, he needs me, he *needs* me.

*I need him.*

I try to tell my father that it's not okay, nothing is okay, Emma is gone, but he doesn't listen. He just whispers gentle words into my ear as he strokes my hair and pulls me farther and farther away from the Bishop house.

Everything is a blur after that.

I don't remember much else about that night, except for one thing.

As I glance up, a falling star shoots across the blackened sky.

A little light in the dark.

Like a firefly.

I make a wish as I scream Cal's name, still kicking, still crying, knowing nothing will ever be the same.

I make my one and only wish.

*Come back, Emma. Please come back...*



*PRESENT DAY*

*"Let me go. She fucking needs me."*

I hear a voice. A muddled, muted voice.

Somehow, I know it's him.

I think I'm dreaming. A chill sweeps through me as winter nibbles at my



skin. Maybe I'm making an angel in the snow, or maybe I'm sledding. It's been a long time since I've been sledding.

I miss it.

*"Let me go...Lucy!"*

The voice breaks through again as glimmers of light flicker and float behind my eyes. Little streaks of stars. I can't find my voice, can't speak, can't call to him. I want to tell him I'm right here.

I'm here, I'm here.

*Cal.*

Something in my chest jolts. A shockwave. Tingling warmth shoots through me, and I want to cry out, I want to scream, but I can't communicate.

More light, more sound.

It feels like I'm trapped inside my own body. Partially aware, but helpless all at once. My eyes won't open, glued shut, stuck like taffy. Terror infiltrates me as a clamoring of noise filters in and out of my ears and my mind conjures up an image of Cal looming over me.

We're in the snow. Maybe we're sledding after all, twisted in a heap of love and laughter at the bottom of the hill. He's right above me, telling me all the things I long to hear.

My eyelids flutter, briefly.

I think I see him.

*"Lucy...Lucy, fuck...sunshine..."*

It's his voice, I'm sure of it.

I hear beeping, bustling, ringing in my ears.

*Cal, Cal, I'm here.*

The last thing I see is his face, just a blur, backlit by a harsh glow. A halo of sunlight. Worry, pain, and heartbreak stare down at me. His lips are moving.

He's calling me his sunshine, but I know that he is mine.

I reach for the light.

But then...

Everything goes dark.

## CHAPTER 2

CAL

“**M**erry Christmas.”

I hardly hear the words at first, lost inside my head. Still on that sidewalk, still in shambles, still replaying the image of Lucy’s chest being shocked with a defibrillator as a medic brings her back to life. I see her limp body jumping, jolting, so pale and lifeless. So cold.

*Merry Christmas.*

Someone has the nerve to wish me a merry Christmas as I sit hunched over in a waiting room chair with my head in my hands.

I glance up.

It’s a nurse, smiling, her scrubs a happy pink.

My head falls back down, returning to the solace of my hands, where I’m shielded from the too-bright lights and sterile walls and nurses wishing me a merry goddamn Christmas. Movement is blurred, sound only a muffle of meaningless noise.

Except for the fucking holiday jingles filtering out of a speaker like a slap to my face.

No...not a slap, but a throat-punch.

A lead bullet lodging in my gut.

*It’s the most wonderful time of the year*, he sings, and I want to strangle him in the same way my chest feels strangled with the weight of a thousand fifty-ton bricks.

Trembling fingers sweep down my spine like a mother’s touch, but I know it’s not my mother. Never *my* mother. The hand travels up and up, landing on my shoulder with a squeeze, and then the whirr of a woman crying punctures through the song.

Lucy's mom.

She weeps as her palm falls away from my shoulder.

I wish I could weep. I wish I could cry and grieve and feel like I did on that icy sidewalk, but numbness has overtaken me, and all I want to do is hide.

"It'll be okay," she whispers, a hopeful mourning. A contradiction. "She'll be okay."

Lies, lies, lies.

That's what Dad said on the worst night of my life.

*"She's going to be okay, son. We'll find her. She just made a wrong turn, and she'll turn up."*

Two weeks later, he killed himself.

There was a time when I thought he'd taken the easy way out, the despicable coward. Now I'm not sure I blame him. Part of me yearns for easy, for burdenless, for something other than this vicious cycle of pain. And I'm all too aware of the common denominator right at the center of it.

*Me.*

Lucy is here, half-dead in a hospital bed, because of me. I started this, I did this, I broke down her fragile heart until it had no other choice but to sever and split.

As if she's privy to my intrusive thoughts, Farrah Hope returns her hand to my shoulder.

*Hope.*

I once believed it to be the perfect last name for a girl like Lucy, but now it only serves to mock me.

"It's not your fault," she says gently, too gently to hold much weight.

I lift my head, propping my elbows on my knees, my chin settled on clasped hands. "I set it in motion," I mutter darkly. "It's my fault."

"Don't do that to yourself, Callahan. She'd never want you to believe that."

"Doesn't matter what she wants. It's the truth."

"The truth is that Lucy has battled a heart condition all of her life. That's the only truth here." She sighs wearily, a sad whimper bleeding into the sound. "She kept putting off her cardiologist appointment. I was so worried this would happen."

I close my eyes, teeth gnashing together. "She *told* me this would happen. She said her heart had an expiration date, and all I did was expedite it. It's not

a coincidence.”

Another sigh meets my ears, the squeeze of her hand trying to counter my truth.

“She told me she was dying,” I add, fury and self-loathing the only things keeping my blood pumping hot. “*Dying*. And I made it all about me and how it made *me* feel. Fucking selfish.”

“What?” Her hand falls away again, as if the very word scalded her, just as it singed right through *me* in two venomous syllables. “She told you she was dying?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe she’d tell you that...or even *think* that,” Farrah says, her words catching with emotion, catching with flames. “Her condition was manageable. We had no reason to believe she wouldn’t live a long, happy life. She’s always been good about keeping up with her doctor appointments, but she was so busy this past year...”

“That’s not what she believed, and clearly, she wasn’t wrong.”

Silence infects us for a few beats before the sound of weeping returns. I lean over and cover my ears, blocking it out. We sit like that for a while, Farrah crying beside me, her tears fusing with the jolly Christmas music.

And me, deadened to it all.

Sometime later, maybe minutes, maybe hours, a doctor moves into my line of sight. I see his legs first, encased with blue scrubs, a white coat draped over them. His nametag is a jumble of letters I can’t decipher because I’m too clouded by grief and hopelessness.

“Good afternoon. I’m Dr. Malcom.”

My gut twists like he stabbed me with a red-hot poker.

*Malcom.*

Fucking Malcom.

A guy named Malcom delivering Lucy’s fate is the epitome of twisted irony.

Farrah grabs my knee, her anxiety transferring over to me as she jolts into a sitting position. “Is my baby girl okay?” she cries, and it’s an actual cry, her words secondary to the terror in it. Her grip on my knee strengthens twofold until I feel her fingernails burrow through the denim.

I stare blankly at the doctor, waiting for news.

Waiting for the news that she’s gone, that I lost her, that I killed her.

“Miss Hope is stable,” he says.

She lets out another cry, this one a howl of joyful astoundment.

The doctor keeps talking and explaining, filling us in on details that don't make an ounce of sense. Medical terms and jargon. Gibberish. I pluck out what I can, what I can process.

Cardiac arrest.

Leaky valve.

Lucky.

A long road ahead.

Weeks of rehabilitation.

*She's alive, she's alive, she's alive.*

I choke on a breath, reminded that I still have enough breath in my lungs to choke on.

Good news.

*It's good news.*

"It's a miracle," Farrah whimpers, pulling me into a hug.

My hand lifts on instinct, hugging her back in a loose grip as my mind zones out.

I don't believe in miracles. I stopped believing in them when I was fifteen, when the stars lost their luster and fireflies lost their light and every song started sounding sad.

She says miracle, I say false positive.

But Lucy is alive, he tells us, she's going to make it, he says.

And while I don't believe in miracles, I pull from it the only glimmer of hope I can find.

A second chance.

It's more than I got with my father.

It's more than I got with Emma.

It's more than I deserve...

*But it's all I have.*

## CHAPTER 3

### LUCY

**F**lowers.

So many flowers, all kinds, all colors.

In a way, I think the spectrum of love is a lot like the color spectrum. What is love but a distribution of pigment and feelings when light is dispersed. Warms and cools, pastels and darks. Fiery crimson to parallel our passionate, bleeding heart. Pink for sweet kisses, yellow for friendship, green for envy.

Pale indigo to match the chilly, lonely moments in their absence.

I pick at the petals of my potted roses.

*He loves me.*

*He loves me not.*

I realize I don't need plucked petals to give me an answer. The answer is clear as day, reverberating within the chasm of his silence.

My mother turns to leave my hospital room, her fingers curling around the cornflower blue curtain to tug it aside. "Tomorrow is the day," she says, her smile watery, eyes misty. "I'll stay with you for as long as you need, honey."

I force a smile. "I'll have to get the guest room ready for you." The guest room is Emma's room, and it's not ready. It's full of ghosts. Normally, I sleep in Cal's old room, but not that last night—not on Christmas Eve when I fell asleep, hair and cheeks damp with tears, my mind slipping into a past when everything was still beautiful. "The house is a mess."

"Don't worry about that. Don't worry about anything, except for getting better."

A sigh leaves me with an achy chest and jittery limbs. I nod, a pink petal



pressed between my thumb and finger. “Have you talked to him?”

The subject change is as abrupt as that white-dusted Christmas morning—one minute Kiki was sniffing a snowy patch of grass, and the next, I was hooked up to cords and needles and monitors, confused and alone in a hospital bed.

So abrupt. Right out of the blue.

I’ve never given much thought to that phrase before. Out of the blue sky, the blue sea, the blue-gray storm clouds. Sapphires are blue, and so are bruises. Birds, huckleberries, flowers.

Forget-me-nots.

I pluck off two more rose petals.

*He forgets me.*

*He forgets me not.*

Mom turns toward me, her hand dropping from the curtain the moment she senses the melancholy in my voice. “Callahan is fine, honey. He’s just... he’s trying.”

“Trying?”

My tone isn’t accusing; it’s confused. Lost and searching.

*What does that mean?*

He’s trying to get his bike started to come visit me?

He’s trying to power up his phone to call me?

He’s trying to force his legs into moving with rhythm and purpose, so he can make his way to me?

No, no, none of that holds any merit, but all of it holds the truth.

It’s been two weeks.

Two weeks without him, two weeks of wondering if he even cares.

“Lucy...he feels responsible,” she tells me. “That’s a heavy weight to bear. He’s trying to work through it, so he can face you.”

I swallow, tilting my head toward the ceiling and into the harsh, abrasive hospital lights. He doesn’t need to *face* me—I just need to see his face. “He’s not responsible for any of this. I’m sick, Mom. I’ve always been sick, and this was bound to happen eventually.” More petals pull from bright green stems, fluttering to my starchy bed sheets.

“Did you tell him you were dying?”

The hitch in that last word has me turning to look at her, and I see desperation reflecting off the fluorescent bulb light. She looks paler, gaunter. Her eyes swim with a darker shade of blue than I’m used to seeing, a hue that

is strikingly similar to my own. “Yes,” I choke.

I may have *said* it all wrong—too cold, too cruel—but I wasn’t wrong.

Clearly, I wasn’t wrong.

“Lucy.” She sighs my name, almost in the same way Cal used to. The end-of-my-rope inflection weaves through the word, twisting the syllables into knots. “Why would you say that?”

I can’t look at her. The lights are too bright, too revealing. All I see is her devastation. The ceiling is less accosting, so I focus on the popcorn texture of it instead. “He needed to know the truth. He wanted more than I was able to give him.”

He wanted more, but not everything.

But...even *more* felt like too much.

More stolen kisses, more sensual words whispered against my ear. More skin, more moans, more weak moments.

I wanted more, too, but I also wanted everything.

And my heart was not built for the everything I want.

I burrow deeper into the cot, holding in the shoddily built dam of tears. “Alyssa came to visit me. Gemma, Knox, Greg. Nash. Even the guys at the shop stopped by to see how I was doing.” There’s a breakage in the timber and a teardrop slips through. “But not Cal.”

So many flowers, none of them from him.

A rainbow of colors, all bleeding into murky gray.

*He forgets me.*

*He loves me not.*

I return the pot of roses to the bedside table and lie back down. My father told me once that the only pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is the treasures we put there ourselves. And if there is no value waiting for us, we need to look for another rainbow.

But I don’t want another rainbow.

I just want him.

Mom lets a tear fall, too. It glides down her cheek, settling in the corner of her mouth. “He’s been here every day,” she confesses gently. “In the waiting room. He sits in the same chair, with the same bouquet of flowers, the same haunted expression on his face.” Off my startled look, she stretches a smile. “I promise he’s trying, Lucy. I promise he cares.”

A ball of heat unfurls inside my chest, drenching me all over. I feel warm and smothered. Her words burn like the tears behind my eyes, like the

hornet's nest caught in my throat. Nodding, I stab my teeth into my bottom lip to keep an ugly sound from pouring out of me, my eyes trained on the ceiling, fingers curling around the stiff sheet.

"I'll talk to him," Mom continues, inching back the curtain. "Get some rest, sweetie."

She leaves me alone. I try to rest, try to douse the flames still licking at me, but I'm restless.

I was transferred from ICU to a regular hospital room over a week ago, following surgery for a leaky valve that almost killed me—a leaky valve that would have been discovered had I not pushed back my cardiologist appointment.

A defibrillator was needed to shock my heart back into a normal rhythm after Cal discovered me collapsed on the sidewalk.

So I've been told, anyway.

My memories of that morning are hazy at best. I have a vague recollection of Cal looming over me, backlit by the sun, calling my name, but it could have been a dream. It could have been delirium. After all, he's not here now.

I'm still alive, and he's not here.

I wiggle my toes beneath the sheets. I've been encouraged to walk and pace the room as often as possible, but I'm sluggish and weak. I'm sad, too.

Sad and lonely.

I want to go home and see my dogs. I want to sing songs again on a hexagon stage while people smile, clap, and sing along. Every inch of me misses every inch outside of this hospital room.

As my mind replays all of those inches and stretches, all of those precious millimeters of my life, I hear the curtain draw back. I think it's a nurse, so I plaster on a smile and cant my head to the left.

It's not a nurse.

It's a drug, a cure, a remedy, yes, but it's not a nurse.

"Cal." My throat is scratchy, sandpaper to silence. He looms just outside the entryway, one hand stuffed inside the pocket of his jeans, the other clutching a sprig of dying flowers. Without his trademark hat, I see that his hair has grown out even longer. All shaggy and disheveled, curling around his ears. Stubble is now goatee, and the shadows in his eyes are darker than ever. I don't know what to say to pull him closer, so all I whisper is his name again. "Cal."

It seems to be enough. He trudges forward, hesitation claiming every headlong step. His knuckles go white around the flower stems, brows pinched with emotion. He doesn't say anything. Just drags a chair over to my bedside and collapses into it like he's exhausted. Like the five steps toward me were equivalent to a ten-mile hike up the ridgeline of a mountain through rugged terrain.

He looks bone-weary.

Cal hands me the flowers. "These are for you."

My hand is trembling, I notice, when I reach for them. But trembling or not, I still reach.

Bone-weary or not, he still came.

"The last time I gave a girl flowers, the petals wilted away to ashes on my desk, because that girl never came back."

Pain slices through my chest, but it's not from the aftereffects of open heart surgery. It's the crack in his voice, the despair on his face. His words, his grief.

I still reach, letting go of the flowers and finding his hand, instead. It's cold and clammy against my touch—a glacier melting the harder I hold him—until his fingers loosen and interlace with mine. We both suck in a breath at the same time, the contact more than physical. I feel him everywhere; even in the places I shouldn't feel him. "Thank you for coming to see me," I find myself saying, squeezing his hand, an exclamation point to my words.

He swallows, nodding once. "I wanted to come sooner. I just..." Clearing his throat, the breath he intakes sounds shaky. "I just couldn't."

There's bourbon on his breath and smoke on his skin.

There's poison in his words.

Similar words spilled out of him atop the Ferris wheel last fall when I asked him why he never tried to look for me.

*I didn't have a choice*, he told me.

It sounded like there was a tangible reason for his absence, and I suppose there was.

He is the obstruction, his demons the barricade.

I squeeze harder. "But you're here now," I murmur, finding his eyes through the floodlit room. I watch the golds and browns swirl together as my words process. "That's all that matters."

I'm not mad.

I cannot condemn a self-condemned man.

Cal unlocks our hands and stands from the chair. “Fuck,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry it took me so long to see you.”

In a blink, he’s climbing into the bed.

My heartrate dizzies. He slides under the covers, his arm enveloping me while he burrows his face into the crook of my neck. I go still, weightless, breathless, my eyes closing with pure relief as the tip of his nose nuzzles just below my ear, sluicing me in goosebumps. I feel his ankle curl with mine beneath the blanket, and I drink in short, wispy breaths, strangled with nerves and want.

His body heat is the sun on my skin.

His breath is new life, filling me from the inside out.

And his words, *his words*—

They are everything.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” he rasps into my tangled mess of hair. “I thought I’d never get another chance to touch you, feel you, breathe you in.” He breathes in deeply, nearly groaning as he exhales. His grip around my middle strengthens as he pulls me closer. “I had to listen to those jingle bells every day at work and think about you strolling in with your perfect fucking smile, wondering if I’d ever see it again.”

“I’m here,” I croak out, bobbing my head adamantly. “I’m still here.”

He sighs right into my ear like a tortured promise. “So am I.”

As Cal lies half-splayed beside me, one muscular arm draped around my middle, I sweep my fingers through his hair. It’s soft and silken as I twirl the strands around my index finger. His breathing steadies, as does mine. With my free hand, I search for the discarded bouquet, finding it lying on my opposite side, the petals faded and dull. I clutch the stems in a tight fist.

They’re wilted, but they’re not dead yet.

There’s still hope for them.

I look over at the man beside me, his eyes closed, expression more contented, and the beam in my smile returns like sunlight poking through a sky of clouds.

*There’s still hope.*

## CHAPTER 4

CAL

*ONE MONTH LATER*

**I**t's the jingle bells that do me in.

My heart jumps at the sound of them. My muscles twitch, teeth grinding together. A patron strolls out of the shop, and I hardly even remember our interaction because I was too busy thinking about my dinner date tonight with Lucy.

I'm not sure how I'm going to get through it. I'm a mess, and that's the last thing she needs right now while still recovering from major surgery. Not when her heart is so fragile.

Not when my burden of accountability is so damn great.

I need to be strong for her. Invincible. And the only time I've ever felt invincible was when I had a little help. Maybe the only way to move forward is to take a few steps back.

I won't stay there.

*It's only temporary.*

So, it's the jingle bells that trigger my march toward the service door to hunt down Ike, desperate for something to alleviate a little bit of my back-breaking weight.

Not that I deserve the reprieve, but guilt is heavy, and she needs me.

"Office," I order, sweeping past Ike through the garage as he finishes up an oil change.



“What’s up, boss?”

I don’t reply, and he follows accordingly. We make our way into my office, Ike closing the door behind him before stuffing his hands into the pockets of his grease-stained pants.

“When’s the last time you slept?” he wonders, leaning back. “You look like shit.”

His words are crass, but the concern in his pale blue eyes is genuine.

I hate that it’s there.

“I need something...to take the edge off.” The statement would be vague to some, but not to him—he knows what I need. He knows exactly what my edges look like, sharp and jagged, scraping against everything I touch.

For a moment, I’m ambushed with more guilt.

More shame, more self-loathing.

I’m trying to be strong, but the request drips with weakness.

“What?” Ike falters, looking away as he deflates, until disappointment replaces the concern. “No.”

“I’m serious,” I force out, keeping my voice level. “I fucked up my back the other day on my bike.”

It’s not my back, it’s my heart. It feels like a boulder inside my chest, suffocating me.

He knows that, too.

The little voice inside my head nags at me, begs me to retreat, to take it all back, but I can’t get the words out.

I stare at him, stance rigid and pulse pounding.

“Nah, Bishop,” he says, swinging his shaved head back and forth. “No can do. You were nothin’ but a customer back then. Now you’re a friend.”

I bristle at the statement, perching my hip against my desk. “I don’t have friends.”

“That’s some bullshit you like to tell yourself.”

*Fine.*

I have one friend, sitting alone in her haunted brick house, waiting for me to come over tonight so she can cook me tamales. She’s the reason I’m even doing this—to be a *friend*, to be the kind of person who pulls her up and doesn’t drag her further down into the mud.

And I can’t be that person right now. Not like this.

When I finally told her I’d stop by, her response was a rocket launch of happy-face emojis and little red hearts. She accidentally added an eggplant

into the mix, then shot off about fifty more text messages, apologizing and mortified.

LUCY:

Oh god! I didn't mean to you send that!

I'm so embarrassed!

Maybe you didn't see it. Hold on. Don't look at your phone for a sec.

It won't unsend. Of course it won't. I'm screaming.

I'm so sorry. It was saved from a recent convo with Alyssa.

But not a convo about you.

Ugh. Just delete my number please.

I won't lie—it was the closest I came to a smile in a long damn time. My lips twitched a little. I swear my heart even skittered, the beats tripping over one another.

Truth is, I want to see her. Badly. In between my busy-ass work schedule, her four-week recovery with her mother, and my own soul-sucking guilt gnawing at my bones, I've hardly gotten a glimpse of that smile I crave. I've replaced the comfort of her warmth with whisky and gin, drinking myself stupid almost every night for weeks. I knew alcohol was a tipping point. It's destined to lead me down that dark road I'm all too familiar with...but I didn't see another way out.

And now I have to face her inside that godforsaken house.

I need something stronger.

Sunlight streams in through the partially cracked blinds, even though I'm certain I shut them as tight as I could. My eyes narrow with disdain at the little sunbeam that managed to burst through, illuminating a cloud of dust particles, brightening the shadows I itch to get back.

Sighing, I rub a palm over my face and pull the beanie off my head, fisting it in my hands. "Listen, it's just a temporary fix until my back heals up. I know what you're thinking, but I'm fine. I'm good. I just need something to get me over the hump."

He sees right through me with his see-through eyes. "They got therapists for that."

Bleakness claims my vision, stealing the auto-response from the tip of my tongue. Knuckles white, I wring the hat back and forth, staring down at my dirty boots. “I’ve tried. Doesn’t work.”

“More bullshit, more excuses. You’re about to spiral, Cal, and I won’t be a part of it.”

“I’m not spiraling. I’m coping.”

“Find a better way.”

Leveling me with a hard stare, Ike pushes up from the frame and turns to leave, cracking open the door. Jingle bells chime again, altering us of a client and reminding me that I’m attempting to buy pills while I’m on the clock like a spineless chump.

*Jesus.*

I’m sinking.

Rock bottom inches dangerously close, I can almost taste the gravel on my tongue. I would know—I’ve been there before, choking on mouthfuls of debris and piss-poor decisions, face-planting into the rubble. Part of me wonders if it tastes any different the second time around. Third time, fourth time. At some point, a rock is bound to sever something vital.

Ike wavers, poking his head out toward the lobby, then glances back at me over his shoulder. “Client here. Get your shit together, Bishop, I mean it.”

The door slams shut.

Itching for a double shot of bourbon, I fall back into my rolling chair with a throaty grumble. Shame, disappointment. Something in between. I kind of hate myself for stooping so low, but it would only be a taste. A temporary vice to help me over the peak.

To help me help *her*.

An early February glow seeps in through the sliver of window pane, spotlighting the dead orchids and shriveled cigarette butts littering my office. If I close my eyes long enough, I can almost see her zig-zagging around the room with a white-toothed grin and armfuls of thriving flowers, asking if she can help me with anything. I can almost hear her laughter floating throughout the space as she vacuums, or cleans the glass, or organizes my filing cabinet for the eighty-billionth time. I smell the pear notes in her shampoo, the sugary balm of her skin. I taste her bubblegum kisses stuck to my lips.

I didn’t need to fucking fire her; didn’t even want to. It was a cowardly stunt to put distance between us because I was too damn weak to keep my hands off of her.

The regret eats at me, acid to bone.

Thumbing through my carton of cigarettes, I pull one out and light the end until the embers crackle. I'm feeling twitchy and anxious, so I reach for my cell phone and scroll through the torrent of notifications I've steadily ignored, still ignoring them, and power up Instagram. I click on her handle and watch her feed start to load.

One new photo stares back at me.

It's a picture of Lucy and her guitar. She's sitting on her bed, her legs sprawled out in front of her, a showering of loose papers scattered on both sides of the mattress. The camera must have been on a timer, or maybe someone was with her, someone who wasn't me, capturing the smile on her face as she's partially curtained by a waterfall of golden brown hair.

It's a Lucy smile. The one I've missed, the one that started wilting months ago. It's beaming and bright, steeped in truth, reaching the blue of her eyes.

There's something brilliant in the blue. Something sky-high and flying, instead of lost at sea.

The photo is paired with a caption that reads: ***"No more sad songs."***

I swallow, wishing there was liquor sliding down my throat. She's making music again. In no time, she'll be playing live shows and lighting up wine bars with magic and melodies. Stealing hearts, captivating minds, and making even the strongest men fidget in their seats.

Seduction comes in many forms, but nothing compares to when Lucy sings.

In the darker moments, when I live to torture myself, I imagine that first night I watched her show from the edge of the bar. Her final song was something by Stevie Nicks, and I was fucking bewitched. Swept up in the thrill of her. The way her mouth moved, the husky cadence of her voice, the raw talent pouring out of every inch of her. Innocence and sex appeal, all rolled into my ultimate undoing.

Then she skipped over to me in that little dress, her hair floating all around her, smile so damn sweet, and blurted out something about blowing me.

*Fuck.*

A mouth so skilled at making music had me wondering what else it was good at.

My dick perks up at the thought, but the timing isn't great because Ike

starts hollering at me from the lobby about a faulty engine.

Grumbling, I toss my phone aside, knowing it's a futile train of thought anyway, and readjust myself in my jeans.

The only thing that gets me through the work day is knowing I'll see Lucy when night falls.



She isn't texting me back.

Her phone is powered off, and the sound of her instantaneous voicemail message over and over sends an icy chill down my back.

*“Hey, it’s Lucy! I’m probably singing to my dogs right now, but your call is important to me. Really important. Leave a message and I’ll call you right back, then I’ll apologize profusely for missing your call. Please promptly forgive me, otherwise this wasted opportunity to hear your voice will haunt me for the rest of my life. No pressure. Beeeep!”*

When all I can see is the image of Lucy dangling lifeless in my arms on Christmas Day, ghost-white and half-alive, I grab my coat and race out the front door to go check on her.

Problem is, I'm shit-faced.

I decided to be fucking stupid when I got home from work and slung back an irresponsible amount of whisky, feeling haunted and desperate to drown my ghosts.

I'm regretting that now.

*What if Lucy's in trouble? What if I'm too obliterated to help her?*

I forgo my bike, not wanting to add anymore guilt to the ever-growing weight on my shoulders, and clumsily jog the mile and a half to her house. Stumbling down the sidewalk, no swagger, all teeter, I finally wind through her front lawn until I'm propped up against her brick column. The last time I stood here, I had a gift for her.

Now all I have are empty hands and a concerning blood-alcohol level.

The house looms before me like a giant shadow of all the things I left behind, and I'm grateful the whisky has my vision blurring to the point of hardly recognizing the yellow in the bricks and the divots in the shutters.

I'll never understand what prompted her to buy this miserable place. It's nothing but a tomb of ghosts and dirt. A crypt. But Lucy didn't see it that way, thinking she could spin relics into gold. Old bones into new life. She wanted to turn tragedy into something hopeful, and that was always her way, even when we were kids—Lucy was the fixer, aligning crooked pieces perfectly into place, and Emma was the glue, holding it all together.

And me?

I'm the wrecking ball.

I guess I must have knocked because the front door swings open.

My balance staggers, even though I'm leaning against a big ass pillar. I still sway, still jolt, still physically react to seeing her. Lucy stands before me with her hand curled around the door frame, her knuckles white, eyes blue.

Even in my inebriated state, I see magic in the blue. Her eyes peer up at me, mimicking the smoky hue of the sky as we sat in a Ferris wheel bucket counting the stars one night. The blue was the bluest I'd ever seen it, a striking indigo pigment outshining the stretch of black.

I'm pissed that I'm too fucked-up to appreciate this moment for what it really is. Lucy is alive and glowing in front of me, all breathing lungs and beating heart. She's here, she's okay, she's standing upright, just an arm's reach away.

I blink, attempting to clear my vision.

I blink again, seeing double, but only wanting to see one. One Lucy is hard enough to face right now.

She says my name in the same way she always says it, like she combed through a dictionary until she landed on her favorite word, and no word since has ever compared. "Cal."

Swallowing, I attempt to straighten from the pillar, my footing compromised by liquor. I hope she doesn't notice when I nearly topple to my left. "You okay? You're not answer'ing your phone." I slur a little, giving myself away.

Her brows dip into a frown. The sparkle in her eyes dims, replaced with concern. "Are *you* okay? Are you sick?" Lucy steps out onto the porch in an off-the-shoulder, dove-white sweater, reaching for me, her nose pinkening when the cold air kisses her face. "You don't look well."

Fucking tears blanket the blue of her eyes like a rain-laden sky.

She's worried about me.

*Me.*



And I hate it.

I steady myself, clearing my throat and dodging the tenderness in her tone. “Why’s your phone off? You’re sure you’re good?” My hands itch to hold her. To kiss her mouth until her lips turn as pink as her nose. “I don’t like when I can’t reach you.”

Double meaning rolls off of me. Instinct and too much booze cause me to lean into her until her hands lift and plant against my chest to keep me from falling forward.

So damn electric, her touch. It’s a physical reaction, buckshot to my skin. I’m helpless to the feeling, unable to move out of the way in time before I’m honeycombed with shrapnel.

Raising her eyes to me, her fingers curl into my shirt. She presses harder against me because I think I’m still falling.

“Cal, come inside and sit down,” she tells me, her smile weak but still trying to beam. “I’ll get you some water.”

I don’t want water, I just want to kiss her. Steal a little of her warmth for myself.

But she spins away before I can act anymore brainless, reaching for my wrist to pull me forward. It takes a minute to realize where I am when my feet trudge through her entryway and land on a happy little welcome mat decorated with holiday puppy dogs. I glance up, squinting, trying to get a read on my vision but also grateful I can’t see or think straight right now.

I’m inside.

I’m inside the house, her house, my house.

*Emma’s house.*

I think I make some sort of noise like I’m choking or suffocating, and Lucy swivels back around with eyes as wide as the gaping hole inside my heart. “Oh God...I’m sorry,” she gasps, grabbing both of my hands to mimic her apology. “I wasn’t thinking. I should have eased you into this better. I wasn’t—”

“S’fine,” I mumble, kicking off my boots and almost tipping. “Gonna happen sooner or later.”

The house smells like cornmeal and spice with a hint of something sweet. Vanilla or honey. Graham crackers. Orange-tipped flames dance inside the fireplace and wrap me up like a warm blanket, casting flickering shadows across her face. She still looks conflicted.

“I’m sorry you were worried,” she says, slowly letting go of my hands. “I

was charging my phone..." Lucy glances behind her to the table next to the couch, eyeing the phone. The USB port is connected, but the wall adaptor lies atop her area rug, unplugged. "Whoops."

I move to the couch and sit down because my legs are telling me to fuck off. "All good." Collapsing back against the cushions, a fuzzy Lucy moves into my line of sight.

"Are you okay, Cal? You smell like..." She studies me knowingly, a mask of worry. "You smell like you've been drinking."

A lazy smile pulls. I feel like I can finally relax now that I know Lucy is okay. She's perfect and breathing, and her house smells like a home-cooked meal and vanilla creme.

"I'll grab you some water..."

Her voice sounds far away as my eyelids flutter and the alcohol fog overtakes me now that the worry has been snuffed out. I'm hungry, but I'm hungrier for peace. Even my drunken stupors have been restless, my body jolting awake every few minutes, wondering where she is and if she's okay, imagining that dreadful, wintry morning. But she's right here, winding toward me from the kitchen with a glass of water in her hand.

"Drink this, please," she says, her features unfocused as she leans over and sets the glass beside me. "Cal, I'm worried."

"Hm." I make an indistinguishable sound as my head falls back. My hand reaches for her, latching onto something soft; her hair, her sweater. I pull her onto my lap until I feel her straddling me, chest pressing to mine.

"Cal." It's a whisper now. A longing, breathy sound.

I want to squeeze her, hold onto her so tight, but my common sense is sharp enough to realize she's still healing, still frail. So I just cradle her in a loose grip.

Lucy rests her head against my shoulder and nuzzles into me.

My fingers ache to dip underneath her sweater and sweep across her soft skin. I want to sheathe myself inside of her, drink in her moans, make her mine.

Take what I know she's saving for me.

But the only thing I want more is to memorize her heartbeats.

She goes lax in my arms, and the sound of her beating heart lulls me to sleep like the sweetest song.

I finally rest.

## CHAPTER 5

### LUCY

**P**art of me always knew I'd wake up in bed beside Cal one morning. In my fantasies, it went something like this:

Tangled sheets, sex-mussed hair, naked skin, and drowsy smiles stretching as golden light pooled in through the curtains. The blissful wakeup would be followed by breakfast in bed, day-long cuddle fests, and endless repeats of the night before, laughter and moans mingling as one.

Reality finds us, instead, staring at each other from across the mattress. His eyes are dim and bloodshot, hair limp, expression sorry, skin missing the bronzy glow that often fades when winter and hardship roll in. Fully clothed but soul bare, Cal inhales deeply as he keeps his gaze pinned on me from a foot away.

“Sorry,” he finally says, voice full of gravel. He blinks twice, slow and sluggish, browline pinched with remorse. “Didn’t mean for it to go like that.”

For a moment, I wonder if he thinks something happened between us.

*Something*, as in the something that has been brewing for months, just one kiss away from detonating.

With my hands clasped beneath my cheek, I shake my head, a string of hair falling into my eyes. I push it back and inch closer to him on the bed. “Nothing happened,” I assure him.

“It did.” He rolls onto his back, scrubbing both hands over his face. “You cooked me dinner, and I drank myself into a coma.”

Sadness coats my vision. I anticipated the evening going differently, sure—bonding over tamales; a first step toward healing and fixing our fractured pieces—but Cal only seems to be taking backward steps. He passed out on my couch, holding me tight until his grip loosened, and his arms went slack.

A cruel vice stole him away. The turn of events was disappointing, but I'm more disappointed in the knowing that he poisoned himself instead of letting *me* remedy his pain.

I helped him stumble into the bedroom to sleep it off until sunrise, then crawled into bed, falling asleep with my face pressed into the warmth of his chest.

"It's okay," I whisper back.

It's not a boldfaced lie. It's okay that he's struggling, but I refuse to let him simmer in it.

Cal turns his head and squints at me through the snowy morning glow seeping through the window. Swallowing, he murmurs, "I'm here for you."

A small smile blooms, his words tickling my heart. "You need to be here for *you*, too," I counter softly. "That's important to me, Cal. So important."

I've lived my whole life with a compromised heart.

I can't bear to see his wither.

"I fucked up when I fired you. It was a colossal mistake." He stares blankly up at the ceiling again, one hand massaging his forehead, as if that transgression in his office is a pesky migraine he can't relieve.

A tiny part of me finds comfort in the admission I knew to be true, but it doesn't last long. The sting of it thaws, because now, the only comfort I need is for Cal to get better. "That doesn't matter anymore." I reach out to touch him, hoping *I* can be that comfort. "It's in the past."

Huffing out a joyless laugh, he shakes his head. "You told me the past matters."

I swing my head right back at him. "I said the things in the past that mattered *still* matter. We carry the good with us and let go of all the rest. We release the parts that keep us hurting and stunted."

A glimmer of revelation lights up his eyes for a split second before he blinks it away. "I just..." Cal sighs, scrubbing at his face again. "You feel like my one and only anchor, Lucy, and I just can't shake the feeling that I'm going to sink you down with me."

"I won't let you sink. We'll rise above."

"It's not that simple. You were born strong," he responds wearily. "I wasn't."

"Nobody is born strong, Cal. Nobody." Moving closer, I skim my gaze over his taut features and strengthen my voice as I finish, "But, we're all born fighters. And sometimes, the thing we're fighting for is strength."

He glances at me, eyes lingering. A heavy silence stretches between us as his throat bobs, like he's swallowing down my words and letting them fill him up. I watch a muscle in his cheek tic when he pulls away from our stare and looks out the window, instead.

Something in the air shifts, then. A sudden change in wind direction.

His eyes pan around the bedroom, drinking in the new peach-hued walls that have replaced the chunky stripes of red and blue. Cantaloupe Slice was the paint color, reminiscent of summers under an orange sun that always filled me with such sweetness.

We're in his old bedroom.

I tense, worried that I've triggered him. Cal is fragile right now despite his muscle and mass. His tough, rugged exterior doesn't allude to the troubled man hiding inside. He's breakable, just like all of us, and the last thing I want to do is add anymore cracks.

My knee-jerk reaction is to start rambling and apologize, but I chomp down on my bottom lip and allow him this moment to reflect. A few minutes pass, then a few more. Nothing looks the same as it used to, but that was the whole point. I didn't buy this house to stew in all the things it used to be—I bought it because it deserved a second chance to shine.

This house is Cal, this house is me, this house is anybody who's ever been beaten down and dragged through the mud.

We all deserve to be polished and restored, and this little house isn't any different.

I hope he'll recognize that one day.

When he finally sits up in bed, his back flush with the wicker headboard, and his eyes swing over to me, a shade lighter than they once were...I think, perhaps, he does.



*Fact:* tamales are decidedly just as good served for breakfast, warmed up the following day, as they are freshly made.

I buzz around the kitchen in my black yoga pants and oversized yellow sweater, looking like a bumble bee flitting from table to sink. My smile is

overly bright to match my attire, and to offset the mopey vibes radiating off of a hungover Cal.

My chest is still achy while my wound heals, so I pop some pain medication as Cal's eyes track the motion. He looks away when I strengthen my smile.

The coffee maker gurgles from the countertop in a further attempt to snap him out of the funk. It was a gift from one of my cousins, I think, a few years back, and I didn't have the heart to tell her that I'm one of the few alien lifeforms inhabiting this planet that doesn't drink coffee.

Plus, it was always convenient to have on hand for when Alyssa crashed at my place after a night of games and wine.

Actually, I think it was a gift from Alyssa.

Cal eyes the sea-blue coffee maker. "You don't drink coffee," he notes, slumped forward in the chair with his elbows digging into the table.

He looks rundown and worn out. I brighten my smile to neutralize the sour mood. "I don't. I've never even tried it."

"How?"

My lips fold in while I debate giving him a less than truthful answer. As I glide across the tile and pull a mug from the top cabinet, I clear my throat and reach for the pot, the truth winning out. "I was always scared to drink caffeine with my condition," I admit. "I know it's a stimulant and can increase blood pressure, so I wanted to play it safe. Silly, I guess. I'm sure I'd be fine."

I thought taking my dogs for a leisurely morning walk would be fine, too.

But then an innocent walk on Christmas day turned into a medical emergency. Cardiac arrest. Pulmonary insufficiency, leading to valve replacement surgery.

What I'm starting to realize is that things meant to happen are just going to happen.

There's no preparing, no preventing.

They just happen.

And the risks we take, the memories we make, are the only things that count. That's all that matters. Everything else is going to happen anyway.

Cal's silence crawls down my back, only punctured by the sound of dark roast filling my "*Don't Worry, Be Happy*" mug—a phrase I've never really taken to heart because I'm a master at both. I give the handle a squeeze before twisting around to face him.



Two tawny eyes bore into me, darkening to match the coffee as I cross the kitchen and set the full cup down in front of him. I inhale a long breath until my smile slips back into place. “If you’re still hungry, I have some cereal. No chocolate milk, though. I suppose I could run out and—”

“No. You’re recovering. The last thing you need to worry about is feeding me, Lucy.”

“It’s nothing. I’m slower, sure, but I’m not incapable. Maybe I can—”

He cuts me off. “Stay with me.”

I’m mid-ramble, mid-spin, when Cal’s hand whips out to grasp my wrist. Warmth snakes up my arm at his touch, his words nabbing my breath.

Heartbeats in a gallop, I turn back around to face him. The dark circles under his eyes, the mess of hair and overgrown stubble, paint a picture of desperation. His grip on me tightens. “What do you mean?” I muster, wetting my lips. “I – I’m right here.”

“No, I meant...*stay* with me. At my place. Just for a little while.” Another squeeze. Another piercing, frantic look. “The doctor said it would take two to three months before you’re fully recovered, and it’s only been six weeks.”

“Cal, no...I shouldn’t.”

“Why?” He stands then, letting go of my wrist but lifting his hand to my chest. An index finger trails my collarbone, lightly tugging down the neckline of my sweater until the healing evidence of my surgery glares back at him in a streak of angry red. “I can’t watch over you if I’m not with you.”

The feel of his finger grazing along my skin shouldn’t invoke a colony of goosebumps to possess me. And it definitely shouldn’t have my breath stalling midway up my windpipe, causing me to nearly keel over into his arms.

That alone should be reason enough.

I loosen the snagged breath from my throat. “I’m doing better. I just had a follow-up with my physician, and he says I’m recovering really well. I need to get back to my regular walks, keep up with my appointments and medication...”

“It’ll be temporary,” he says, and there’s pleading in it. There’s a whole lot of begging in it. “A few weeks, tops. It would help me, too...please.” Urgency laces the sigh he lets out. “I need to see you with my own eyes, know that you’re okay. It kills me when I can’t reach you.”

Glancing down at the way his fingers split and splay across my ribs, like he’s trying to shield my heart from something, has my balance teetering. I

hold onto his hand for a moment before lowering it from my chest and readjusting my sweater to cover the wound. “It’s not a good idea,” I say shakily, gulping. “With our history.” My eyes lift, wide and searching. His flare with heat, mine with nerves. “Something might happen.”

*Something.*

Truth be told, I don’t think I’m opposed to that something anymore. Surprisingly, my brush with the pale horse seems to have had the opposite effect on me—instead of always running from love, I’m more inclined than ever to dive headfirst into it.

If that’s what he wanted, I just might.

No...I *would*.

I’d give him all of the precious minutes I have left in this world.

But, I know that’s not what he’s after. Cal wants noncommittal, fleeting, things free of expectation. He wants my body and my friendship, but not my future.

*Not love.*

Cal stiffens as his arm falls to his side, his eyes meeting mine. “I won’t let that happen.”

The confirmation is a blade to my already wounded chest. I dip my chin, hoping he can’t see my reaction.

“I’ll be your friend, Lucy. I *want* to be your friend...I want to take care of you.” Inching closer, he reaches for my hand that is now trembling. “Let me take care of you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

My mother stayed with me for four weeks before I sent her back home, missing my routines, missing the life I had before an unkind twist of fate struck me down. She’s still been over nearly every day, checking on me, coddling me, and I love her for it, I really do—

But, I was feeling smothered.

Mom is a lot, and when she’s worried or stressed, the *a lot* becomes too much sometimes.

Cal’s thumb sweeps across the back of my knuckles. “Lucy, stay with me. I still have to work, so you’ll have your space, but you’ll be...closer.”

The last word tickles his Adam’s apple. Bleary eyes find me worrying my lip and fidgeting with my sweater sleeve as Cal drops his hand and waits. He wants to be my friend, just my friend, and I can live with that if clear lines are drawn. That was the whole point of our reconnection, anyway.

I wanted my friend back.

It's the blur of it that twists me up inside. It's the one foot over the firing line, the in-betweens and shades of gray, that have me second guessing everything.

It's a smart move to not be living alone in these post-recovery weeks, and I know Cal wouldn't smother me. He craves his solitude as much as I yearn to hold onto my taste of independence.

And I can take care of him, too.

There's no loser in a win-win situation.

Nodding slowly, I raise my eyes and brighten them, stretching a smile to match. "You just miss my banana bread, don't you?" I attempt to tease.

He blinks. Cal doesn't smile, because he's not quite there yet, but his shoulders do slacken, and his hands unclench, like he's letting go of a small weight. "Painfully."

I smile wider, watching his gaze slip to my mouth for a beat before he gnashes his teeth together and takes a step back. He's moving away from the line, staying on his own side of the field.

We can do this.

Clearing the hitch in my throat, I pull a chair out from the table and take a seat, gathering my hair over one shoulder and glancing at the mug of coffee. Steam rolls off the top in a little plume. I've always loved the smell of coffee and looked forward to the mornings when Alyssa would fill my home with nutty, earthy scents that made me feel vibrant inside, like my face was tipped up toward the sun.

I move a hand across the table and drag the cup toward me. Dark liquid dribbles over the side as I lift it to my nose and inhale.

Then I take the smallest sip.

I look up at Cal as I swallow a gulp, rearranging my face into something pleasant, even though it's scalding and tastes like dirt.

He observes thoughtfully, lips twitching with the smile he keeps buried. "Gotta ease you into it. Sugar and girly syrups."

"Yep," I agree through a wince. "It could use a touch of sweetness."

Cal's eyes slant, head tilting slightly. "Something like that."

My smile widens as he takes a seat across from me and plants both arms on the tabletop, watching as I take another sip, and then another, until it doesn't taste so bad anymore.

I try coffee for the first time, and my heart doesn't explode.

I agree to stay with Cal.

And I hope and pray the end result is the same.

## CHAPTER 6

### LUCY

“Oh my God, you look amazing.”

Alyssa nearly tackles me on the slick sidewalk. Her arms wrap around my middle as we rock back and forth alongside a storefront building, a low-key afternoon of shopping on the agenda. My fuzzy earmuffs go crooked when we both nearly slip on a patch of ice, our embrace too eager. “So do you,” I grin. “Did you cut your hair?”

She pulls back and steadies her balance, then fluffs her slightly shorter bob. “A trim here, a layer there. What do you think?”

Off her supermodel pose, I cock my head with a giggle. “I think it’s been too long since we did this. Valve replacement recovery is far less fun than you.”

Most people would probably cringe and change the subject, but Alyssa latches onto my attempt at keeping the tone light. She links our arms together and pulls me forward. “Honestly, you’ve never looked better,” she breezes, popping one shoulder. “You’re kind of killing this whole cardiac arrest thing.” Then she actually does cringe. “Shit. Too dark, too soon.”

I laugh.

It’s true that I no longer resemble the wretchedly feeble, pasty-skinned girl from a month ago. There’s color in my cheeks, a spring to my steps, and streaks of golden blond highlights in my hair after Gemma offered to give me a post-trauma makeover.

I feel like I’m glowing again. Renewed.

The only thing missing is a guitar in my hands.

As the thought enters, I glance toward the wine bar coming up on our right. It’s perched between a coffee shop and chic boutique, and if I strain my

ear a little, I can almost hear the cheery jangle of my tambourine. My fingers tingle inside my mittens. I've focused on songwriting over the past few weeks, plucking aimlessly at guitar strings, but the itch to perform and play in front of a live audience has my belly pitching with longing.

Alyssa drags me into the coffee shop. I'd usually order a hot chocolate or chamomile tea, but today I'm feeling frisky and decide to try a cappuccino.

My friend blinks her long lashes at me, gesturing at my coffee cup as we stroll away from the counter with our orders. "New year, new you?"

"I guess so." I take a hesitant sip. The taste is still abrasive and overpowering, so I race toward the sugar packets. "My brush with death seems to have been a motivator to try new things. Take risks."

"Or," she adds, slurping her Frappuccino through a wide straw, "you actually *did* die on Christmas day. You've been reincarnated into a coffee-lover."

My nose crinkles as I pour two packets of sugar into my cup.

"Maybe you're Jesus."

"What?" I snort. "Jesus loved coffee?"

"Probably. If anyone needed the caffeine boost, it was him. I fall asleep just thinking about fishing," she shrugs. "But I was referring to a Christmas miracle type of thing. Never mind." Her eyes look wide and dilated. "Sorry, this is my third espresso-infused beverage today and it's only noon. I'm malfunctioning."

A laugh slips out as I shake my head. Taking another sip of the cappuccino, I decide that it's far more palatable, and we saunter out of the cozy café.

"Should we stop in and say hi to Nash?" Alyssa muses when we slow to a stop in front of Bliss Wine Bar and her eyes ping-pong between me and the tall window. "Just to say hi."

*Hmm.*

My best-friend instincts perk up as I assess her. She could be overly caffeinated, or she could be crushing on the cute bartender. "Why?" I instigate, watching her cheeks tinge pink.

Again...it could be the cold, or it could be a crush.

"To say hi," she repeats for the third time.

"You want to say hi?"

"He'd appreciate that, Lucy. We're standing outside of his bar right when they open, and I know he works on Thursdays, so the friendly thing to do

would be to stop in and say hello.”

She planned this outing to a tee.

Alyssa spots her reflection in the glass and fluffs her hair, then adjusts the pistachio-green scarf around her neck, fiddling with the fringed edges. Clearing her throat, she throws a glance my way.

I stretch a knowing grin.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I hide my smile by taking another sip of coffee. “You look antsy.”

“It’s the espresso.”

“Okay.”

Her brown eyes narrow at me, lips puckering with a muted plum stain. She blinks. “You’re reading my mind right now. You are Jesus.”

“Oh my God,” I giggle, peering in through the window and catching Nash’s attention as he moves around from behind the bar. Waving, I look back over at Alyssa who is still studying me like she’s trying to read *my* mind. “It’s okay if you have a thing for him. I never liked him like that.”

“What? I don’t have a thing for—”

Nash pops the door open and sticks his head out, a grin broadening. “It’s warmer on the other side of the door,” he quips, ushering us inside. He zigzags his gaze from me to Alyssa, then back to me. “Good to see you. It’s been too long.”

“Heh, yeah, hi. I just wanted to say hi.” Alyssa looks flustered, and she never looks flustered. Her hair lifts when a draft rolls through, so she swats at it, nearly spilling her beverage.

Swiveling behind me, she shoves me forward so I enter first, and I can’t help but laugh again. This feels good—a day out with friends, fresh air, lightness and laughter.

My mother, bless her heart, was a constant reminder that I almost died, where this day—right now—is a reminder that I’m still very much alive.

It’s all about perspective.

The wine bar is an added blanket, wrapping me up in warm familiarity as low light and soft music greet me. Natalie Imbruglia serenades us, singing about a perfect sky being torn, but all I feel is pieced back together.

My phone vibrates from my coat pocket as we commandeer two stools at the bar.

“Want some tots?” Nash asks, swiping a rag down the bar counter. “Eddy

is here and can whip something up.”

Bliss is known for their iconic, enchilada-style tater tot appetizer, so we both nod eagerly and agree to split a serving with shredded pork on the side.

I dig around for my phone and glance at the new text message lighting up the screen.

CAL:

Stopping at the store for groceries. What kinda food do the dogs like?

My nerves heighten, reminded that I’ll be rooming with Cal for an unknown number of weeks.

Still, the sentiment has a smile blossoming as I text him back.

ME:

That’s so sweet, thank you! They like Purina One. The chicken blend :)

CAL:

Got it

Alyssa bumps shoulders with me, not-subtly peeking at my cell phone. “How’s that going?”

“Good,” I say, slipping the phone back into my pocket. “I’m staying with him for a while.”

“What?”

“He offered, and it’s not a terrible idea.” I send Nash a thankful smile when he sets two glasses of water in front of us. “It’s smart to have someone watching out for me during these first few months post-recovery. My mom was...a lot,” I admit with a hint of guilt. “I sneezed too many times in a row one day and she was a third of the way into dialing 9-1-1.”

Alyssa tucks her hair behind her ear as she tinkers with her straw. “I mean, your heart does technically stop when you sneeze.”

“That’s a myth,” I chuckle. “I’m just saying, Cal worries. He’s lost a lot, so I get it. We can help each other heal.”



While I'm fairly certain Alyssa is mostly Team Cal, she still holds a grudge about the whole office incident that spiraled me into a black hole for weeks. Forgiveness has always come easier for me, as I'm a strong believer in second chances, and I know Cal regrets firing me.

It hurt him, too.

It's still hurting him.

"Well, it's probably not the worst idea," Alyssa decides, her eyes following Nash around the bar. She pulls them away when he turns around. "I'm too far away to visit you as much as I'd like. And even though I still kind of want to smack Cal for making you the saddest I've ever seen you, I saw how messed up he was at the hospital. He had this terrible, haunted look in his eyes, like when my dad accidentally backed the car into me in the driveway when I was twelve. Pure guilt."

"Are you serious?" She never told me that story before. I stare at her, unblinking.

"Yeah, I was okay. He wasn't going fast, and I was zooming by on my bicycle, not paying attention," she explains, dropping her elbows to the counter. "I had some bumps and bruises, but luckily, I was wearing a helmet. I was fine." Blowing a strand of hair out of her face, she tilts her head toward me with a soft smile. "Point is, we all have regrets, and sometimes we crucify ourselves enough, and that's all the punishment we need. All we can do is learn from them and try to be better. More careful, you know? My dad *still* takes forever to pull out of a parking space, terrified he's going to hit somebody. Guilt is powerful—I don't think it ever goes away. It changes a person."

Nash pops over with our gooey mound of tater tots and a little bowl of pork, then presses forward on his palms, eyeing Alyssa. "Shit, we might need to skip the coffee and go straight to alcohol," he notes, quirking a smile as his golden hair reflects off a kitschy chandelier. "That was deep."

She does a theatrical bow from her stool. "Deep Thoughts with Alyssa Akins. Tips welcomed and encouraged."

Simultaneously, Nash and I both fish out a handful of dollar bills and toss them at her until we all break out into a choir of laughter.

"We should go out this weekend," my friend perks up a while later, after we've made it through half the tots, both of our chins dotted with remnants of sour cream. She licks a finger, making a popping sound. "Nothing too crazy. Drinks and catch up."

Honestly? That sounds wonderful. “I’d love to. I’ll text Gemma and Knox. Maybe I can even convince Cal to tag along.”

“Count me in,” Nash nods, giving his hands a clap. “How about Cloud Red? It’s pretty chill.”

We all agree.

As the plan comes together, I glance over at the empty stage draped in string lights, longing for my Friday nights to return; yearning for music, for magic, for that *feeling* to possess me again.

I’m supposed to take it easy for three months, but nothing has ever been easier.

Singing is the easiest thing in the world, and I ache to get it back.

I interrupt the breezy conversation on my left, nodding my chin toward the stage as I snag Nash’s attention. “Think I can come back soon?” I was supposed to start bartending with him when the new year rolled in, but that plan unraveled on a blustery Christmas morning. I sigh. “I miss performing.”

“You never have to ask, Lucy,” Nash says easily, jade eyes sparkling against the ambient bar light. “We all miss your music as much as you miss playing it.”

Smiling, I dig my fork into a mushy tater tot and mentally prepare a new set list.

Then I snatch my cell phone and shoot off a text to Cal.

ME:

We’re going to Cloud Red on Saturday. It’s in Shorewood. Want to come? :)

He responds a few seconds later.

CAL:

Gotta work, so probably not

My lips purse with dismay.

“So...do you think a relationship is still on the table?” Alyssa inquires, noting the way I’m still staring at my phone, as if some magical mind voodoo might change his responding text to a cheery yes. “With Cal, I mean.”

Warmth snakes through me at the mere thought, at the idea of crossing

that line and turning our friendship into...*more*. Ultimately, I shake my head. “That’s not what he wants. He told me flat-out that he likes being alone. He doesn’t want to be strapped down to anything, so I’m not going to push it. I’m okay just being friends.”

She balks at me. “Strapped down? As if the guy isn’t already gone for you.”

My belly twists. “It’s not like that, Lys. There’s attraction, sure, but acting on it again would only break my heart. I’d expect too much, and he’s anti-expectation. It’s better this way.”

“If you say so.” A sigh leaves her as she slings her handbag over her shoulder. Alyssa falters when she leaves a tip on the counter and plucks a napkin up to dab her lips. It’s adorned with a note, scribbled in blue ink. She skims over the familiar writing and quickly stuffs it into her peacoat pocket, clearing her throat. “Ready to shop?” she pipes up, rising from the stool.

I nod and follow her lead. “I’m ready.”

We pay for our food, say goodbye to Nash, and amble out the front door.

I didn’t catch what the note said, but it leaves her beaming for the rest of the afternoon.



Overall, it looks mostly the same.

My eyes case the lobby, from the cluttered reception desk, to the merry-go-round wax warmer, to the smudged white board on the wall, still decorated with faded hearts and happy faces.

“Cal’s Corner” is scrawled in loopy letters across the top in bright pink, a focal point for clients.

I thought, for sure, he’d have taken that down the moment I left.

Even the jingle bells are still tied in place above the door, and I wonder if it was deliberate or just an oversight. Either way, the sound of them chiming caused my heart to flounder when I entered the shop for the first time since mid-December—the day Cal brought me to orgasm on his office desk, then promptly fired me.

My cheeks burn at the memory.

A citrus-infused wax melt infiltrates my senses as the service door pops open, revealing a line of familiar faces as the guys greet me, one by one.

“Holy shit,” Dante thunders, emitting authentic joy upon seeing me. He wipes his dirty hands along his coveralls, sending a wink my way. “Didn’t think we’d see our favorite ray of sunshine around here again.”

I hold out a basket of apple cinnamon muffins, my grin positively gleaming. It feels good to know I’ve been missed and that my time here was appreciated. “I come bearing gifts. And a recommendation to hire a receptionist,” I say in jest, glancing at the desk piled high with folders and invoices. “That mess is making my eye twitch.”

“Trust me, we’ve been begging the boss man to rectify that monumental blunder,” Dante agrees, stepping over to me, snatching the basket of treats, then wrapping me in a firm, one-armed hug. He smells like petrol and peppermint. “We’ve missed this pretty face of yours. And your top-tier cleaning abilities.”

Still grinning wide, I pull back and give my ponytail a tug as I shift my attention to the closed office door across the lobby. “Is Cal around?”

“Office, finishing up reports,” Kenny confirms. “He’s not in a great mood.”

“Is he ever?” I force a laugh, even though it comes out strained and nobody looks amused. Anxiety races through me to hear that Cal is next-level grumpy on my first night as his new roommate, and my mind spins with creative ways to cheer him up.

Ways that involve our clothes staying on, anyway.

“He screwed up a customer’s brake job today,” Kenny adds with a sigh, swiping a rag over his sweat-sheened face. “Used the wrong grade of brake fluid.”

I frown at that. “Oh no. That doesn’t sound like Cal—he’s always so careful.”

“He ain’t himself lately,” Ike cuts in, spearing me with a look that says more than I’m able to decipher. Pale blue eyes shimmer with foreboding, like he’s genuinely concerned about his boss. Like he knows something that I don’t know. “Do us all a favor and keep an eye on him, doll.”

The warning hangs between the four of us like a tornado siren.

My stomach pitches.

“Sure,” I bob my head. “Of course. I’m actually going to be, uh...staying with him for a while. Just until I reacclimate.” I play with my ponytail,

twisting it over my shoulder.

“Heard about that,” Dante nods, running his tongue along his upper lip. “That’s either going to be another grade-A fuck-up, or exactly what he needs.” Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he cocks his head to the side as if weighing the odds. “Sure hope it’s the latter.”

All three men stare at me, stoic and silent.

I gulp as the siren blares louder, telling me to take shelter now.

Then the office door whips open and Cal stalks out, situating a ballcap on his head, grumbling something under his breath. He’s looking down at a piece of paper in his hands when he realizes there’s an audience huddled across the room.

His head swings up, and when he spots me mingling with the guys, he blinks, coming to a halt. “What are you doing here?”

Not exactly the shiny, happy greeting I was hoping for, but I smile anyway. “Hey! I thought I’d stop by and say hi to everyone before I head over to your place.” I point a finger at the muffins. “I brought carbs. Apple cinnamon.”

Two tired eyes rake over me in my geo print shift dress and black stockings before he throws a scowl at Dante. “You guys finished up?”

Dante takes a step back from me, as if the scowl was directly correlated to our proximity. “All done, boss. Did you make things right with Dawson?”

“I handled it.” Cal pokes around his pockets for something, then sighs when he seemingly comes up empty. “You can head out. See you tomorrow.”

The tension in the room is so thick, I have to fight for a full breath. When Ike and Kenny stop over for a hug and then shuffle past me to punch out, Dante lingers briefly, glancing at Cal who pulls something out from the printer.

I clear my throat. “You know, I’m meeting up with some friends on Saturday if you and the guys wanted to stop by for a drink. It’s a little far from here, but it would be nice to catch up,” I say, still smiling, trying to ignore the wary eyeballing from Cal out of my periphery. “It really meant a lot that you came by the hospital. Maybe I can buy a round for everyone.”

Hesitation skates across his face. “Bishop going to be there?”

“I’m not sure,” I shrug. “He didn’t sound interested.”

“See you tomorrow, Dante,” Cal clips, tone gruff, intent clear.

We both look toward the desk, then back at each other. I school my smile to stay put.

Blowing out a breath, Dante takes another step back with a small nod of consent. “Yeah, maybe. Text me the details, sweetheart.” He gives me a wave before sauntering away. “Good to see you.”

“You, too.” I watch him disappear into the break room before all three guys head back out and give me a final farewell. When it’s just me and Cal left in the lobby, I pivot toward him. “Sorry to drop by unannounced. I’m just going to pick up my dogs, and then I’ll head over to your place.” The only response I receive is something like a grunt, so I keep going. “If you’re still okay with that, I mean. I totally understand if—”

“Yes, I want you to stay with me, Lucy,” he says, glancing up with only his eyes. “My idea, remember?”

I swallow. “I remember, but—”

“But nothing. I’ll see you at the house in a bit.”

*Okay.*

Something is wrong.

I thought Cal was eager and excited for this arrangement, but he’s acting like I’m a giant inconvenience. Refusing to let him see the glittering tears in my eyes, I swivel around and move to the front door. “See you soon,” I murmur, hurt and deflated.

“I just had a bad day,” he calls out to me as I reach for the door handle. “Nothing to do with you.”

I look back at him over my shoulder with a soft nod. He’s leaning forward on the desk, the veins in his arms bulging as his eyes pin me with a touch of despair. My heart aches. “I get it. No worries.”

I don’t get it, and I *am* worried.

He said it has nothing to do with me, but I’m not sure I believe him.

The desolate glaze over his eyes, the excessive drinking, the dark cloud hovering overhead crackling with an impending storm—Cal has always been moody and closed-off, but this is different.

And I feel like I’m the trigger.

His negative charges clashed with my positive charges, and now there’s lightning.

As I turn to leave again, he stops me, sounding a few steps closer. “If you want to go out with Dante, I won’t stand in your way.”

I freeze, eyes widening as I spin around to face him. “What?” My heart plummets into my stomach at the suggestion. “I thought you said he was trouble.”

“No more than me.” Cal moves forward, his strides long but sluggish. Pain decorates his face with creases and conflict, like the proposal is having a physical effect on him and making him sick.

Like he wants me to do anything *but* go out with Dante.

He stares at me, piercing and waiting.

My brows dip into a troubled frown. “No...I’m not interested in him like that. He’s just a friend.” It’s the truth—I’m not attracted to Dante. I’m not attracted to anyone but Cal.

I swear he lets out a breath of relief that causes his whole body to decompress. Shoulders loosening, biceps twitching, he sends me a quick nod, as if it was hard enough to suggest it once, and he doesn’t have it in him to press the matter. “All right, good. Don’t go out with Dante, then.”

My frown deepens as I try to read him. “Are you okay?” I ask softly. So softly I hardly hear the words leak out.

A lengthy pause crashes over us. His silence is infused with so much he isn’t telling me.

Finally, he tenses back up and mutters, “I’m fine. See you in a few.”

The lie ruptures at my feet like confetti, and I send him a watery smile and nod my head. Cal turns back around and trudges toward the desk until all I can do is walk the other way.



An hour later, I shuffle inside Cal’s house with a giant suitcase and my guitar, my corgis bulldozing past me like they’ve spotted the holy grail of dog bones. They see, in fact, nothing at all, and are simply hellbent on running in circles around the coffee table, chasing each other until Cricket howls with terror and launches herself down the basement stairs in an impulsive act of self-preservation.

It’s going to be a long few weeks.

“Here,” Cal says when he hears the chaos, moving toward me from the hallway and reaching for my belongings. “I got it.”

He smells like booze, and I’m immediately instilled with dread. His usual oaky, bourbon scent is overpowered by *actual* bourbon—*how is he drinking*

*already?* There was hardly an hour window in between when I last saw him, so he must have reached for the bottle the moment he set foot in the house. Deep concern burrows into my bones.

“Thank you,” I tell him, painting a smile on my lips to mask the worry. We stand there face-to-face for a heavy beat, and I’m sunk with the notion that I have no idea what to do next. I’m itching for the comfort of fall nights, handholding, warm cider, and winning free-throw shots. For the dreamy afternoons of pressing and filling raviolis by window light as we sneak smiles and soft touches, while holiday jingles fill the space between us. I bite my lip and glance at the piano draped in black. “I appreciate you letting me stay here.”

Cal doesn’t reply. Instead, he moves in closer, sets my suitcase and guitar case at his feet, and pulls me into a hug.

With my eyes elsewhere, I don’t expect it. I don’t expect it at all, but my body reacts as it always does when he holds me, and I fall into him in a way that is entirely effortless. Pressed up against the planks of his chest, I lift my hands and settle them on his denim-clad hips, my nose burrowing into his t-shirt. When I’m this close, the scent of soap and sea-breeze detergent trumps the whisky, and contentment washes over me.

“Is this okay?” he asks, raspy and low. Cal squeezes me tighter, a rogue hand grazing up my spine and raveling in my hair. “Just needed to touch you. Feel you.” He breathes in deep, tickling the hairs on the top of my head. “Make sure you’re really here.”

*Here sounds a lot like...alive.*

He needs to know I’m still alive; that I didn’t leave him on that sidewalk.

I nod. “I’m here.”

*I’m here, I’m here, I’m here.*

But all I really want to say when I lift my chin and find his eyes is, “*Are you?*”



## CHAPTER 7

### CAL

The silver tin stares back at me, glinting off the hallway light. I give it a shake, listening as a handful of tiny pills dance around inside. My heartrate kicks up at the memory of one sliding down my throat; of the euphoria that came right after.

*Weakness.*

That's what this really is. That's what the tin feels like tucked inside my hand, what the pills sound like tinkling back and forth against the edges.

Since Ike wouldn't budge, I texted an old acquaintance of mine from Jolene's tattoo shop. Oscar, a shady fucker with greasy hair, a limp in his gait, and two felony charges on his record, that I know of. I knew damn well Oscar wouldn't give me a guilt trip, or try to convince me to see a therapist. I knew he wouldn't look at me the way Ike looked at me, all knowing eyes and pity. He'd take my money and shake my hand, then send me on my way.

And that's exactly what he did.

My eyes narrow at the tin.

I haven't taken anything, haven't even looked inside.

All I've done is drink since I left work, feeling edgy and irritable. Lucy didn't deserve that side of me as she made the transition into my place, especially after she'd witnessed my shitty mood at the shop earlier. Alcohol quiets my inner turmoil, keeps my demons in check. I can relax, I can be better, I can be stronger for her.

It's just temporary, until I get my shit together. Right now, my wounds feel too raw.

There's a sheen of sweat across my brow and a warning spasm in my chest. It's been years since I've journeyed down this black hole of a road, and

I swore I'd never make that wrong turn again. Yet here we are. I'm inching closer and closer the longer I sit here simmering in my own madness.

After a tension-ridden hour of getting Lucy settled in the guest room and sneaking back swallows of Jim Beam in my bedroom, I feel lost. All I wanted to do was keep Lucy close, but now that she's here, I don't know what to fucking do with her. She still feels far away, just out of reach. Her probing glances sent pangs of disgrace right through me. She deserves better than this—than what I am, than what I'm becoming.

I stood in the hallway and watched her unpack her suitcase. Her back was facing me, but I still saw her pull out that little panda bear and set it on the bed. The one I gave to her, the one I won because I tried, because I *fought*.

Because there was no other option but winning that toy and watching her face light up with pure joy.

Weightless, beautiful joy.

Her eyes were so damn bright that night.

Mine were, too, and I think that was the moment I really felt like I could be something. For her, for me. *We* could be something.

*Fuck...* I want to do it again. I want to fight and win and be *worthy*, but all I feel is buried.

My head snaps up when I feel her.

She's standing in my bedroom doorway in a powder blue dress, her hair long and wild and newly shaded with sunny streaks.

After everything she's been through, she's still getting brighter.

She's caught in the sun, while I'm slipping into the shadows.

I hide the tin inside my fist. "Hey." My voice wavers like she witnessed me doing something wrong, and her eyes ping open a little wider, now privy to the alarm bells.

"Are you okay?" she asks me again, taking a small step toward my perch at the foot of the mattress. "You're sitting here alone in the dark."

"I'm good." I squeeze the tin harder until the silvery edges dig into my skin. "What's up?"

The skirt of her dress flutters as she sways her hips side to side, looking fidgety. "I made you dinner. Meatloaf and sweet potatoes. A salad, too. Extra croutons."

Fuck, she's perfect.

Too perfect.

Too perfect to be here, in this house with me, sharing a space with my

demons. She shouldn't be this close to my weakness.

But, she can't *not* be here, either—I won't survive it.

I watch the corners of her lips turn up in the way they always do when she looks at me. Her smile has me wishing the pills would catch on fire in my hand.

Maybe I'll flush them.

"Are you sure you're okay, Cal?" The smile fades slightly off my silence, her eyes dimming. "Did you want me to bring you a plate?"

"Said I'm good." My tone is too bitter, too acidic. I didn't mean for it to be, but I'm being torn in half, pulled one way, yanked the other way, and it's hard to keep the agony out of my voice. "Sorry," I try again. "I'm fine. I'll be out in a minute."

Lucy wavers, clasping her hands in front of her and wringing them together. She nibbles at her lip. Something I'm fucking dying to do.

"Sure, okay," she says. "I'll set the table."

Her smile is long gone now. I rub my free hand over my face and pinch the bridge of my nose, hating that I wiped it off her pretty face. "All right," I mutter.

Nodding, she walks out the door.

She walks out, but the scent of pears and sugarcane lingers behind, and the cloud of sweetness is enough to pull me to my feet and guide me across the room to my nightstand.

I toss the pills inside and slam the drawer shut.



I'm there again.

It's a familiar dark night in late May, and storm clouds are dumping down rain and forewarning.

Police cars pull up along the front of our house.

Red, blue, blinding.

I call out for my parents because I've been staring out the window all evening, waiting for her to come home. Dad just walked in after spending hours casing the neighborhood streets, searching for any sign of Emma. He

was soaked to the bone. Shivering and sick. I've never seen my father so helpless before—to the point where he heaved into the kitchen sink, sobbing and retching, as my mother stroked his back and told him it was going to be okay.

Dad said the same thing to me as I paced the living room pulling out my hair. He wouldn't let me search with him, too afraid of what he'd find.

*Of what I'd see.*

“She's going to be okay, son. We'll find her. She just made a wrong turn, and she'll turn up,” he told me, but his voice was shaky and broken. Color had drained from his skin, and his eyes were wild. Glazed with the bone-deep awareness that nothing was going to be okay.

Emma's not here, but she never made it to Marjorie's.

She's not here, and she's not at Marjorie's, and she's nowhere, and she's *not fucking here*.

My parents race out the front door before the officers can even step out of their cruisers. The door is left wide open, swinging back and forth, so I step onto the porch as my heartbeats strangle me.

A cop walks toward Mom and Dad, a harbinger of bad news.

I'm far away, but I can still see the look on his face. His features are all twisted up, and he's shaking his head as my mother flies at him demanding answers.

Words are swept up by cracks of thunder and furious wind, but I hear a little.

*Found her.*

*So sorry.*

*Gone.*

*She's gone.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Gone, gone, gone.*

Icy rain pelts me, fusing with the words.

Dad collapses in the grass. His legs just give out, as if they're gone, too.

Mom howls like a rabid animal and falls at the officer's feet in the driveway. “No!” I've never heard a sound so wretched before. It can't be human. It can't be her. “No, please, *no!*”

She clutches at his ankle, and I blink through the raindrops, trying to process.

*Gone, gone, gone.*

Emma's gone.

"My baby! My baby!" The last word is just a wail of mournful syllables pouring out of her.

*Emma*

*is*

*gone.*

She left the house alone and never made it to Marjorie's.

Because I wasn't with her.

Because I didn't insist, didn't plead, didn't force my way out the door with her safely at my side.

Oh, fuck.

Oh, *fuck.*

And then Lucy is rushing toward me from the adjacent yard, a white gown plastered to her willowy frame, her face just as white. Rain mats her hair and has her feet sliding every which way, but she makes it over to me with a sigh of relief when she spots me in front of my house.

"Cal!" She's out of breath. "Cal, what's going on?"

I'm out of breath, too.

My sister is gone. I can't breathe.

I finally meet her eyes, and I think I say something. I think I tell her what I've just discovered, the words I managed to pluck out of the wind, but I don't even hear myself speak.

All I remember is falling to my knees in the grass with Lucy in my arms, dying inside. Ripped apart and torn to shreds.

I think I'm still dreaming when I feel those same arms around me again.

Lucy, holding me tight, sobbing against my chest as the rain buckets down. But the sound of her voice pulls me from the stupor. It's not raining, and we're not two teenagers crumpled in a heap in front of my old house.

The bed is warm and dry, her arms stronger, steadier, and her bare legs are braiding with mine. "Lucy?" I mumble, half asleep, still dream-drunk as I roll over to face her. She slinks in beside me, just a gorgeous shadow. Her face nestles into the center of my chest, cheek pressed to my heart.

Drowsiness infuses her tone. It's soft and husky, a sweet vibration against my skin. "I had a nightmare," she croaks out.

Fucking hell. I wonder if it was the *same* nightmare; the one I can't escape, can never fully run from. Even when I'm awake, it lingers. A stain on my memory.

“C’mere.” I sling a heavy arm around her body and pull her close, wrapping us in blankets, and entangling our legs even more. She’s wearing a nightshirt and underwear, but no pants. The shirt bunches up around her middle, and my hand drifts to her ass as I tug her closer. I can’t help the groan I release into her hair, especially when I get a whiff of that hair. Smells like fucking candy.

We’re spooled and wound together, twisted limbs and jumbled hearts. I sense the shift in her breathing as her lips tickle my bare chest, and my dick responds by thickening to steel inside my boxers. She can feel it, I’m damn certain. We’re too close for her to not feel my erection jabbing her in the abdomen, desperate to thrust into that heat between her legs. When she squirms a little, my eyes roll up, and I think about how tight she’d be. How she’d probably have me coming inside her like a pathetic jackass the moment I slide home.

*Fuck.*

I need to pivot, and fast. This is the last thing I should be thinking about, and we both know it. Whisky still taints my blood, softening my willpower. If Lucy asked me to fuck her, I would—hell, I probably wouldn’t even hesitate. But then I’d hate myself because I’ll never be all the other things she’s bound to ask for. A worthy partner. A good man.

Something she deserves.

I school my brain into blocking out the erotic images, along with the memories of my fingers pumping in and out of her, the whimpers I tore from her throat, and the way her stomach was the perfect canvas for my—

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Grandma Edith in a bikini.

Artichokes.

Bed bugs, everywhere, forever.

Cricket’s litter box after she raided my cheese drawer.

Exhaling a shuddery breath, I inch my hips back, away from Lucy, and calm myself the fuck down. I don’t release my hold on her though, still keeping my arm draped across her middle and maintaining a comfortable grip. She shifts a bit on the mattress. Her own shaky breath spills out, warming my skin, but she also scoots back because she knows what I know. Lucy knows sleeping together would be a mistake.

And I promised her I wouldn’t let it happen.

“S-sorry I woke you,” she whispers, curling her knees to her chest. When

I don't answer right away, desperately trying to keep my thoughts from veering off the deep end, she begins to slither out of my arms. "I should go."

"Stay with me." The words ring with urgency, tumbling out with little thought. My voice is thick and raspy from sleep, mimicking a growl. "Please."

Lucy relaxes. "Are you sure?"

I'm not sure about much, but I'm sure about this—Lucy sleeping beside me, breathing and full of life, the scent of her skin a far better drug than the poison hiding inside my bedside drawer.

When we're like this—just like this—everything feels right.

She feels like she could really be mine.

"I'm sure."

I feel her muscles slacken as she snuggles closer to me, her head tucked right beneath my chin. It feels so perfect, this moment. But I've been privy to a lot of perfect moments and they never last.

So, I'll savor it while I can.

I'll be sure about it while it's still here.

Her steady breaths eventually morph into a soft snore as she drifts back to sleep in my arms, and I close my eyes.

*No*—I'm not sure about a lot, but I'm damn fucking sure about her.

I just wish I was sure about me, too.

## CHAPTER 8

### LUCY

I realize something isn't quite right when I wake up the next morning and feel an uncomfortable slickness between my thighs, paired with cool, wet sheets against my skin.

I'm lying on my stomach, arms draped over my head, eyelids fluttering to meet the new day. Dawn trickles in through dark gray curtains, illuminating the space in a wash of coral light. I inhale a long breath, my face pressed into the pillowcase, and I'm met with the scent of woody, amber musk and a lingering trace of smoke—something inherently masculine. The notion sends a zip of thrill straight through me.

Thrill...and confusion.

I tilt my cheek to the right and am also met with the sleeping, shirtless body of Cal sprawled out beside me on the mattress.

*His mattress.*

Angry tattoos stare back at me, only softened by the muted glow of early morning. Skulls and bones, flames, blood-red roses edged with thorns. He's lying on his back with an arm folded over his eyes, as if he's blocking out all remnants of light. I stare at his long fingers decorated in inky musical notes, then trail my gaze over the blue veins rippling through his triceps, landing on the hard planks of his chest and stomach. A trim hip pokes out through the top of his boxers, his hand curled around the bedsheet covering his lower half.

I blink rapidly, drowsiness clouding my memories.

I'm in bed with Cal.

Why am I in bed with—

*A nightmare.*



I'd had a nightmare at three a.m. and crawled out of the guest room bed, stumbling my way through the dark and into his room. Images of Emma begging for her life had slithered their way into my dream psyche, but I couldn't tell him that. When he murmured my name into the wall of shadows as I slid in beside him and wrapped an arm across his torso, all I croaked out was, "I had a nightmare."

"C'mere," he told me, then tugged me as close as I could get.

It was a bold move, climbing into bed with Cal on our first night together. I almost started to question the sleep-spurred decision when I felt his arousal pressing into me as we wove our respective limbs into a knotted pretzel. He was hard and erect, bringing back sordid memories of our office indiscretion. My core clenched at the thought of him taking me right then—my heart racing, knowing that I'd let him—but then he moved back, putting a small gap between us.

Just enough distance to let me know he wasn't going to give in.

To remind me that we were just friends.

I was too groggy to do much else but nod off in the safety of his arms, allowing the warmth of him to ward off anymore bone-chilling nightmares.

But...none of that explains why it feels like I'm lying in a pool of my own mortality.

My thighs feel sticky as I rub them together.

I suck in a breath.

*Did my chest wound tear?*

*Was I maimed in the night by a masked intruder?*

*Did Cal claim my virginity and I missed it?*

Because it feels like—

My eyes ping wide open.

Nausea churns in my gut as the worst possible scenario filters through my mind.

No. Shit. No.

I shoot upright and fling off the bed covers, greeted by a grisly stain of bright red.

*No!*

Oh my God. This isn't happening.

I had my period.

In Cal's bed.

Right next to Cal.

It's probably touching Cal.

My period blood is touching Cal.

Water bites at my eyes as the horror manifests into ugly sobs that lodge in the back of my throat. The sensation of my frantic limbs kicking away the covers, like they're crawling with thirty-thousand ancient Scarab beetles, has Cal shifting beside me, stretching and newly alert. In a split-second of blatant desperation, I debate clocking him in the head and knocking him out before he's made aware of my worst nightmare unfolding, but my conscience, of course, wins out.

So I just burst into tears.

"What the hell?" Cal grouches, startling fully awake beside me.

He rubs the sleep from his eyes before he's pulled into a horrifying reality in which I bled all over his bedsheets. My nightshirt is bunched around my middle, so I tug it down as far as it'll go, trying to shield the added evidence coating my thighs. "I'm sorry," I blubber, full-on panicking at this point.

"Lucy, what the fuck is—" The mattress shifts with his weight before he turns to face me and says, "Shit."

I sob harder. "I'm so sorry. I didn't—my period—I didn't mean—"

"Fuck, hey...you're okay." Cal moves across the mattress and grabs my face between his hands until I'm forced to look him right in the eyes. "Breathe, Lucy. You're fine."

My head swings back and forth. I'm close to hyperventilating from mortification. "Y-you don't understand. I feel horrible. I—"

He squeezes my cheeks between two big hands, and even though his grip is firm and rough, his touch is kind and tender. A calloused thumb grazes my jawline. "You're fine," he repeats, pulling my forehead to his. "You're good. Breathe."

Those childhood words ripple through me like a sun-soaked stream, placating the roaring waves trying to sink me. My eyelids flutter as I try to calm down, focusing on my breathing before I spiral. Focusing on him; his hands, his skin, his breath beating gently against my lips.

My anxiety ebbs as a tear leaks from the corner of my eye. Cal swipes it away, placing a kiss along my hairline, and I reach for his wrists to hold myself steady as my body relaxes.

Here's the thing.

I'm triggered.

This would be appalling for anybody to wake up to, but it feels

catastrophic to me. After an incident occurred when I was twelve years old, riding home on the school bus, period mishaps have become pretty high on my list of Worst Things To Ever Happen To Lucy Ever, right alongside my irrational fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of my mouth.

Cal drags his hand around to the back of my head, gathering me closer as he whispers against my ear, “You good now?”

I’m not sure if I’m *good*, but his words make me feel good, and his careful hold on me makes me feel really good, so I nod anyway. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You’re acting like I’ve never witnessed a woman on her period before,” he says, inching back to gaze down at me. His eyes skim across my face, trying to make sense of my bizarre breakdown. “Tell me you’re good.”

I swallow, licking away a stray tear from my lip. “I – I think I’m good. I just...I need to wash your sheets. And clean up,” I murmur, my voice still wobbly. “And then go dig a six-foot hole and bury myself in your backyard.”

The makings of a smirk have his lips twitching, but he pulls back and scrubs a hand over his jaw to hide it. “I’ll help you,” he mutters, moving off the bed.

“Okay. You can grab the shovel.”

“I’ll help you clean up,” he corrects, and when he turns to glance at me as he stands from the mattress, the tiny smirk breaks free. He clears his throat and erases it quickly. “It’s not a big deal, Lucy. Go hop in the shower while I get the laundry going.”

“No! God, no, I’ll take care of everything.” Panic zings through me again, and I leap from the bed, frantically tearing at the fitted sheet and blankets. “Go...hide or something. I’ve got it.”

“Lucy.”

“Please go, this is humiliating.” I gather the sheets into a giant ball until the wad of stained linens is tucked against my chest.

“Why?”

I look up at him, eyes flaring wide and glassing over as memories of seventh-grade school bus mortification come careening back, slamming into me like a bottle rocket of post-traumatic stress. I stare blankly, zoning out.

Cal stalks toward me and snaps his fingers in front of my face. “Blink, Lucy. You look like you’re about to black out.”

Letting out a breath, I blink half a dozen times until his features morph back into view. “I just...I had a terrible experience on the day I got my period

for the first time. Emma was there, and she—” My mouth snaps shut. “Never mind. It’s too embarrassing.”

“Tell me.”

My throat tightens. I shake my head like a madwoman and high-tail it out of his bedroom with the evidence bunched inside my arms. Carrying it into the bathroom, I race inside and slam the door behind me, instantly shoving my underwear down my legs and burying it deep into the wastebasket like it never existed before cleaning myself up. Then I stop to catch a breath and remind myself that this probably isn’t a big deal.

Not really.

Actually, it’s fine and normal, and part of having a uterus, and—

The bathroom door flies open.

“Cal!” I shriek, kicking the linens behind me with my heel and planting my hands against his chest to push him out. “Go. Please.”

“I want to help.” His body is a cement block, and he doesn’t budge an inch. “Tell me what happened.”

I push harder, and still, nothing. I’m just a down feather trying to move a brick house. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

In a flash, his hands are around my waist, and I’m being lifted off the tile floor and plopped onto the sink. I inhale sharply. His eyes are molten, blazing into me as he slides between my legs and gives my hips a squeeze. “Wh-what are you doing?” I stammer.

“I told you, I want to help.” Pulling his eyes away but keeping his body firmly perched between my knees, he reaches over to the hand towel dangling from a silver bar and turns the water on until it heats. He moistens the rag, rings it out, then inches my shirt up, just far enough to expose my thighs.

I freeze. I’m hardly even breathing.

Cal locks eyes with me for a beat, almost like a plea for permission. Consent to breach this delicate wall of intimacy and trust.

Releasing the breath I’ve been clinging to, I give him a small nod.

And then the warm rag is traveling up my leg, knee to thigh, gently dabbing and washing.

Cleaning me.

Taking care of me.

He’s managed to temper my anxiety, somehow. I feel like I should be running, crying, shoving him away, screaming with embarrassment, but all I

feel is...

*Safe.*

“I’ve thought about this before,” he says, voice turning to grit. His throat bobs through a swallow as he grazes the wet rag along my inner thigh. Carefully, almost lovingly. “Not this, exactly, but...” Trailing off, he wets his lips and glances up at me. “When I thought that maybe we’d become more than friends.”

My thighs yearn to clench as a shot of heat races south, but I keep them parted.

“I knew you’d bleed, and it fucking killed me that I’d hurt you like that,” he says darkly, gaze penetrating, touch still tender. “But it also did something to me—knowing you would bleed because no one’s ever had you like that before. Only me.”

Hot tension crackles between us. My skin flushes, and I don’t know what to say or how to respond. I don’t think this is supposed to be sexual—it’s an act of trust, of safekeeping—but my breathing kicks up and I start to sweat. The tungsten overhead light feels like it’s burning me alive, Cal’s words an accelerant to the flames.

He doesn’t trail the rag any higher than my thigh.

“Tell me what happened,” he pivots, his words cracking a little as he looks away from me. “When you were a kid.”

I feel myself locking up, so I close my eyes and focus on the soft texture of his sweatpants tickling my bare knees, on the wisps of his breath along my hairline, on the languid swipe of the rag, up and down, cleansing my skin. “I had my period for the first time on the bus. On the way home from school,” I tell him, cheeks heating. The memory is beyond demeaning, but as I imagine the look on Emma’s face when she peered down at the red stain blooming on my jeans, her words slicing off mid-sentence, a giggle bursts out of me. “Emma yelled at the bus driver to stop the bus,” I tell Cal through a cry-laugh sort of sound. Something unhinged. “I mean, she positively *screeched*. The color left her face as she hollered, ‘*STOP THE BUS, MR. MYERS, LUCY IS BLEEDING TO DEATH!*’ and we all went eerily silent, struck with horror.”

When I open my eyes, Cal is staring at me, dark eyebrows raised, one palm pressing forward on the sink beside me.

“The driver pulled off to the side of the road and asked me what happened. I was so embarrassed, I couldn’t speak. I covered my lap with my backpack, shaking my head back and forth, refusing to tell him.” I cup a hand

over my mouth, realizing how comical it all truly was. My shoulders shake with silent laughter as I continue. “He kept asking me where I was bleeding, but I wouldn’t answer. He eventually called over the radio to all of the other drivers and the transportation office, saying there was an injured student bleeding on the bus, and they advised him to call 9-1-1.”

“Jesus.” Cal tosses the rag into the bathtub to his left, then tugs my t-shirt down over my thighs. One of his hands remains on my hip, thumb brushing along the edging of the fabric. “Tell me he didn’t call.”

“He called,” I confirm, cheeks aching as I giggle with morbid amusement. “He totally called. I was completely mute with shock at that point, so I just sat there, staring out the window while EMTs raced toward the bus. All of the students needed to leave and wait in the grass while an ambulance and a fire truck showed up to treat my *medical emergency*.”

The ghost of a smile paints Cal’s lips. He leans forward a little, bowing his head as his grip on my hip tightens ever so slightly. “Well, shit.”

“I know. When I was finally forced to confess the truth, I burst into tears and apologized a thousand times. I was traumatized—and, clearly, I haven’t gotten over it,” I sigh, swiping at the water in my eyes. As my giggles abate and my smile fades, I lift a hand and rest it atop Cal’s, my fingers skimming across his knuckles. My voice hitches as I add softly, “It was a disaster.”

Cal glances down at our hands, at my fingers tickling his tattoos, and he bites his lip. His eyes close for a beat. “You’re smiling about it now,” he notes, a gravelly pitch to his tone as he raises his chin, our faces no more than two inches apart. “Sounds like an adventure to me.”

Our eyes meet.

My hold on his hand strengthens as I nod my head, knowing that he’s right. As awful as it was at the time, Emma always stood out in my mind—the hug she gave me, the way she smoothed my hair back as I sobbed my mortification into her shoulder, her endless apologies, and how she tried so hard to make it up to me that night with tubs of chocolate ice cream and boxes of Sour Patch Kids that she coerced her mother into buying.

Cal pulls away and takes a step back. He rubs the back of his neck, muscles rippling as he eyes me up and down. “I’ll let you shower,” he mutters before leaning down to pick up the heap of bedsheets.

I let him this time. “Thank you.” Swallowing the knot in my throat, I watch as he turns toward the door to leave.

As the sleek planks of his back and inked shoulder blades come into

view, I frown. My brows pinch together, eyes squinting through the brassy lighting.

I blink, registering what I'm seeing for the first time.

I've seen Cal without a shirt before, but only his chest.

Never his back.

A startled gasp leaves me as a shiver rolls up my spine.

Pulling the door open, Cal steps over the threshold and falters briefly; just for a fleeting second. He gives me a knowing glance over his shoulder, eyes igniting with awareness as they hold with mine for one potent heartbeat.

And then he walks out and closes the door behind him.

*Deceptive Cadence.*

Those two words flash across my mind, scrawled across his skin in cursive lettering. Emma's diary entry slams into me, and I grip the edge of the sink to keep myself from falling.

### ***“Deceptive Cadence”***

*You think you know what's coming, but you never really do.*

*And sometimes, when you think something is coming to an end, it's actually the beginning of something beautiful.*

The words were tattooed along his lower back in jet black ink.

A tribute. A homage.

They were etched onto his skin, right beneath a pair of angel wings.

And between the wings...was the outline of a glowing sun.

*Sunshine.*

## CHAPTER 9

### LUCY

“**S**urprise!”

I drop Alyssa’s hand and go stone-still inside the doorway.

Dozens of familiar faces shine back at me, swathed in ambient light and gleeful smiles. Mom stands from her seat and pumps a fist in the air through happy tears, garnering the rest of the group to rise and break out into a round of applause.

I stand frozen in the entry with snowflakes in my hair and butterflies zipping around my belly. An arm envelops me, slinging around my neck and tugging me closer, and I realize through a joyous sob that it’s Alyssa. She did this.

She did whatever this is.

All I can comprehend at the moment is that so many people I love are here, staring at me with overjoyed grins that make their eyes glitter. They’re clapping their hands and whistling and hurrahing as I crumble against my best friends and cover my face with my palms.

“Happy belated birthday, bestie,” she whispers into my ear, smacking the side of my head with a kiss. “I love you so much.”

The *Happy Birthday* song meets my ears, voices off-key and wonderful, and tears of disbelief slip through the cracks in my fingers.

I glance up, truly taking in the scene.

My mother is here. My aunt and uncle, cousins and nieces, Gemma and Knox, a handful of sanctuary volunteers, old friends from college, Nash, and even the guys from the auto shop. So many people are here.

*For me.*

It’s too much. It’s so much that my knees nearly buckle, and Alyssa has



to half carry me over to the giant table adorned with candlelight, burlap, and lemon and cream flowers in glass mason jars. Cloud Red, a downtown bar with a trendy, rustic backdrop, looks to be rented out just for me—just for this special night. My heart clenches with happiness.

I shake the snow from my freshly blow-dried hair and pluck the red scarf from my neck, moving to meet with every guest, taking my time to thank them and smother them with hugs. I'm so thrown by the surprise that it takes me a minute to realize there is a very important person missing.

Alyssa gives my hand a squeeze as if she already knows where my mind went when my eyes pan around the room a dozen times.

"I invited him," she says softly, her hand lifting to rub my back. "He said he'd try to make it, but he had to work late."

I refuse to cry—not here, not now. I *refuse*. Forcing back the sting of tears, I bob my head through a strained smile. "It's okay. I know he's busy." I clear my throat and pivot the conversation into something that doesn't make me want to book it out of here and find a pillow to sob into for the rest of the night. "I can't believe you did this for me."

"Why?" She lets out a little huff that sounds like audacity and flips her hair over her shoulder. "You didn't get to celebrate your birthday. I wanted to wait until you were recovered and could fully appreciate a celebration. So, I know we're two months past due, but I hope it's still memorable."

*Memorable?* No celebration has ever been more worthy of remembering. I'll think about this night for the rest of my life. "It's incredible. It means everything to me."

As we draw back together for another hug, Nash strolls over with a craft beer in his hand. I send him a smile over Alyssa's shoulder before we pull away. "Were you in on this?" I wonder, noting the twinkle in his gaze. "You were, weren't you?"

"Probability is high," he shrugs innocently.

Alyssa and Nash bump elbows.

"Teamwork at its finest," she grins, nudging him with her shoulder.

My eyes narrow. I'm mentally whisked away to the wine bar earlier in the week when I was positively certain there was something going on between my two friends. "Are you guys...seeing each other?"

Both of their eyebrows jump to their hairlines at the same time. Alyssa cranes her neck back, like the notion is absurd. "What? Um, no, we're just friends."

“We were in cahoots,” Nash adds.

“Yeah, I was probably being a basket case because keeping a secret from you is like trying to give someone a hug with no arms.” Alyssa snorts a laugh, shaking her head as two gilded earrings dangle from her lobes. “I can’t believe you thought that.”

I pucker my lips, still confused. “What about that note he gave you? You were acting all giddy about it.”

She points across the room to the dessert table. “He told me he thought of the perfect birthday cake for you.”

Glancing backward, I grin. It’s a sheet cake printed with a photo of my dogs—it really *is* perfect. Kiki’s tongue is hanging out while Lemon nuzzles her neck with her snout. It’s decorated in yellow frosting swirls and bubbly letters. When I look back at Alyssa, she’s holding out the crumpled napkin that had still been stuffed into her coat pocket.

Sure enough, it reads: “*Got the perfect cake idea for Lucy. Need a pic of her dogs stat.*”

Well, crap.

I was way off.

We mingle for a few more minutes before Alyssa and I glide over to the bar and order two cocktails. We’re chatting idly about her overbearing boss when Dante pops over with his hand curled around a glass of amber liquid. He gives me a chin-nod, sweeping his eyes over Alyssa for a beat. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Alyssa brings the straw to her lips, attention piqued, eyes on Dante. “Hey yourself.”

“I meant Lucy.” Half of his mouth curls up with a smile.

She lowers her glass, brow lifting as irritation steals her expression. “Cool. I guess I’ll just go fuck myself then.” Her tone is falsely chipper.

As she tries to slip away, Dante laughs and tugs her back by the shirt sleeve. “Are you the friend?”

“Yep. I’m ‘The Friend,’” she snips. Then she falters, eyes squinting for a moment before they flare wide open. “Wait. Do I know you?”

“This is Dante,” I cut in, frowning thoughtfully. “Dante, this is Alyssa.”

He slowly raises his hand to her. “‘The Co-Worker,’” he introduces, twisting his lips. “You do look familiar.”

Brown eyes glimmer dubiously as she regards his hand before accepting it in a limp grip. His olive skin meets her light ivory before she promptly

pulls back and blinks.

They stare at each other.

They stare some more.

Then, they say it at the same time: "Tinder."

*Oh boy.*

"Bugs." A smile breaks out onto his face as he slams a fist to his heart like a dagger. "You ghosted me and broke my heart."

"You stood me up," she barks back. "And don't call me that."

"I told you, I had an emergency. Wasn't personal. I tried to reschedule, and you went all witness protection on me."

She huffs. "Likely story. I should have known I'd get burned by someone who calls himself *Picante Dante*."

The air quotes are in full swing.

His dark eyes twinkle beneath the recessed lighting as he sips his drink. "What? I'm zestful."

"Right."

"We can try again, you know. You wanted to hang out with my dog. He was disappointed."

"Can I *just* hang out with your dog?"

"Doubt he'd agree to that. Diesel is very loyal."

My eyes are zipping back and forth like a furious game of ping-pong. I clear my throat and point over Alyssa's shoulder at my mother who is talking over-animatedly to one of my timid sanctuary friends. "Look, there's my mom," I blurt. "I think she's trying to get your attention."

Alyssa sighs with resignation and leans in for a quick hug. "Fine. I'll give in to your subtle tactics of diversion and go say hi to your mother. Stop over when you're done...here." *Here* sounds particularly caustic as she swings her eyes to Dante for a beat, then pastes on an extra-wide grin for me, flashing her whole set of teeth.

I watch her skip off across the room, hips swaying with gusto in her cobalt tulip skirt.

Dante watches her go, staring at her butt, then blinks his gaze back to me. "Anyway...sorry about that. Did Bishop bail on you?" he grouses, parking his hip against the bar counter. "Sucks he's being a fuckhead."

My insides pitch at the mention of Cal, but particularly, at the mention of Cal's notable absence. I pop my shoulders with a shrug, feigning disinterest. "It's okay. He's a busy guy."

“He did have to stay after work to fix the brake job he botched. Maybe he’ll show.”

It doesn’t matter.

I tell myself it doesn’t matter at all because it’s not a productive use of headspace. Cal is already giving me a place to stay, watching over me, and even cooking on occasion. He surprised me with breakfast before leaving for work this morning—scrambled eggs, a bowl of fruit, and faux sausage patties. Seeing the table plated with a mug of hot coffee with extra sugar and a vegetarian spread just for me, sent hopeful little tremors to my heart.

Still, there’s a distance.

Ever since our charged moment in his bathroom, he’s pulled away.

For every step forward, there are three steps back.

And that’s a good thing, I suppose—it’s for the best. Even though I’ve still been waking in the middle of the night with flashes of nightmares, horrible images of Emma haunting my dreams, I haven’t gone to him. I haven’t slipped into bed beside him and let him chase away the memories with his beating heart and safe, warm arms.

It’s too...*dangerous*.

It would be too easy for that heart to slaughter mine.

Too easy for those arms to crush me.

Spinning my Hawaiian tiki-inspired drink called a *White Lotus* between my fingers, I paint on an easy smile. “Yeah, maybe. It’s okay though, really.”

“You say that, but I know you don’t mean it,” Dante says, spearing me with moss-green eyes. “And I honestly don’t fucking understand you two. At all. He’s so in his head all the goddamn time, he’s ignorant to what’s standing right in front of him—and you don’t even bat an eye. You just let him walk farther and farther away from you.”

I try to swallow, but there’s a fistful of needles in my throat. “H-he doesn’t want a relationship. There’s no point.”

“There is a point,” he says. “He’s crazy about you. Mad crazy, but he thinks he’s no good for you. Make him realize that’s all bullshit. Make him see the *point* because the point is clear as day to me.” Dante lets out a breath and pauses to swallow down the rest of his cocktail, shaking his head. “Shit, I’m getting all philosophical on you. Fuckin’ scotch always does that.”

I fold my lips between my teeth, his words also turning into needles and prickling my heart.

“You know, my dad was a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, too,” he muses,

flicking his finger at the bartender for a refill. “He met my ma and fell stupid in love with her. Immediately. She’s Puerto Rican, beautiful, feisty as hell. She loved just as hard as him. They had this whirlwind thing—so I’m told—and she got pregnant with me pretty fast.” Dante nods his thanks as he exchanges the new drink for a wad of cash. “Dad never felt like he was good enough for her. Came from poverty, had a crappy childhood. He worked a warehouse job for shit pay, pulling overtime and weekend shifts just to make ends meet. Ma didn’t care, as long as they were together, but *he* cared—he saw the way heads turned whenever she’d walk into a room, saw how she could have her pick of the litter...and eventually, he made himself believe she was settling with him. That he’d never become what she deserved. Goddamn martyr.”

My eyes mist as I squeeze the glass in my hand. “What happened?”

He shrugs. “He believed it until she started to believe it, too. He pushed her away, closed himself off, and she left him. Married some schmuck I’m supposed to call my stepdad, but I just call him Fuckin’ Larry.” Dante fills his cheeks with air and settles onto a bar stool, eyeing me while I chew on my thumbnail. “I’m just saying, don’t let him run you off. Don’t allow him to fill your head with that bullshit because it’s all garbage. I don’t know shit about much, but when I tell you I’ve never seen him happier than during those months you worked at the shop, trust me—you’re it for him, Lucy.”

I stare at him with glossy eyes. At some point, my heartbeats decided to sky rocket to a concerning pace, and my skin feels flushed, glazed over with a sheen of sweat. The room is drafty, but I’m sweltering. Overheating.

Dante twists around to face the bar, propping his elbows on the counter. I sweep my hair back, noticing how much my hands are trembling as I squeak out, “What happened to your dad?”

He barks out a humorless laugh as he brings the scotch to his lips. Staring straight ahead, he replies, “Living by himself in a shithole in Kentucky, lonelier than ever, regretting every second he’s not with her.”

A feeling slithers through me.

Awareness, maybe. Possibly an epiphany.

I think about Cal living all alone, eluding relationships, rejecting any form of deep connection. While the circumstances are different than Dante’s parents, it all comes down to the same thing—*fear*.

Cal says he won’t love me, and it’s not because he can’t.

He’s afraid to love because he’s afraid to lose.

Once you lose something precious, it changes you. Sometimes you hold onto things too tightly and they crumble in your hands, and sometimes you don't hold onto them at all.

At the end of the day, you're still losing.

When I told Cal I was dying, it was the worst possible thing I could have said to him. Now that's all he sees when he looks at me. A dying thing, slipping through his fingers. Another person destined to leave a gaping hole in his heart.

But here's the thing—we're *all* dying.

Every damn one of us.

And the whole point of life is to live while we're still alive—*that's the point*.

My arms fly out to wrap around Dante, my drink sloshing everywhere as I envelop him in a clumsy, epiphany-drunk hug. "Thank you," I murmur, tears coating my eyes.

He pats at my arm, a little awkwardly, releasing a chuckle. "Any time, sweetheart. Just get some scotch in me, and I'm full of useless wisdom."

"It wasn't useless at all," I tell him. "I needed that."

His glass lifts, clinking with mine as it dangles over his shoulder. "Cheers, then."

Before I pull away, a sharp gust blows through the bar, causing my hair to take flight. Bitter February air fills the warm space as the door pushes open and two black boots stomp through.

When I look up, Cal is standing in the doorway staring at me.

## CHAPTER 10

### CAL

The first thing I see when I enter the bar is Lucy hanging all over Dante.  
*Fuck me.*

Every muscle in my body locks up as dark tension races through me. I stare at her from a few feet away, watching how her big blue eyes light up with relief when she spots me by the door.

She's happy to see me.

I don't think she expected to see me.

Lucy jumps back from Dante and moves around him, damn near skipping toward me in a little black dress that would look a hell of a lot better torn in half on my bedroom floor.

I pull the snow-spattered beanie off my head and flick a hand through my hair. I came straight from the shop, so I probably smell like sweat and motor oil.

"Cal."

Her sweet, wispy voice reaches my ears, waves of golden-brown tresses bouncing over her shoulders as she closes the gap. I stuff the hat into my back pocket, tempted to reach for my cigarettes hiding in the other one, but I hold off for now. I don't like smoking around her. "Hey."

My response is muffled when she leaps at me, knocking the air from my lungs.

"You came," she practically moans, face plastered against my leather jacket. Her arms ravel around me, fingernails sure to leave tiny half-moon prints on the back of my coat from the sheer force of her grip.

I raise one arm, trailing my hand up her spine until it's twisting in her mane of hair. *Fuck*—she smells so good. Fruity pears and candy floss.

“Sorry,” I murmur, nuzzling my nose into her hair and breathing in deep. “Got stuck at work. I wanted to get here sooner.”

“As long as you’re here now,” she says easily, like it doesn’t even matter. I came, I’m here, and that’s all that matters to her.

Doesn’t matter that I’m late and broken and a total fucking mess.

My eyes lift up to see Dante sending me a wave from the bar. I nod my head, pulling away from Lucy, and when I glance back down at her, her eyes are all shiny with a film of tears. My blood chills. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she shakes her head. A smile greets me, confirming she’s actually okay. “I just...I want to talk later. If that’s okay.”

She chews on her lip in a way that tells me she’s jittery. I dip my gaze to the way her teeth sink into her full, pink bottom lip. “About?” I murmur, still staring at her mouth.

“Us.”

This has my eyes pinging back up. “What about us?”

Those perfect lips part with a quick intake of air, but no words spill out. They get stuck in her throat like taffy. Lucy glances around the room, shuffling from one stilettoed heel to the other, before pulling our eyes back together. “You and me.”

My eyes narrow as I try to read her. “I know what *us* means, Lucy. What about us, specifically, did you want to talk about?”

“Later,” she says, all whispery breath and nervous energy. “Tonight. After we get home.”

Tonight.

Home.

*Us.*

I rake my fingers through my hair, my chest suddenly tight, skin hot. Something tells me this conversation is either going to end with her naked and screaming my name from underneath me, or it’s going to leave her in a heap of tears when I tell her I can’t give her what she really wants.

Maybe both.

Because I know what she wants—she wants a relationship. A real home. And what we have right now is an arrangement and a house. Four plaster walls, some shabby flooring, a roof, and a lot of fucking ghosts to haunt us.

It’s not a home.

I haven’t had one of those since I was fifteen years old.

But then she reaches for my hand, and soft fingertips graze up along my



knuckles until she's weaving our fingers together. I remember how good it felt holding her hand at the carnival. It feels just as good right now. A shimmering warmth trickles through me, a slow-burning buzz that has my heart breaking into a gallop. I glance down at our linked hands, then back up at her. She smiles, of course, and I should always expect to see that smile, but it still causes my balance to teeter like I'm drunk on something.

I'm not, though.

I haven't had anything to drink all week, not since the night she wandered into my bedroom and tangled our limbs together and pressed her heart to mine as if *she* were my home.

No.

I can't think about shit like that.

All I want to do is keep her close, keep her safe, and be some kind of friend to her while I drive myself mad with repressed attraction and feelings with nowhere to go. It sure as hell beats going stark, raving mad the moment I give in and inevitably fuck up and ruin her.

Before I step back, she gives my hand a squeeze, then a tug, drawing me farther into the bar. "Come on."

I follow, our hands still locked.

My eyes dance around the room, landing on a few familiar faces; her mom and some relatives, friends, the fucking hipster bartender, my guys from the shop. I recognize almost everybody, as if I'm already a prominent part of her life. When she introduces me to the handful of people I don't know, she calls me her friend—but the way she clings to my hand as she guides me from person to person, brushing a thumb across my skin like a sweet caress, has me thinking she's aching to call me something else.

Lucy is eventually whisked away by the redhead from the wedding—Jenna, I think—and I'm left itching to light up a cigarette as her social circle sends me a flurry of curious side-eyes.

I need a fucking smoke.

And a triple shot of bourbon.

Completely out of my comfort zone, I shuffle over to an unoccupied corner of the room and zero in on the way Lucy's ass looks in her black dress. Especially when she leans forward on the bar and juts her hips out a little, her long, thick hair bouncing between her shoulder blades when she laughs at something the redhead says. The dress hugs her curves as it rides up her thighs, and makes her milky white legs look a mile long.

“Yo. Cal.”

Blinking, I pull my attention from the bar and find Kenny standing in front of me with a Miller Lite. He slaps me on the shoulder before gesturing toward an empty seat, his coarse, amber hair glinting red beneath the diffused lighting. He’s the only one at the shop who calls me by my first name. Kenny’s a couple decades older than me, so maybe it’s a generation thing.

I glance at the chair. It’s situated between Ike and that cowboy guy, Knox, with Alyssa across the table chatting with a girl from the kennel place. Begrudgingly, I trudge toward it and take a seat, already feeling the guys staring at me like they’re waiting for some sort of ball to drop. A boulder, maybe.

It’s true I’ve been a dick lately. More than usual.

There’s nothing quite like your world collapsing at your feet for the umpteenth time to remind you that happiness isn’t a privilege given to everybody.

I just happen to be one of those unlucky few.

“How’d the repair go today?” Ike wonders, making pointless conversation.

I’m not in the mood, so I answer with a shrug. “Fine.”

The guys take the hint and start talking around me, laughing and clicking their glasses together when the liquor takes over.

I’m okay with that.

What I’m not okay with is the way Nash strolls over to Lucy still stationed at the bar, or the way she beams up at him with a pink drink in her hand. The table noise drowns out, replaced with the sound of her laughter. Faces blur around me, and all I can see is Nash lifting his hand and pressing it to the small of her slender back as he leans in close to tell her something.

Way too fucking close.

She throws her head back with more laughter. More joy, more smiles.

I stare at his hand, still touching her like she’s his.

She doesn’t pull away, and she doesn’t look uncomfortable. She doesn’t look like she did the very first night I put my hand there, as we sat at the wine bar, and I apologized for saying something shitty to her. Something she didn’t deserve.

Lucy froze up when I’d touched her, my hand lingering at the recess of her back in a way that felt strangely intimate. She tensed, flushing and fidgeting at the contact. Her eyes clouded over. Her breathing stuttered. I

swear she was even trembling, like she was scared of me.

I felt something that night. I didn't know what it was then, but it was *something*—and maybe it was the residual echoes of her sexy, sweet voice singing from that stage, or maybe it was the whisky heating my blood, or maybe it was way she smelled so fucking irresistible, I was tempted to bury my face in the crook of her neck and bite at that pretty skin along her throat.

Instead, I went home and jerked off thinking about her for the first time.

The first of many times.

I bet Nash thinks about her like that, too, and the thought alone has me standing from my chair and storming across the bar.

Lucy spots me coming toward her, her eyes twinkling with blue stars. “Hey!” she calls out, sending me a wave.

She sounds chipper and a little buzzed, and the shift in her attention has Nash glancing my way. He drops his hand from her back.

Smart guy.

My intention was to slide in between them to break up the pow-wow, but my own toxic brand of possession takes over, and I wrap an arm around Lucy instead. Slowly, deliberately. Maybe she's not mine, exactly, but in a different life she would be.

And she's sure as fuck not his.

My fingers curl around her waist as I tug her to me, slipping beside her and bumping Nash out of the way. I dip my lips to her ear. “Having fun, sunshine?”

I feel her turn to putty in my grip, the way she always does when I call her that name—ever since some punk kid knocked me on my ass on the basketball court and had me seeing stars. When my vision refocused, there she was: Lucy hovering over me, her face framed in a halo of golden sunlight, like she *was* the sun. Glowing and heaven-sent. The minor concussion had me thinking I was a goner, and that she was my very own guardian angel.

If there's ever been an angel on earth, it's Lucy Hope—divine, pure, so sweet it fucking hurts.

And hell, who am I kidding? I was definitely a goner.

Still am.

The proof is in the giant sun tattoo scrawled across my back, my way of keeping her close to me for all these years.

Lucy and Emma, carved into my skin.

*My girls.*

Lucy's fruity drink wobbles in her hand as she stares up at me. When she bends to take a sip, eyes pinned on mine, she misses the straw and eats the paper umbrella instead.

I bite down on my lip to keep the smile from slipping. "How'd that taste?"

"Sorry," she laughs, a floaty sound that makes her nose crinkle. "The rum is winning me over."

I'm winning her over, too.

I feel it in the way her pelvis presses into mine like a magnet.

Nash decides he has trouble reading the room and moves around me, inserting himself into our bubble. Clearing his throat, he takes a sip of his pretentious peach beer and yo-yos his attention between us. "So, do you think you'll be delving into your new bartending career anytime soon, Luc?"

Luc.

*What the fuck is that shit?*

Lucy throws an arm around my waist as she finally finds the straw and faces Nash. "I'm thinking about it," she decides after a healthy swallow. "My doctor recommended three months off of work, but I'm going a little stir-crazy. I need something to pass the time."

"Come back to the shop," I blurt.

She stiffens like a board beside me, nearly choking on her cocktail. "What?"

"Been meaning to bring it up," I shrug. My eyes skip over to Nash, who impressively keeps his pleasant smile in place. "The guys miss you, and we could use the morale boost."

Because I've been such a miserable bastard lately.

Fidgeting against me, Lucy spins the glass between her fingers and pulls her arm away to tinker with the straw. She looks like she's debating what to say.

She looks like she doesn't actually *know* what to say.

My gut twists at the notion that maybe she doesn't want to come back at all. Maybe I'm being presumptuous.

I stare at her, waiting.

"I – I don't know, Cal," she opts for, an apologetic smile claiming her lips. "I promised Nash I'd help him bartend."

"You can't do both?"

She blinks. “Maybe. Maybe I can swing both...I’ll have to think about it.”

Nash crosses an arm over his chest and takes a sip of his beer, looking smug.

Actually, he doesn’t really look all that smug—but, pretending that he does gives me more validity to want to punch him in the face.

Truth is, he’s probably a decent guy. Seems that way, from what I’ve witnessed. And I think it kills me to know there’s someone better out there for Lucy; someone who would be good for her and treat her right.

Someone worthier than me.

I sniff. “All right.” Dropping my arm from around her waist, I turn to face the bar, digging through my pockets for my wallet. I had no intention of drinking tonight, but fuck it.

I order a drink because the alternative is much worse.

Then I order one more.

## CHAPTER 11

### LUCY

**M**ost of the guests call it a night around nine as they wrap me up in hugs and sprinkle me with cheek kisses before ambling from the bar. Mom lingers to hold me a few breaths longer, a few squeezes tighter, and frames my face between her hands, her rings and baubles pressing into my jaw.

Her eyes mist as she stares at me. “You have no idea how incredible it’s been to see you smiling all night, sweetheart,” she says, grazing her lips to my forehead. “Do you have a ride home?”

Admittedly, I’m on my third drink, and they’ve been on the stronger side. The tropical paper umbrellas to match the ones that would adorn my Shirley Temples as a kid had me far too trustful, so I’m feeling a wee bit tipsy. “Yep. Alyssa drove,” I assure her. This is my last cocktail of the evening because I have no desire to cross over the precarious line that separates bubbly and buzzed, from draped over a bar bathroom toilet begging for mercy, and later, White Castle.

After I see my mother off with a final embrace that smells like memories from childhood—baby powder and orchid musk—I turn and head back to the small table of guests still mingling. The bar reopened to the public a few minutes ago and is now crawling with a rowdy college crowd, so Nash pops over to suggest moving the celebration farther down the block to a karaoke bar called Sing.

Ike and Kenny decide to take off, leaving me, Nash, Dante, and Alyssa trotting down the snow-dusted sidewalk moments later with Cal grumbling through a cloud of cigarette smoke behind us.

I slow my pace, sidling up beside him and warming my hands with my

coat pockets. As soon as I'm in his vicinity, he's tossing the cigarette to the cement and crushing it beneath his boot. A playful smile tips my lips as I glance up at him. "You look super excited for karaoke," I tease, taking in his scowl. "What will it take to get you up on the stage?"

A muscle in his cheek flexes as his voice dips low. "What are you offering?"

Sexual connotation laces his tone, or maybe my alcohol buzz has just taken over my interpretation skills. Still, I blush, ducking my head as we trail the group. "Are you still okay to talk later?"

I only ask because he's been drinking steadily for the last hour, and I worry his head won't be clear enough.

"We can talk now," he counters. Cal readjusts the cocoa-colored beanie on his head until it's covering his ears. Unruly tufts of hair poke out from the edge of the hat, softening his dark expression.

"Later," I murmur.

"It is later." His own hands find his leather coat pockets as he sends a glance my way. "Or, were you wanting to wait until we're alone? Because that sounds dangerous, given the topic you have in mind."

My cheeks heat even more. He's not wrong—it *would* be dangerous if I wasn't planning on convincing him to let his walls down and open his heart to me, and leave the fear behind for good. Sex, and only sex, would be dangerous. I'm not sure I'd survive never truly having all of him. "I do want to wait until we're alone, if that's okay," I squeak out, keeping my eyes trained ahead. I feel him staring at me, picking apart my pieces and trying to fit them together in a way that makes sense.

Our shoulders bump as my feet crisscross in front of me, my balance compromised by rum and visions of what the night might bring.

"All right," he mutters under his breath. "Hope you plan on calling it an early night, then. Not sure how much longer I can deal with your bartender friend making eyes at you without causing a scene."

My heart fumbles. "He's not making eyes at me. We're just friends."

Cal scoffs, spearing me with a cynical look.

"Besides...you and I aren't together like that," I reason, unintentionally pushing his buttons. I flick a strand of hair out of my eyes when a draft blows through. "It shouldn't matter to you if he's interested in me."

The words have hardly left my mouth when his hand curls around my upper arm, and I'm being spun around, held up against the side of a brick

storefront building by his hard chest. My eyes widen, meeting with his volatile gaze as our groins press together. Cal's hand lifts to caress my throat, the tenderness of his touch a heady contradiction to the fire spitting from his eyes.

He leans in and whispers against my ear, "It matters."

I realize I'm gripping his leather coat with two white-knuckled fists as the scent of smoke and bourbon wafts around me and has my eyes fluttering closed.

"Maybe we should talk right now," he adds, tilting his head until our foreheads are flush together. One of his hands trails down the side of my peacoat, settling on my hip. "Tell me what you want."

Wetting my lips, I heave in an addled breath. "A-are you drunk?"

"No, I'm fine." He kisses my temple and drags his lips down the side of my cheek, nicking my jaw with his teeth. "Talk to me."

My thighs clench together, moisture pooling down below. "I—"

"Lucy! Get your sexy ass over here and sing some *Bad Romance* with me!" Alyssa blasts from the entrance of the karaoke bar. When she pokes her head farther around the corner and spots us smashed against each other on the sidewalk, she cups a hand over her mouth. "Shit, sorry! Do your thing. No rush. Gaga can wait."

*Crap.*

Newly rattled, I clear my throat and slip from Cal's hold. I send him an apologetic glance, while simultaneously apologizing to my lady parts for the false alarm. "Later," I echo shakily, walking backward until I'm turning around to join the group inside the bar.

Cal enters five minutes later, after we've commandeered a high-top table. He doesn't join our little group, and instead, sits by himself at a table right behind ours.

Okay.

That's fine—maybe he just needs to cool off.

I do, too, so I guzzle back a tall glass of ice water and let it flush out the heat.

I catch his stony gaze as I shrug out of my peacoat and hang it over the back of my chair. His eyes slide over me, landing on the swell of my breasts peeking out from the neckline of my dress, before they pull back up, ever so slowly, as if he has all the time in the world.

My breathing unsteadies.



Alyssa floats back to the table after putting in some songs for us, her bright blue skirt and flashy smile attracting the eyes of male patrons that pass by. Everyone dives back into conversation, but the words are a muddle of noise around me as my attention keeps drifting back to Cal.

A cocktail waitress takes his drink order, then returns with whisky over ice, lingering to chat with him as she fluffs her hair and inches closer and closer. My insides churn like I tossed my vital organs into a blender and stuck around to watch them puree. I find a semblance of relief in the fact that Cal hardly pays attention to her, his eyes only flicking over to me in between sips of liquor.

I feel an elbow jabbing my ribs, so I jolt upright and glance at Alyssa who is eyeing me like she's waiting for my response. "Oh, sorry, what?"

"I was asking how you managed to put up with this guy for all those months." She pops her thumb over to Dante on her left.

He swipes a hand through his black, cropped hair, seemingly enjoying getting a rise out of my best friend. They've been antagonizing each other all night, their bickering teetering the line of flirty and hostile; I'm still not sure where exactly they fall.

"No need to be shy, Bugs," Dante proclaims, a smirk lifting as Alyssa flusters beside him. Her pretty brown eyes roll up, hair catching on her lip gloss when she emphatically shakes her head. "You can ask me out if you want."

She puckers her lips like she's sucking on a piece of sour candy. "Great to know. Please see yourself out."

I can't help it—I laugh.

Dante looks less amused, but he doesn't back down. "I think you're protesting a little too much. Survey says: I'm your type."

He's actually not wrong. Dante is totally her type with the swagger, muscles, and tattoos, and I'm surprised the idea of connecting these two hadn't crossed my mind before.

It's a shame he already blew it somehow.

Alyssa huffs as if the survey says otherwise and bright red exes are flashing through her mind. "I'm sure the last time you were somebody's type, you were donating blood."

"Hilarious." He grins, unfazed. "You've been giving me fuck-eyes all night."

"Yeah, fuck *you*-eyes, sure."

“Allow me a moment to spot the difference.”

Mercifully, my cell phone vibrates from the tabletop, penetrating the cloud of banter. I’m assuming it’s my mother checking to see if I’m still alive, considering it’s been twenty minutes since she last saw me, but my chest tightens when I notice it’s Cal’s name that lights up the screen.

CAL:

That dress you’re wearing is driving me fucking crazy

I almost choke.

My eyes slide up to Cal. Hot waves of tension radiate off of him as I suck in a breath and rack my brain for a response. Gathering my wits, I message him back.

ME:

Why are you sitting over there?

CAL:

Because I won’t be able to keep my hands off you and that would be a mistake.

I swallow.

Part of me wonders if the amber liquor in his nearly finished glass is giving him some kind of liquid courage, or if our lusty encounter outside has him feeling more daring.

I send a reply.

ME:

Would it?

CAL:

Well ... Depends

ME:

...On?

CAL:

On if you can fuck me without falling in love with me.

The space between my legs throbs, so I slam my thighs together to ease the

tingling.

My face heats.

This is ridiculous. I wish he'd just come over here and talk to me.

Maybe it would be a mistake, or maybe it would be a breakthrough. The answer to his query is an obvious no because I fell halfway in love with him ten years ago, and I'm one more stolen kiss away from all-the-way gone.

He has to know that.

A knot forms in the back of my throat.

ME:

I thought you wanted me to go out with Dante.

I glance up to catch the way his eyes darken with black smoke. He lifts his chin and holds our gaze for a beat before looking back down at the screen to type a reply.

CAL:

I was trying to be the bigger person but we both know that's not what I want. The thought of another guy touching you makes me want to fucking die.

I gnaw at my lip.

I'm mid-text when the DJ calls me up to the stage to sing *Hold On* by Wilson Phillips, a song Alyssa must have put in for me—it's one of our usuals when we indulge in karaoke nights together.

"Lucy, we've missed you, girl," the familiar DJ with a head full of curly highlights voices into the microphone as he waves me up to the stage. "Y'all are in for a treat with this young lady."

My stomach pitches.

My gaze rolls over to Cal as I move to stand, and I watch as he leans back in his seat and folds his arms, eyes still kindling.

Alyssa nudges me with an enthusiastic shoulder. "Woo!" she exclaims, the epitome of a "Woo Girl."

Nash raises a beer in my direction as Dante watches with interest, and I swipe my hands along the skirt of my dress. My palms are clammy, skin buzzing.

*Crap.*

I'm a bundle of nerves as I trek over to the stage and prepare to sing for the first time in months, with Cal staring at me with whisky in his veins and fevered intensity dancing across his face. I harness my smile as I shift my attention, giving a little wave to DJ Mikey, and as he hands me the microphone, a different song sweeps through me—I decide that I want to sing something else.

Leaning over to whisper in the DJ's ear, he bobs his head and tells me it's not a problem, then makes some adjustments to his equipment and pops in the new song.

The title flashes across the big screen behind me, the first notes echoing through the bar. I inch the microphone away to clear my throat, and then I center myself with a lungful of breath.

*I Will Follow You Into the Dark* by Death Cab For Cutie.

It's not a powerhouse of a song, but it means something.

Cal and Emma used to play it on the piano when we were young, and I'd sing along from my perch on their checkered blue sofa. It was the first song he ever learned; the first song Emma taught him. As the lyrics leave my lips and my eyes settle on Cal in his shadowed corner across the bar, I'm engulfed in a downpour of bittersweet memories. My lungs feel waterlogged, my heart drowning in nostalgia and the echo of laughter and piano keys.

It took him a while to get it right, and I remember the frustration that would rile him with every bum note. We'd start over, and we'd start over again. And every minute that would pass was just another minute of music and friendship and moments I'll miss until the day I die.

My eyes are on him the whole time. I don't need to look at the monitor because the lyrics are memorized in my bones. Songs are funny like that—you might not hear them play for years, but you still remember every word. And I think it's because songs are more than words, more than notes, more than verses and choruses. Words fade and scatter over time, but songs tied to life's most precious memories live inside of us forever.

Cal keeps his eyes trained on me, too. He doesn't look away as my voice rings loud and strong, every note perfectly in tune. His posture is rigid and tense, his hand gripping his glass in a tight fist like he might break it. I'm not sure what he's thinking or feeling as he watches me, but his lips are pursed in a flat line and his gaze smolders within the lambent bar light.

As the last note leaves my mouth, applause breaks out.

I close my eyes and smile.

Alyssa jumps up and cheers wildly, whistling between her thumb and finger. I take a bow, my grin wide, and I hand the microphone back to Mikey as he gives me a playful fist bump.

Then I blow out a breath and exit the stage.

When I shuffle down the few stairsteps, I immediately look for Cal, my heart twisting when I see him rising from his seat and storming out the front door. He's a blur of dark leather, his gait borderline urgent—like he can't get far enough away from me.

*Really?*

Choking down my disappointment, I follow him. I weave through flocks of tipsy patrons and boisterous laughter, my eyes pinned on his back as he disappears around the corner. My legs pick up speed as I shove through the solid oak door and look both ways.

But he's right there, leaning against the building, just a foot from the entrance, staring up at the sky. Moonlight paints him in a soft glow, and he breathes in deep like he's drinking it in. Like he needs a moment to inhale in the stars.

"Cal." I'm slightly winded, my heart dizzy. I step over to him, shivering when I'm blasted with a sharp wind, realizing I'm sans a coat. "Why did you —"

"Why that song?" he says, face still tipped skyward.

Popping my shoulders, I amble closer to him as my exhale falls out like an icy puff of air. "Because it means something."

He scoffs. "I hate that fucking song."

I frown, slowing my steps. "No, you don't. You loved that song."

"I hate it now. It reminds me of..." Trailing off, he looks to the left, then ducks his head. "It reminds me of shit I don't want to think about."

"It reminds me of us. Of the beautiful memories we shared." I take another step toward him. "Maybe you *should* think about those things. Maybe it'll help you heal."

This snags his attention, and he spears me with a dubious look. "Heal," he parrots, grating out the word like it cuts him on the way out.

I nod. "Yes...I can help you. I'll be whatever you need."

Cal still stares at me for a heavy beat. Then he rakes his eyes down my body from head to toe before swinging them back up. "Whatever I need," he repeats, this time low and suggestive.

My skin warms despite the thirty-degree temperature. I just look at him,

unsure of how to respond.

He pushes up from the brick, his eyes swirling with tinder and twilight. “Tell me what you wanted to talk about.”

I shake my head, emotion siphoning my courage. “Not here.”

“Why?”

Because I’m scared I’m going to leave my heart bleeding out on this downtown sidewalk on a blustery February night. And this is no place for a heart to bleed. It’s too cold here, too bitter. I won’t be able to bring it back to life before it freezes to the concrete.

And it doesn’t deserve to go like that.

Cal inches closer to me. My heartbeats race, mind reeling with a tangle of things I want to say, should say, shouldn’t say. But as everything seems to go quiet around me—no cars speeding by, no passersby or downtown buzz—I feel a rush of conviction sweep through me.

I’m not sure if the words are ones I should or shouldn’t say.

All I know is they’re the ones I *want* to say.

And I think that’s all that matters. In the grand scheme of life, that’s what counts.

There’s a desert in my throat and cobwebs in my lungs as I whisper, “I want to be with you.”

He stutters to a stop.

A few flurries tumble from the sky, blanketing his hair in splashes of white.

The air is cold, but everything inside me burns like a brushfire as I await his response.

*Say yes.*

*Say you want that, too.*

*I know, I know, I know you want that, too.*

Cal’s jaw clenches, eyes closing tight. “No, you don’t.”

A wave of tears prickle behind my eyes. “I do.”

“I’m no good for you, Lucy. I promise. Please let it go.”

The *please* sounds helpless, hopeless.

I move toward him, trying to be brave. Trying to convince him of what he already knows. “Tell me that’s not an impossibility.”

*Just give me a crumb, a tiny shred of hope.*

But all he does is reach his hand out and curl it around my wrist, tugging me to him. I squeak in surprise as he spins me against the brick siding and

shakes his head, adamantly, fervently. “God...let it go,” he says again. “I can’t be what you need me to be. You’re making this so damn difficult.”

“I can’t let it go.” My chest is heavy, beat down with emotion. “This feels right. This feels like—”

He cuts my words off with a kiss, slamming his lips to mine. I hate the moan that meets his mouth, stifling my courage. Stealing it away and distorting it into weakness.

His tongue is hot and demanding.

And so, so perfect.

I pull back, sucking in a breath. “Tell me there’s hope.”

My demand is pleading and raw. There’s gumption in it. There’s cutthroat in it.

He leans in and kisses me harder, tongue stroking mine. It’s messy and chaotic, but it feels like possibility; it feels like hope. But his answer is still a broken, anguished, “I can’t do that. It’s not fair to you.”

“Please.” A sob breaks through, poisoning our kiss. “Tell me you’ll love me someday,” I beg against his mouth.

Cal’s hands reach out to cup my face as our foreheads clash together, his fingertips digging into my skin, his face twisting with something akin to pain. His hips push against mine, arousal evident. I feel his erection just as hard as I feel his determination to fight this.

He kisses me again, tugging my hair back.

My mouth opens like the traitor it is, and I weep and moan into his mouth as he plunges his tongue back inside. My hands dive in his hair, angry and desperate. I pull at it, I fist it, my nails scratching at his scalp as he grinds against me with a tapered groan.

I can’t get close enough.

I want to crawl inside of him and never leave, until he has no choice but to keep me.

One leg climbs up his thigh, tangling around his waist until his cock is flush with my throbbing core. My underwear is soaked through, and I wonder if he can feel it. He moans again, his mouth falling from mine until he’s burying his face into my neck and thrusting his hips against me. The friction has my mind blurring, my body trembling, my willpower exploding to ashes at my feet.

“Fuck...*fuck*, Lucy...” he husks, biting at the skin along my neck and tugging it between his teeth until it’s sure to bruise. “I want you so much.”

He wants me, but he doesn't *need* me.

Not the way I need him.

He's telling me he'll never give me more than this, that we'll never be more than casual sex, and yet I'm still throwing myself at him and devouring the meager scraps he's leaving at my feet.

I shove him away, weakly.

Cal's half-lidded eyes soak me up beneath the lamplight. I'm still mildly buzzed, and he's more than mildly. Hormones with nowhere to go are paired with whisky and rum, and it's a recipe for catastrophe. My bottom lip wobbles as I watch his chest expand and contract with sharp, unsteady breaths. I'm cold and hot and confused, and so damn certain, I feel my heart cracking with the weight of that certainty.

I'm certain of him.

*Of us.*

But he never did answer me—his silence is all I have to run with.

And so that's what I do. I run.

I push up from the wall as I inch the skirt of my dress down and dart back through the main entrance. Winding through the crowd, eyes blurred by tears, I sweep past my table and hope no one spots me before I can make a hurried escape into the bathroom.

I round the corner, hair clinging to the tear stains on my face. The door is patterned with graffiti and bright stickers as I whip through it. It's a teeny, singular bathroom, just a toilet and a sink, and it smells like cheap perfume, stale beer, and one of those ocean breeze air freshener plug-ins.

It could be worse.

*This could be worse.*

A cry escapes me as I close the door with my back, eager for a moment of reprieve.

But my solitude is interrupted when that door shoots open, and I stumble forward, only to be lifted right back up by a firm hand around my arm. He pulls me upright and spins me toward him, and I squeak out a breath of surprise when I'm eye-to-eye with Cal.

I stare at him, breathing hard, his grip on my arm tightening.

Water droplets trickle from the leaky faucet.

Bar noise seeps inside: clattering glasses, a jumble of voices, a Bryan Adams cover.

This is the very last place I should be doing this.



And still...I do it anyway.

We fly at each other.

I'm flung around one more time, until I'm pressed up against the door as he slams it shut and reaches behind me to lock it. A gasp bursts from my throat, swallowed by his mouth when he dives forward and devours me in a tumultuous kiss. With one hand planted on the door beside my head, the other curls around my throat with a token of possession, forcing my head to tilt back as he drags his mouth down my neck, my chest, to the scar between my breasts. His moan vibrates through me, and I lift my leg to lock around his hip, my hands latching onto his hair for steadiness.

"Cal," my lips murmur, my heart thumps.

I part my legs and pull him closer by the hair as his tongue glides back up and our mouths lock. He tastes like cigarettes and smoky bourbon, smells like sin. The kiss is frenzied and clumsy, tongues twisting together, seeking everything and anything. I can hardly breathe, can hardly stand.

Mindlessly, my hands trail south and reach for his belt buckle.

Cal groans into my mouth, almost a growl. He shoves my dress up my hips until it's bunched around my middle, then rips my underwear down my legs. "You still on your period?" he asks raggedly.

I shake my head.

It ended yesterday.

Registering my answer, two fingers plunge inside of me and start to pump—so deliciously familiar, so good that I'm already on the brink of detonating.

I practically scream with pleasure, but he silences me with his mouth, pushing my hand from his belt to unlatch it himself. I'm vaguely aware of the tinkling buckle, the whir of a zipper. My red panties are dangling from one ankle as he props my leg up around his waist again. I throw my head back against the door, my pelvis thrusting against his fingers while they move deeper and deeper inside of me. It almost hurts, but it feels too good to care.

When I hear his pants hit the ground, I lift my head up and lower my eyes. His jeans are a pool of dark denim around his ankles, his boxers pushed down, caught around his muscled thighs.

An angry erection is pointed at me, fisted in his big, tattooed hand. Protruding veins are ribbed around the steel thickness of his shaft as the fat tip glistens with precum.

*Oh my God.*

We're going to have sex.

Right here, right now, in this dingy bar bathroom.

It's not going to be the rose-petaled, wined-and-dined, slow-paced evening of lovemaking I'd always envisioned. It's going to be messy and raw and desperate.

It's going to hurt.

It's going to hurt for a long time.

And I still want it.

*I want it so badly.*

Using one arm, Cal lifts me higher up the door and nudges his cock between my thighs, gritting out a rough groan through his teeth when the head slides along my slickness. "Fuck, Lucy...*fuck*," he rasps, pressing our foreheads together as he holds me up by the waist, fingers digging into me. "I'm drowning in you. I'm *crazy* about you."

I curl my leg tighter around him and tug him closer while my other foot hardly touches the tile. My arms wrap around his shoulders, fingertips dragging through the back of his hair as I hold on.

He inches inside me, and I tense up, squeezing a fistful of hair and arching my back. "Oh God..."

Moaning, he drags his forehead from mine and lets it fall against my shoulder as he pushes in farther. "Fucking hell...you're so goddamn...tight." Another inch, another grunt. "Lucy, Lucy...*fuck*. So wet, so fucking tight. You're perfect."

The intrusion has me quivering, right on the edge. "Cal...Cal, oh my God," I chant, unable to keep my hips from pumping forward.

"You want my cock?" he growls into my ear.

I nearly collapse. "Yes...please, yes."

He slides in farther, another inch, another devastating push. His voice is gruff, full of sharp edges, but he scatters kisses along my neck with softness. "So perfect. So sweet."

My heart is thundering beneath my ribs as pain fuses with passion. I glance down between our bodies and watch as his cock disappears inside of me—and when he moves his fingers to my clit and starts rubbing me as he pulls out, then slides back in, doing it over and over, I shatter.

I'm grasping at him with feverish hands, my entire body racked with tremors as an orgasm floods me. My head slams back against the door, my other leg lifting to wrap around his waist.

Cal grips me by the ass with both hands and thrusts all the way inside.

*Holy shit.*

The ripples and waves peter out as a shock of pain slices through me.

He raises his head, eyes locking on mine with apology and desire and weakness and *everything*. They blaze golden brown as he moans helplessly against my mouth. My lips are parted, only a mewl escaping my throat as I go still within his arms. One hand squeezes the leather of his coat, my other tangled in his hair, tugging so hard I'm afraid I'm hurting him.

But I know he's afraid he's hurting me.

I let out a shaky breath and nod my head, bucking my pelvis forward like a silent consent.

His eyes close, lips dipping closer to mine until we're both panting against each other through open mouths. He starts to move. Quick, jerky thrusts, like any control he might have had has crumbled into dust.

"Jesus..." Planting a hand against the door, his right arm holds me up from underneath my backside as he thrusts into me. "Lucy...fuck..."

I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking out the twinges of pain.

I focus on the feel of him inside of me, pulling out and pushing back in, big and hard and all-consuming.

I memorize the sounds he makes, guttural groans that send shivers up my spine.

My mouth opens wider when his tongue slips in, more whimpers spilling out of me. His tempo picks up, the knot of pleasure in my core unfurling again, replacing the sting, and I clutch him harder, trying to meet his thrusts with my own.

He weaves his fingers through my hair and makes a fist, pulling his tongue from my mouth to rasp, "You feel...so *fucking* good. So sweet and tight."

I force my eyes open.

His face is a mask of tortured pleasure as our bodies slap together, as my shoulder blades knock against the wood.

Wet, slippery sounds echo around us, the smell of his earthy shampoo and tobacco making me dizzy.

*Faster, harder, faster, harder.*

I'm being pounded into the door, my thighs clenched around his waist, cheeks flushed hot, hair a matted mess as it twines through his fingers.

He buries his face in the crook of my shoulder again, quickening his pace until his hips are moving with little coordination and every bit of urgency.

He's going to come.

Cal tenses up, holding me tighter than ever.

"Oh, fuck...*fuck*," he groans into my neck, fist straining in my hair, palm squeezing my ass as he pumps into me and finds his release.

I feel him pulsing, emptying, filling me, his euphoria-laced moans reaching my ear in time with his final thrusts.

When he collapses against me, warm breaths beating against the sensitive patch of skin below my ear, one of my legs slides down his thigh. I curl my ankle around his calf and go lax against the door.

Inhaling a shuddering breath, I glance up at the ceiling.

Dim yellow bulbs flicker overhead, illuminating a cluster of dead flies. The drippy faucet sounds louder as the smell of musty bathroom and Glade sea breeze mingles with the heady cloud of sex.

A long, husky sigh tickles the shell of my ear as Cal slowly lifts his head. I feel him start to slip out of me.

And it hurts.

It stings and chafes, and I can't help the hiss I make through clenched teeth as he pulls all the way out. My eyes slam shut, and I suck in a sharp breath as I'm gently placed back on the ground, the heels of my stilettos twisting under the weight of my shaky legs.

"Jesus Christ," I hear him whisper in a low, broken voice.

I just stand there, blinking, my teeth digging into my lower lip as I feel his release glide down my inner thighs.

"Fuck, Lucy, I'm sorry...I'm so fucking sorry."

I finally look at him, relieved I'm keeping the tears at bay. I'm not sad, I'm not regretful, but I'm brimming with emotion I don't know what to do with.

He looks wrecked.

There's a wild glaze over his eyes as he scrubs a hand over his face and through his hair before frantically tugging his bottoms back up and yanking at the zipper.

"Cal."

I don't think he hears me because he spins toward the tiny sink and pulls down spools of papery thin towel. He turns the water on warm, shoving the cardboard-brown paper under the stream of water until it's soaked through, then tries to wring it out while it disintegrates in his hands. "Fuck," he curses, doing it all over again, wrenching another sheet of paper towel from the roll

and wetting it more gently. Cal turns back around and approaches me, dropping to his knees and parting my thighs.

“Cal...” I repeat, only a choked-up whisper. I’m not sure what to do, so I just watch him as he dabs the towel to the sensitive juncture between my legs. I flinch a little. It feels cool against my heat, but it also burns.

He makes this awful sound as he trails the paper up and down my thighs and watches it tinge red. “Christ, Lucy...” His head swings back and forth, features pinched with pain. “I’m sorry.”

I lift a hand and place it against the crown of his head. His tufts of soft, wavy hair are like silk against my fingers. “I wanted it,” I tell him softly. “We both wanted it. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. It’s not fucking okay.” Cal continues to clean me up, to take care of me, dragging the towel carefully along my skin, just like he did earlier in the week when I had my period.

He told me he’d imagined this moment before, but I don’t think he imagined it like this.

Somebody pounds their fist against the other side of the door.

I startle at the intrusion, reality crashing into me: where we are, what we did, how I have no idea what to do next...

“Hurry up, I gotta take a piss!” a stranger’s voice blares.

Cal looks like he wants to murder someone. He tugs the hem of my dress back down over my hips until it reaches mid-thigh.

I look down and realize I’m stepping on my underwear with the sole of my shoe. I can’t put them back on; they’re probably filthy. Flustered, I bend over, scoop them up, and bury them in the trash can as Cal tosses the used paper towels in after them.

And then it’s like nothing ever happened.

The only evidence remaining is the throbbing ache between my legs and the tragic look in Cal’s eyes.

He stares at me and blinks, brows bending with a deep frown as he shakes his head. “I’m so sorry, sunshine. I—”

“Hurry the fuck up!” someone shouts, slamming a palm to the door.

We both jump.

Cal blinks again, letting out a heavy exhale as he dips his chin.

I don’t know what to say, so I just turn and unlock the door, pulling it open as a clamoring of bar noise deafens me. A preppy twenty-something is leaning back against the far wall with his hands stuffed into his pockets,

shooting me a death glare. The man's attention piques slightly when Cal slips out behind me and stalks off.

The stranger must notice my chaotic hair and bee-stung lips because he pumps his fist in the air. "Someone got *lucky*," he bellows through a laugh, then stumbles past me into the bathroom.

I swallow.

Out of my peripheral vision, Cal storms across the bar toward our table, vibrating with tension, shoulders squared, and I mentally piece myself back together and do the same.

I wonder if anyone will notice.

I wonder if Alyssa will notice.

Tangled webs of hair fall into my eyes as I begin my unsteady trek through the bar. My ankle twists in my heel, and someone tells me to drink some water. I'm sore and achy between my legs, my thighs rubbing together with more slickness.

I'm a mess.

Alyssa definitely notices something is off when she pivots away from her conversation with Nash and blinks up at me, probingly. I look around for Cal, spotting him hunched forward at the table behind us with his head in his hands. Unnerved, I glance back at Alyssa and come to a stop.

All three heads turn.

All eyes are on me.

*They know, they know, they know.*

Alyssa peers across the table at Cal who looks like he's preparing to leave for a funeral, then turns to me. Thankfully, she gives me grace. "You know, I'm getting tired. Want to call it a night?"

Nash clears his throat and stands. "Yep, same. See you back on stage soon, Luc?"

Dante mutters something, too, but the words don't register. I look over at Cal just as he rises from the chair and slaps a twenty-dollar bill onto the table.

Nodding at nothing in particular, I scratch at my cheek and force my legs to move in Cal's direction. I think he's about to swivel toward me, to offer to take me home so we can talk, to hug me or hold me or see me approaching him—but I end up coming to a screeching halt, instead.

He doesn't do that.

He doesn't do that at all.

My heart withers up and dies as I watch him walk the other way, right out

the front door.

## CHAPTER 12

CAL

I awake with a start when a bucket of ice water hits me in the face. “What the *fuck*?” I lift up, spluttering, as the icy droplets dribble down the collar of my shirt. I rub both hands over my face and swat wet pieces of hair out of my eyes, trying to focus on who’s standing in front of me.

“You stupid, *stupid* idiot.”

I blink.

The voice cracks like a whip, and I realize it’s Jolene.

*What the hell is Jolene doing in my house?*

“Are you insane?” I mutter, wringing out my t-shirt and flicking ice cubes off my lap.

“Are you?” She plants both fists against her waist and spears me with a look of disgust. “I can’t believe you’re using again. I want to strangle you. I legitimately want to strangle you.”

My cognitive skills are working at a snail’s pace, so it takes a minute for me to process her claim. I frown and press the heel of my palm to the center of my forehead. “I’m not...” The words trail off when I realize she probably heard from Oscar about the opiates I bought. *Shit*. “I haven’t taken anything.”

“You’re a fucking liar.”

“I’m not lying. Jesus.” I collapse back against the couch and shake more water out of my hair. The aftereffects of drinking myself into a coma when I got home are still swimming through me, muddling my focus. I’m queasy and unwell. “They’re in my nightstand. Haven’t touched them.”

As if she still doesn’t believe me, Jolene leans over and wrenches my eyelids open with her thumbs for a full inspection of my pupils and eye



motion.

I whack her hand away. “I’m not using, Jolene. Maybe I was going to, but...”

But...Lucy.

*Lucy.*

*Fuck. Lucy.*

Holy shit—it wasn’t a dream.

It really happened.

*No, no, fuck no.*

My gaze frantically zig-zags around the room in search of a fucking time machine, but all I see is Jolene studying me with those gray-green eyes that have always seen right through me.

She cocks her head, taking in my soggy clothes, chalky skin, and ghostlike expression. “I already texted your girl. She’s on her way.”

This has me jerking upright, doing nothing for my migraine. “You *what?*”  
*Goddammit.*

I look around for my phone, finding it sitting atop the couch cushion beside me, luckily spared from the ice water assault. I pull up my outgoing texts and quickly spot the evidence.

JOLENE:

Hey it’s Jolene. I’m texting you from Cal’s phone because he’s passed out on the couch like a stupid asshole and can’t do it himself. He needs his girl.

The text is followed by a blurry photo of me passed out on the couch like a stupid asshole.

*Fuck.*

Lucy’s reply stares back at me, sent fifteen minutes ago.

LUCY:

Thank you. I’m actually already on my way. I stayed with a friend last night. Can you do me a favor and let my dogs out back to go potty? I’d really appreciate it :)

JOLENE:

You got it!

Ice skates through my veins as if the cold water somehow seeped right through my skin. It's not the water, though—it's my own personal glacier of regret. "She's not my girl," I mutter miserably.

She's not.

Any chance of Lucy being my girl nosedived out the window the moment I lost control and fucked her raw in a dirty bar bathroom.

I stole her virginity in the filthiest way and came inside of her, stupidly and recklessly.

I'll never forgive myself for it.

I told her I'd make it good for her, that I'd take my time and cherish every inch of her, but I didn't do any of those things. I treated her like a cheap lay.

Shame slams into me. I think I'm going to puke.

The whisky turns on me like it's privy to what a piece of shit I am, and I leap off the couch, stumble toward the kitchen, and heave into my garbage can.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I can't believe I did that to her.

Pushing up from the wastebasket, I drop back down to my ass and scoot backward against the far wall until it's the only thing propping me up. When I glance at the clock, I note that it's already nine a.m. the next morning.

Lucy never came home.

I went out for a smoke to clear my head, and she'd already bolted with Alyssa by the time I finished pacing around the block for a miserable ten minutes. When I slipped back inside and searched for her, I realized she was gone.

Probably thought I ditched her like a coward.

To be honest, I thought about it. I thought about hopping on my bike and never looking back. Thankfully, that was not one of the many mistakes I made that evening—I took an Uber home, refilled the dog bowls, then drank myself to sleep, semi-hoping I'd never wake up.

Sleeping forever sounded better than facing what I'd done to Lucy.

I think I'm going to be sick again.

"Shit," I whisper, breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth so I don't vomit for a second time. "Shit, shit, goddamn, *shit.*"

My fist collides with the tile floor as I toss my head back.

Cricket creeps out from underneath the couch to wind around my splayed legs and ankles, burrowing her little nose into my blue jeans. She purrs. She

purrs like she's trying to comfort me, and it only makes me feel worse.

"What the hell are you doing to yourself?" Jolene asks softly.

She's a blur moving toward me from the corner of my eye, and her voice drops from its original berating pitch, sounding softer. More pity than scorn.

*Also worse.*

All I can do is shake my head because I don't even know. I don't know what I'm doing—all I know is what I've done, and what I can never take back.

"You've come so far, Cal. It kills me to see you like this."

And then she's crouching down beside me, her leather pants matching the inky eyeliner drawn into wings from the corner of each eye. Curly, dark hair floats into my line of sight, and my jaw clenches. My teeth grind together, close to cracking.

*I'm close to cracking.*

Maybe I already have, maybe I never stopped.

"I slept with her," I murmur wretchedly, balling my hands to stone at my thighs. Cricket gently swats at one of them, hoping to find a crunchy treat hiding inside. "I fucking ruined her." Anger and regret drape over me like a black cloak. "*Christ.*"

A sigh meets my ears as Jolene situates herself beside me against the wall. Silence fills the space between us, and she takes a long moment to study me. To read me. "She's a grown ass girl," she finally says. "If it happened, she wanted it to, and I'm honestly surprised it didn't happen sooner. I saw the way she looked at you that day at the garage—she's crazy about you, Cal."

I laugh with ice. "Her mistake."

She smacks me on the shoulder—harder than I expect but not as hard as I probably deserve. "Knock it off with that self-loathing bullshit. You're better than this. You're an incorrigible asshole a lot of the time, absolutely, but you're not nearly as bad as you think you are."

"Thanks."

"I'm serious. That train of thought is what sent you down this road two-and-a-half years ago, and I'll be damned if I watch it happen again."

That rainy night in September still weighs on me, just another tragedy to round out my bleak existence. Squealing tires, a blur of lamplight, metal crashing to pavement. The way the stars looked as I laid out on the wet ground, blood dripping into my eyes.

They looked like they were moving. Dancing from galaxy to galaxy,

granting wishes that weren't mine. I thought of Emma in that moment as rain pelted me in the face and my back felt like I'd cracked it in half. I wondered if she was among those stars. Dad, too. They looked a little brighter, a little more magical, but it could have been the lingering effects of the painkillers that caused my motorcycle to spin out, throwing me off the bike.

I still feel the snap and flutter of my control in those grim months.

That feeling of being held hostage beneath a burial ground with no way out. No clean air, no shafts of sunlight peeking through the mud, guiding me to solid ground. I knew I had to claw and climb until my nails bent back and my fingers bled, and my lungs choked on dirt and mort.

I knew that, but it sounded so damn hard.

And when nothing in life had ever come easy, the easy way out was appealing. So, I latched onto every easy thing that came along.

Alcohol, drugs, nameless women.

I was in a dark place, so I shadowed myself accordingly.

And then the accident happened.

"Why did you buy those pills?" Jolene asks me. Concern bleeds into every word. "What in your life could have possibly been so bad that you'd consider going down that road again? You worked *so hard*, Cal. I'm just... I'm pissed, frankly. I'm really fucking mad at you."

I hear the anger in her voice, how much she cares.

Before I can respond, the dogs start pawing at the patio screen, so I pull my ass off the floor and trudge across the kitchen to let them in. They shake snowflakes from their fur and dart around in manic circles, a blur of sable and cream.

Kiki reminds me of Lucy. Hyper, eager to please, always looking for love, even in the wrong places. Lemon makes me think of Emma. Cool and confident, gives zero fucks.

And then there's my squirrely kitten, rejecting love and attention. Usually hiding. Often lurking in the shadows, scared of the sun.

I almost chuckle at the parallels.

Cricket surprises me and joins in on the chaos, chasing the dogs through the kitchen and into the living room. I stop for a minute, pausing. The scene forces me to pay attention to something light and joyful for once; something other than my own depressing bullshit.

Three unlikely friends, running carefree and wild, creating adventure, as a terrified little cat says, "fuck it" and dives right into the mix.

My chest feels tight as I lean back against the wall and shove my hands into still-damp pockets. I look down at Jolene and roll my jaw. She sits there, cross-legged, waiting for me to answer her question, to shed some light onto why I'd actively try to ruin my life again.

There's no way she's letting me off the hook, and I don't blame her.

"I'm not even sure I had any intention of taking them." I scrub a hand through my hair and give my knuckles a crack. It sucks to stand, but I manage to stay upright. "It was this...familiar safety net. Things felt a bit easier, just knowing they were there. Close by."

I'm sure none of that made any fucking sense, but I think it's the truth. It feels right. There were a million opportunities to shove a pill down my throat, but I didn't. I'd always think about Lucy and how disappointed she'd be—how disappointed *I'd* be, knowing I let her down.

Knowing I let myself down.

*Again.*

Jolene twists her lips as she takes in my answer. Smoky eyes fuse with jade as she looks me up and down, folding her hands in her lap. "Does she know?" she wonders.

"No. I think she's caught on that I've been drinking more frequently, but she doesn't know about the pills."

"Does she know about any of it? Your past, your history? The accident?"

My eyes close through a quick shake of my head, like I'm trying to dislocate the memories. "No."

"I can talk to her if you want. If it's easier."

Sounds like a nice, cowardly way of doing it.

*Tempting.*

"Can't," I ultimately say. "I've fucked this up enough. Time to man up."

"Good. I was going to smack you again if you agreed," she tells me, crossing her arms.

A smile twitches but doesn't stick.

Jolene has seen the worst of me, that's for damn sure. I'd love to say she's seen the best of me, too, but I don't think that's true. The best of me got left behind beneath a sky of storm clouds the night my sister crossed paths with the Devil himself.

I need to find my way back to that person.

I need to find my way back home.

As the very thought crosses my mind, the door knob twists, and an angel

in a black dress steps inside. She's instantly ambushed by her two dogs, Kiki hopping up and down, Lemon circling her heels. I can't help but watch as Cricket hangs off to the side, observing, debating what to do.

She surprises me for a second time when she slinks forward to sniff Lucy's leg.

Cautiously, carefully.

But she still does it. She lets Lucy lean over and give her a quick scratch between the ears before darting off under the couch again.

Mascara smudges and bloodshot eyes meet my gaze when Lucy glances up and spots me standing across the room.

I stop breathing. Last night's memories come careening back, slugging me right in the gut. The feel of her legs wrapped around me, the noises she made, the way she moaned my name like it was her favorite goddamn thing. How tight and wet and *perfect* she felt as I slid inside of her for the first time. How I never wanted to let her go.

She wanted it; I know she did. I wouldn't have let it happen if I wasn't dead fucking certain that she wanted it.

And I still hate myself for it.

It shouldn't have happened like that, so sudden and reckless. Not *there*, not right then. She deserved better than that. Something sweeter, softer, kinder.

It makes me sick. Makes me hot all over.

It breaks my fucking heart.

Jolene jumps up from her place on the floor and strides over to Lucy in the doorway. She pauses to glance at me over her shoulder. "Ziggy and I will pick up your bike. Text me the address," she says, sending me a pointed look that I return with gratitude.

I can't hear what she tells Lucy as she leans in and gives her arm a gentle squeeze, but Lucy nods through a watery smile, then thanks her for something.

I send Jolene off with my own version of a smile, knowing I'll thank her better later. And then it's just me and Lucy standing face-to-face, a room between us.

So much between us.

I have no idea what to say to her.

Anything, everything.

*Something.*

Sludge crawls down my throat when I swallow, and I inch up from the wall, hands slipping back into my pockets. “Hey.”

I guess it’s something.

Part of me expects Lucy to come at me with claws and teeth.

Wrath and retribution.

Fifty lashes to my heart.

The last thing I expect is a hug.

Stilettos click across my hardwood floor as her legs carry her toward me. Wobbly and unstable, but steadfast, nonetheless. Full of purpose, without an ounce of resentment in her gait. It takes me off guard and shakes my balance when her arms envelop me, face smashed up against my wet shirt.

And then she whispers back, “Hey.”

*Hey.*

My arms raise to hold her. Instinct, apology, need. “I’m sorry,” I breathe into her hair, closing my eyes. “It shouldn’t have been like that.”

She inhales deeply, her words aimed at my heart. “I don’t care how it happened, or where it happened. All I care about is who it happened with.”

Tension ripples through me.

She can’t mean that—it’s not possible.

“But,” she continues, “I also can’t do it again. Not like that, not like this. You’re not okay, and I don’t know how to help you. You say you want to take care of me, but you need to take care of yourself first.” Her eyes peer up at me, glistening with so much heartache. She’s at a loss. All she wants to do is help me, because that’s Lucy, but she doesn’t know how. “This hurts me, Cal,” she whispers with agony, fisting the front of her dress like she’s squeezing her own heart. “You’re hurting me.”

*Fuck.*

I gape at her.

White-hot pain slices through me, the self-inflicted kind. All I’ve wanted to do is protect her, keep her safe, keep her close, but sickly desperation and remnants of past trauma have turned my effort into destruction. I’ve only done the exact opposite.

My demons twist worst case scenarios into most likely scenarios.

My demons use the past against me, labeling it as proof.

Proof that I will always fail.

I will always lose.

Fumbling for a response, I blow out a breath and go to speak, but Lucy

shakes her head and takes my hand. “I didn’t sleep at all,” she tells me, inching back, eyes wide and tired. “We need to talk, but...maybe you can lay with me first. Just for a little while.”

There’s so many things I need to say, need to tell her.

*I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so fucking sorry.*

I need to confess my past, my addiction history, the accident. What happened last night, and *fuck*—if it should happen again. Whether or not she’s on birth control.

I’ve never acted so carelessly with a woman before—I’ve always, *always* used a condom. It’s been a long time since I’ve had sex, so I know I’m not going to give her anything, but it was still really fucking stupid.

*Jesus...what if she gets pregnant?*

I’m not fit to be a father any time soon. I can hardly take care of myself.

My pulse picks up speed at the notion, but Lucy is already guiding me down the short hallway to the guest bedroom as her corgis trail our ankles.

We’ll talk.

*We’ll talk.*

But first, we’ll recover.

Lucy climbs onto the mattress and slips underneath the blankets, reaching for her panda bear as Kiki and Lemon curl up together in their dog bed.

“Give me a minute,” I tell her. Brown hair pools around her head, a light chocolate halo gracing the pillowtop. “I’ll be right back.”

First things first.

She sends me a nod, and I march over to my own bedroom and pull the silver tin out of my bedside drawer. I don’t falter, don’t pause to take a breath. Credence fires through me, leading me into the hall bathroom, and I flush the pills down the toilet without a second thought. I watch them swirl and spin, disappearing down the drain.

Good fucking riddance.

Then I return to the guest room and join Lucy, watching the steady rise and fall of her chest as she slips into slumber. When my knee hits the mattress, her lashes flutter open. Our eyes meet through the diffused window light, and a smile paints her lips. Relief, I think.

Since my shirt is still damp, I pull it over my head and toss it beside the bed before sinking in next to her. She turns toward me as I tug the blankets over both of us. Words don’t leave her, but her heartbeats sing loud against my chest as I wrap an arm around her waist.



My hand lingers on her hip, my eyes lowering to drink her in as daylight spills into the room. I take in her messy hair, pink cheeks, dirty dress. The scars along her breastbone.

I graze a finger to them, tickling the puckered skin and soft edges.

Lucy hardly moves, barely flinches. She drifts to sleep within the comfort of my arms, and I close my eyes to do the same.

I think about her scars, her battle wounds. Physical evidence of a lifelong war that she carries around with pride. She never tries to hide them, never slathers them in makeup, or camouflages herself in scarves and shawls.

She isn't ashamed of them. They don't serve as a reminder that she almost died.

Her scars are a testament to everything she's survived.

*She's still here.*

And I think I get it now...I think I'm starting to understand.

Everyone has demons. Monsters lurking around every corner, whispering in your ear, hiding under your bed, living just beneath your skin.

The key is turning your demons into friends. Companions. Don't let them scare you. Don't let them chase you.

Let them run *with* you.

Only then, you will win.

## CHAPTER 13

### CAL

I'm fucking sick.

It hits me out of nowhere that same day upon waking up from our nap together. Just an awful sore throat at first, that prompted Lucy to whip up a pot of vegetable-noodle soup after we impressively managed to skirt around our morning-after conversation. Then came the fever—crept up on me like a snake lurking in tall grass, striking in the dead of night. I passed out on the couch after sucking down the soup and water, then woke up shivering my ass off, skin burning hot, weaker than I've ever felt.

And that's saying a lot.

"Cal, you're burning up."

Lucy's whispery voice manages to break through my fever fog as I lie belly-flopped on the sofa, one leg dangling over the side. Aimlessly, I reach for a blanket that doesn't exist, thinking I'm in my bed for a minute. "Hm," I murmur, the sound muffled by the couch cushion.

Two hands shake my shoulders, but I can't bring myself to move.

"Cal," she repeats, sounding far away. "You need to take something. Let me help you to bed."

I lift an arm, waving it around until it smacks her. Pretty sure it's her ass I'm grabbing, so I tug her toward me like she's my favorite stuffed animal and I'm still five.

Fingers gently sift through my hair. I manage to tilt my face to the side, plastering my cheek to the couch pillow, and blink Lucy into focus. "Think I'm dying," I mumble miserably. "Karma, probably. Take care of Cricket for me."

She starts yanking at my arm, but I'm dead weight. "Cal, please. Let me

help you up.”

“Hmmp.”

I’m vaguely aware of her evaporating from my line of sight, so I shut my eyes and fall into a brief coma. A minute later, there’s something hard shoved between my teeth.

I splutter but don’t have the energy to fight it.

Something beeps, and the item is pulled from underneath my tongue.

“Your fever is 103.9,” Lucy gasps.

That feels accurate. “Don’t have a will...but you can have the house f’you want it.”

“You need medicine. Please swallow these.”

She pushes my lips apart, and three pills fall into my mouth.

“Sit up,” she orders.

I don’t want to, but I also don’t want to continue to feel like death, so I muster an ounce of strength and shove myself up until I’m slightly elevated. Cold water slides down my throat to chase the pills, and then my bed quilt is being folded around me.

I’ve been reduced to a trembling man burrito.

I throw my head back against the couch and close my eyes—then, somehow, when I open them again, I’m in my bed.

Lucy is beside me, singing, as if I really am five years old and still crave lullabies.

“What’re you doing,” I slur, shaking inside the blanket cocoon. One eye pops open, taking in her porcelain face only inches from me on the mattress. A light beam sneaks in from the window behind her, and *fuck*...I swear she’s wearing a sunlit halo. “You look like...an angel. An angel caught in the sun.” My voice cracks, my throat burning from whatever inconvenient virus decided to inhabit me.

She stops singing to move a piece of hair from my forehead, her touch lingering as she trails a fingertip along my temple. “Maybe I am,” she whispers.

I think she’s actually glowing, but I’m probably delirious.

Fatigue cannons into me, and then I’m asleep, carried away by the sound of her voice as she hums the tune to *I’ll Follow You Into the Dark*.

And she does; she follows me.

Lucy bleeds into my fever dreams until I’m not sure what is and isn’t real. Emma’s there, too. We’re kids, and we’re adults, and Emma never left.

We're sitting atop the Ferris wheel, just the three of us, plucking stars from the sky. One of them morphs into a cluster of glimmering lightning bugs, and Emma's laughter sounds so damn real, I'm convinced she's right beside me.

Then I see Lucy, draped in white. Tulle of silk and lace float from her slender frame as she glides over to me like a ghost, or an angel, or a beautiful bride.

I hear violins and pianos and music that doesn't make me want to cry.

There's a house perched atop a hill, littered with children running through the grass. I don't recognize them, but I know them. I don't recognize the house, either, but it feels like it could have been built with my bones.

Lucy takes my hand, still a vision in white.

Maybe we're dead, but maybe not.

In fact, I think we've never been more alive.

"There's a new adventure coming," she tells me, and I see stars and moonglade in her eyes. "Are you ready?"

Ready or not, we leap.

We dive off of something, a pool of water glittering below us, and that's when I startle awake.

I'm drenched in sweat. Blankets are tangled around my legs, and one arm is slumped around Lucy's waist as she presses up against me. The room is pitch-black, stolen by the night, and I feel completely awful and rattled, yet oddly content at the same time.

"Lucy," I croak into her hair, mustering some strength to tug her closer.

She shifts slightly, but doesn't say anything, and I fall back into another dream-laden sleep.

*She's still here.*



My teeth are chattering.

It's still the middle of the night when Lucy forces more medicine into my mouth. As I wait for the fever to break again, I feel her weave herself around me as I lie on my back, as motionless as a corpse. I'm alive, though. She reminds me that I'm still alive.

“Do you...believe everything happens...for a reason?” I ask as her leg settles between the gap in my thighs. It’s probably not the time to broach any deep discussions, but my brain is spinning with madness. Madness and clarity, swirling as one.

Her nose nuzzles into the crook of my neck. “No,” she says, just a vibration against my skin. A calming purr. “But I believe we’re capable of finding reason in everything.”

I’m not sure I understand, but maybe I will when I’m more clear-headed. “Hm,” I reply. “I’m sorry...I ruined you. You’re too perfect...too pure. I fucked up.”

“Cal, don’t. Just get some sleep and we can talk about it when you’re feeling better,” she says, pressing a kiss to my throat. “You didn’t ruin me.”

“What if you get pregnant...what’ll we do...”

Those laughing children sprinting in circles around a house on a hill flash through my mind. So familiar, yet so out of reach.

“I started taking birth control a few weeks ago,” she says. “Since our relationship progressed—I wanted to be proactive, just in case...”

“In case I fucked you...in a bar bathroom,” I mutter pitifully. “Made you bleed. Pro’lly made you cry, too.”

“I didn’t cry.”

“I didn’t leave you there,” I add, suddenly stricken with the notion that she thought I ditched her at the bar. “Promise I didn’t...I jus’ needed a smoke. To clear my head. I came back, but you...weren’t there.”

“It’s okay.” Lucy kisses me again, her lips dancing up the expanse of my neck. “I needed a few hours to think about it, too. Alyssa helped talk me through it.”

“Bet she wants to chop off my dick.”

“No. She thinks we need to start over, figure out what we both want. Get to know each other—*truly* get to know each other.”

I consider that, as much as I can through the fever haze. Even though it feels like I know Lucy, and she knows me, that’s not exactly the case. She doesn’t know what I’ve been through over the last decade. My demons, my shortcomings. She doesn’t know about my relationship with my mother, and how it deteriorated the moment she stole me away from my only home, my only remaining connection to Emma and Dad.

*From Lucy.*

She doesn’t know my mother remarried less than a year after my father

killed himself as a way to rid herself of the sullied memories.

A replacement family, because I wasn't good enough to sustain her.

I hated her for it, resented the shit out of her.

Still do.

And I don't really know Lucy, either. I know her heart, her bright spirit, and the way her laughter can turn even my sourest of moods sweet. I know she could live off of lime Jell-O and apple muffins and sing her way out of any disaster. She rambles when she's nervous and cries when she's happy. She sees the best in everything, believes a smile can cure a broken heart. Her love language is every love language because love is just a way of life for her.

I know her pretty damn well, even the things she doesn't realize I know.

But I don't know everything—I, too, missed out on a decade of her pain, struggles, victories, and successes. She suffered through the loss of her father and good friend, health crises, and probably a lot of lost dreams, and I wasn't there through any of that.

I know the strength of her heart, but not all the things that make it tick.

My eyes flutter closed as the medicine takes effect.

“Rest, Cal,” she breathes against me, her hand stroking through my hair.

“We'll talk soon.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I let it out, raising an arm to find her hand.

Our fingers interlock.

I sleep.



A feeling comes over me when daylight brightens my bedroom.

I don't hear any birds chirping, but they might as well be.

My fever broke again before dawn crested, and while I'm sticky with sweat and sickness, I feel well enough to slide my way out of the bed and stand. I try to be quiet, careful not to wake a sleeping Lucy snoring softly beside me, then make a staggered retreat from the room.

I had a dream.

It's cloudy now, but the visions still flicker across my mind as I scrub a

hand down my face. I'm in sweatpants, somehow, and I vaguely recall Lucy helping me out of my jeans at some point when the fever was at its worst.

My steps are clunky as I make my way across the hall, catching the attention of the animals who are eager for breakfast and fresh air. I manage to fill their bowls and let them out back, and then I head back into the living room.

I stop, staring at the black beacon straight ahead. It's sitting idle in the corner of the room, taking up nearly half the space.

My heart stutters.

I'm still weak, but there's a part of me that isn't.

Pacing forward, my pulse revs as I reach out and pluck the velvety fabric from the piano and let it fall at my feet. The image stops my breath.

Rosewood and dusty keys.

Emma's name is etched into the wood with Dad's pocketknife, a carving that earned her a weeklong grounding.

*Fuck.*

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to ease the stinging in my chest. My knees quiver, less from the fever aftermath, and all because I'm staring at my sister's treasured piano for the first time in years. I've kept it hidden from sight, buried from my mind.

It hurt too much.

It still hurts, but I'm not letting that stop me anymore.

Pulling out the little wood bench, I swing a leg over, then the other, until I'm seated in front of it. I pretend she's beside me, teaching me where to place my fingers, educating me on chords and keys. She told me that if I could learn the piano, I could learn any instrument.

I close my eyes and lift my hands.

The last night Emma sat with me on this bench, she introduced me to Dorian mode.

"I just learned this," she said with excitement, enlightening me on the E minor scale. Her hair was pulled up in her trademark ponytail, swinging side to side as her hands glided down the keyboard. "Dorian mode gives songs this eerie, haunting sound. Listen to this one."

She effortlessly played *Eleanor Rigby* by The Beatles.

And I heard it, last night. Shivering with fever, lost to a wild dream, the song played somewhere in my mind, as haunting and beautiful as ever.

It meshed with her laughter.

As I sit here now, rusty and unskilled, I don't try to play anything worthwhile. I just press my fingertips to different keys, drinking in their chords, thankful that they still play.

*I still play.*

I'm not beyond hope.

Piano notes ring out through the small space, abrasive at first. It's a brand new sound echoing off these walls, something foreign to my ears. But as familiarity sinks into me and carries my hands across the keys, it's not long before I feel right at home.

I pretend she's here, guiding me along, teasing me when I hit a bum note.

Encouraging me, cheering me on, and clapping hysterically when I manage to play something that doesn't sound entirely like shit.

I'm not surprised the piano music pulls Lucy from her slumber, and when the final note fades into silence, I hear a choking sound from behind me.

I spin around on the bench and find her gaping at me.

Stunned, shellshocked, overjoyed.

She stands there in her bare feet and waist-long hair with a hand pressed against her heart, as if she needs to hold it in before it falls right out of her.

I don't say anything; words seem futile. They would do more harm than good.

So, I just watch her watching me.

*All the lonely people.*

I know where they all come from because I spent years existing as one of them.

And as I stare at Lucy across the room, drinking in the smile that tips her lips and waters her eyes, I know one thing is for certain...

I don't want to be lonely anymore.



## CHAPTER 14

### LUCY

**M**y driveway is freshly shoveled when I pull in. It's been twenty-four hours since Cal's fever finally ebbed away. I thought it was too soon for him to return to work, but when Tuesday morning peaked and only a slight cough rattled his chest, he brushed off my concern and headed into the shop.

"Guys need me today. Busy schedule," he said, eyes rimmed red and skin pasty. He still looked terrible. "You, uh...good here?"

I assumed "here" meant "in his house alone" as his gaze scanned the space, so I nodded. It wasn't like I didn't have an assortment of cleaning projects I could keep myself busy with—determined to pull my weight while I was staying there—as well as a few errands to run.

We both knew a conversation was in our near future, but Cal needed to get better first, and I wasn't convinced he was yet. Some sort of virus grabbed ahold of him, and it was a nasty one.

I still feel him vibrating in my arms as I tried to chase away his fever with only the sound of my voice and gentle touches. He talked to me in his sleep, sluced with vibrant dreams. My name fell from his lips more than once, as did Emma's, as did a plethora of mumblings that made little sense.

To say I was worried sick would be an understatement.

But when I was awoken by the sound of piano keys yesterday morning, and stumbled upon Cal perched at Emma's old piano, the worry morphed into heart-rending emotion that clogged every inch of my throat.

Awe and amazement.

Pure, undiluted *joy*.

After he re-covered the piano in black velvet and crawled back into bed to

sleep most of the day away, I sobbed on the couch with my dogs in my lap.

I wasn't sure what it meant. I'm still not sure—all I know is that it felt an awful lot like a breakthrough.

I'm sitting idle in my driveway now, having stopped home to collect my mail and water my house plants, when my cell phone buzzes from my purse.

ALYSSA:

How did the talk go?? Need deets!

Swallowing, I chew my lip. Cal and I haven't discussed what happened between us yet, aside from some fever-laced ramblings, and that's my own doing. I'd been so exhausted on the drive over to his house on Sunday morning, I knew I didn't have the mental capacity to participate in a conversation like that.

I want to ask him where we go from here.

What it meant for him.

Why Jolene was at his house that morning.

If they...

*No.*

My gut tells me it wasn't *that* kind of visit—and that for all of Cal's flaws, he would never do something like that.

I type back a reply.

ME:

We haven't really talked yet. Cal got sick with a high fever, so I've sort of been taking care of him. It's probably happening tonight though!

ALYSSA:

It better. This limbo is giving me an ulcer. Speaking of ulcers, Dante left his beanie in my car. Maybe you can give it back?

A smile twists. Alyssa gave Dante a ride home because he'd been drinking too much, so I've been curious if anything came from it.

ME:

How is Dante?

ALYSSA:

Uh, as irrelevant to me as he was the last time I saw him. Why?

ME:

No reason :)

ALYSSA:

Okay. Cute. No I don't like him, no I'm not going to sleep with him, and yes you can tell him that.

Laughing, I send her a flurry of kissy-face emojis and toss my phone onto the passenger's seat. That's when there's a tapping at my car window, and I almost hit the ceiling with a shriek.

"Sorry, girl, sorry," comes a familiar voice.

Blinking away the remnants of my life that just flashed before my eyes, I glance to my left and spot Roy Allanson holding a shovel.

For the snow, probably, or possibly to bury me out back.

Depends on what kind of mood he's in.

Collecting myself, I pop open the car door and step out onto the driveway as an icy draft snaps into my lungs. I send him a smile, pulling my hat over my ears. "Hi!" I chirp through a frazzled breath. "You scared me."

It was months before I realized that my neighbor's husband—the older woman down the street who informed me of where Cal worked—was actually *the* Roy Allanson; resident curmudgeon at Cal's Corner. Apparently, he only lives a few houses down from me in a tiny white ranch, and has been here for over forty years. Once I thought about it, I could recall spring mornings in the front yard, splashing in melty snow puddles, waving to the Allansons as they strolled down the sidewalk, hand-in-hand, just as they did every morning at the same time.

"Yeah, yeah," he gripes. "The missus is always tellin' me to put a whistle around my neck. I'm too stealthy these days without my beer gut. Gave the spirits up a decade ago and lost thirty pounds." He leans against his shovel as the metal point toes the driveway, and rubs his belly. "Noticed you'd been gone for a bit, so I shoveled your driveway. Hope ya don't mind."

My heart soars.

I had every intention of calling my uncle to take care of it for me since shoveling probably constitutes as strenuous labor, which is still a no-no according to my doctor. Cal tried to insist on taking care of it after work, but as he trudged out the front door this morning looking weak and depleted, I lied and said a company had already been by.

To my pleasant surprise, someone *had* been by.

I stretch my grin with gratitude. “That’s so kind of you. Let me grab my purse to pay—”

“Hog wash. It’s on me, girl.” His yellowing teeth flash when he returns the smile and adjusts his wool cap. “Tell ya what—whip me up some of those muffins one day, and we’ll call it even. The cinnamon kind, with the little nuts inside.”

“I can do that,” I chuckle softly, fiddling with my scarf. “I really appreciate it. I’m staying with Cal until—” My cheeks heat through the winter sting, realizing I just suffered a severe case of too-much-information. *Oops*. I clear my throat and continue, “I, um, had a health scare, so he’s just looking out for me. I’ll be settling back in here soon. Probably next week or so.”

Roy puckers his lips like he’s pondering my overshare. “Bishop, eh?”

I nod, meekly.

“Good kid,” he muses. “Used to be more tolerable than he is now, but can’t fault him for the cards he was dealt. You’ll be good for him, I reckon.”

My blood chills, thinking of Cal and his terrible cards. “We’re just friends, really,” I say, because it’s easier to explain our arrangement as friendship than whatever it really is.

“Too bad. He could benefit from a sweet girl like you,” he grouses. “The boy needs a woman’s touch in his life, considerin’ he pushed his own mama away. She calls up a couple times a year and fills Joan in on things. Dana’s still broken up about it all.”

I inhale a breath, leaning back against my Volkswagen, my skin prickling at his words. “He pushed her away?” I echo. I’ve been curious as to what transpired between Cal and his mother, but I haven’t wanted to pry. All I gathered was that the relationship seemed strained. “What happened?”

“Oh, you know,” he shrugs, scratching at his white whiskers. “Dana moved on, found herself another husband who had his own daughter, and built a new life for herself. Pissed Bishop off, and he cut ties. Broke her heart.”

“Oh.” The word falls out as a little puff of breath. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He never told you ‘bout that?” Roy considers this, then tilts his head with a slow nod. “S’pose that makes sense. Doesn’t strike me as the sharing type.”

“He’s been through a lot,” I defend gently, pushing through the knot in

my throat. “Family can be complicated.”

His eyes glimmer, reflecting off the fallen snow. “Well...as Mr. Michael J. Fox said once, ‘Family is not an important thing. It’s everything,’” Roy quotes, unzipping his coat halfway to reveal a *Family Ties* t-shirt. He shoots me another crooked grin. “Maybe the reminder will do him good.”

My gaze trails back up as I bob my chin, my smile misty. “Thank you again for shoveling. I’ll bring by some treats this week.”

“Lookin’ forward to it, girl. You take care of yourself, now.”

I watch him saunter down the sidewalk toward his house, where Joan Allanson is waiting at the front stoop with a hot mug of something, steam rolling off the top. She sends me a kindly wave before the older couple come together for a kiss, then make their way inside.

Roy is right—family *was* everything to Cal. And when he lost it, he probably felt like he had nothing.

But...nobody has nothing.

Maybe it’s only fractured pieces, maybe it’s just ruin and rubble.

Sometimes all we can do is grab ahold of what we can and spin it into something worth treasuring.



After the family chat with Roy filled me with troves of nostalgia, I decided to drive up to my mother’s house and spend the afternoon with her. We went shopping at the downtown boutiques, grabbed coffee and pastries while we browsed a local indie bookstore, and then I helped her finally take down the slew of holiday decorations that still adorned her home. So many handmade treasures, childhood memories, and even Dad’s collection of fishing ornaments he made with fish hooks filled the space—everything brought both tears and smiles as I lovingly placed them back into boxes and plastic bins for safekeeping.

I texted Cal I’d be home late and would cook a pan of lasagna for supper, so after making a quick stop at the grocery store, I come fumbling through the front door just before seven p.m. with two brown bags under both arms.

“Hey! Sorry I’m so late, I—”

I stop short when my eyes peer over the armfuls of groceries.

Candlelight casts shadows and warmth throughout the living room, highlighting an abundance of fresh orchids. Every size, every color. My dogs go wild, circling my ankles, but I'm too breathless to greet them properly. All I can do is stare with my mouth hanging open as I lower the bags, trembling so hard, one of them tips, and onions go rolling across the floor.

When I pull upright, Cal is leaning his shoulder against the far wall, hands in his pockets, expression tired yet charmed. Behind him, the table is set and prepared with a white linen, more glowing candles, and a homecooked meal.

Are those...*raviolis*?

I blink back to him, my heart thudding against my ribs.

*I will not cry. I will not cry.*

Cal ducks his head, almost bashfully, and clears his throat. "Hey," he says.

I cry.

Of course I do.

Tears spring to my eyes, a juxtaposition to the enormous smile that spreads. "Oh my God...Cal," I whisper, taking a step toward him. "What is all this?"

"A thank you. An apology." He shrugs, pulling up from the wall. "Take your pick."

"You...did all this?"

"Yeah, pretty sure the raviolis that look like dog food should give me away." He tosses a glance over his shoulder and cringes. "Tried making pesto, but it looked like avocado-vomit-sludge, so scrapped that and pivoted to something I'd done before. Three panic-stops to the grocery store and a few forgotten steps along the way, and we have something that might be edible. We'll find out."

He downplays it all, while my heart dribbles out of me, a puddle at my feet.

The tiny smile he wore fades as he inhales a deep breath and meets me in the center of the room. Cal swallows, ruffling his hair as he skips his gaze around the space before settling on me, an earnest look in his eyes. "I only worked a half day—I wanted to do something nice for you. Something that could never compare to everything you've done for me. The patience, the forgiveness, the kindness. But...I wanted to try," he says hoarsely. "You have

to know that I've only pushed you away, kept you at a distance, because it's my own fucked-up way of trying to protect you from me. It's not because I don't want you in every way imaginable, and it's not that I can't see a life with you so damn vividly—it's because I'm terrified of what that life will do to you. I drive myself crazy thinking about all the ways I'll ruin this, ruin you."

I stare at him, dumbfounded, mind reeling, hands shaking at my sides.

"My whole life I've felt like a walking curse, and you...you've been up on this pedestal." His hand lifts high above his head. "So perfect and sweet. A pristine canvas I'm bound to wreck. And the thought kills me...it *kills* me, Lucy."

Tears glide down my cheeks, pooling at my jaw. My head swings back and forth as I reach for his hands, squeezing hard. "Cal, no...that's the fear talking. That's not reality."

"That's *my* reality," he insists, inhaling a tapered breath. He swallows it down and continues. "There are things you don't know about me. A lot of things. Bad things. Things I was tempted to do again, only days ago, and you had no idea."

My stomach pitches. "Jolene?" I wonder.

Cal frowns and shakes his head. "No...no, fuck no. Nothing like that. She's just a friend, and honestly, we've always been better friends than anything else. Even when we dated. We're both stubborn and hard-headed, and she likes women just as much as I do."

Relief sweeps through me, replacing the tingle of jealousy. My shoulders relax, and I nod.

"Listen...I don't want to keep going in circles with you. I can't do it anymore," he tells me, letting go of one of my hands to graze a finger down my jaw. "But, I want to take it slow. You need to get to know the real me. You have to understand what you're getting yourself into, and then, if you decide you want to run the other way, I'll get it. I will."

"Cal..." I reach for his finger and pull it to my lips for a soft kiss. "Do you really believe I'll uncover your flawed pieces and think for a second they won't be pieces worth keeping?" My mouth lingers as his fingertip drags across my bottom lip. "That would be impossible."

A flickering of heat steals his eyes as they dip to my mouth. He cups the side of my face, thumb taking over and tracing both lips. "You don't know that."

“I do...but I don’t want to rush this, either. Taking it slow is a good idea.” My heart gallops with prospect because Cal is giving me the hope I begged him for on that snowy downtown street just days ago. A crumb. A chance to become the very thing he swore we’d never be.

As he stares at my mouth, I wonder if he regrets his own suggestion to take things slow. I wonder if he’s thinking about what *I’m* thinking about—his tongue in my mouth, our bodies twined and moving together, the grunts and moans and rivulets of pleasure.

I suck in a breath, my traitorous tongue poking out to taste the pad of his thumb.

Cal’s grip on me strengthens. “Slow,” he murmurs darkly, a reminder for him, a reminder for me. “Although...once you try my food, I might not stand a chance.”

A smile breaks free, overriding the tension, and Cal takes a purposeful step back. “I can’t believe you cooked,” I sigh with amazement, peering into the kitchen.

“*Cooked* is a bold word. Mangled and maimed ingredients is more accurate.”

Still smiling, I glance around the living room at the flickering flames and colorful orchids. “This was really sweet, Cal. I wasn’t expecting it at all.”

His face falls a little. “I’m sorry I never gave you a reason to expect nice things from me. I want to change that.” As he follows my stare to the array of flowers, he rubs the back of his neck. “My sister always said the colors held meaning. Different colors meant different things...so, I grabbed all the colors they had,” he explains, looking antsy, out of his element. “Blue for beauty, yellow for friendship, orange for excitement, green for good fortune, red for passion.”

Cal is right—Emma did pay special attention to the colors, always taking note when Mom would fill the house with new blooms. I only know their meaning because she’d detailed it in a diary entry I recently read. I glance back at him. “You remembered what they all meant?”

The hint of a smile tips his lips. “No, but Google did.” Capturing my wrist, he tugs me forward, toward the kitchen. “Come on.”

We take our respective seats at the table, while Kiki begs unabashedly beside us for scraps and Lemon silently judges from the dog bed in the corner. Cricket even skitters across the tile to sniff my socks, plopping down between Cal’s ankles with a contented mew.



We're eating together like a family, and the smile Cal sends me over his glass of chocolate milk is the icing on the cake. The grand slam. The winning shot at the three-point line as the buzzer goes off, and two little girls squeal with joyful glee from the sidelines.

I'm that little girl again.

And he's my star.

The pumpkin puree leaks out of every misshapen pasta pouch, the sauce is broken, and the garlic bread is burnt to a crisp.

Without a doubt, it's the best meal I've ever had.

## CHAPTER 15

### CAL

I'm rushing to get things organized when Ike chucks a lollipop at my head and laughs like a toddler.

"What the hell?" I snatch it off the desk and throw it back at him. "Let it be known that I have zero faith in you assholes running this place while I'm gone for the weekend."

He unwraps the peach Dum Dum and pops it in his mouth, still grinning. "Don't blame you, boss. Shame you don't got any other options." His eyebrows waggle as he sucks the candy against his cheek. "We'll keep the place standing, at least."

I'm not convinced. "Kenny brought a fucking space heater into the garage and put it by the gas cylinder."

"Got cold," he shrugs.

I scrub both hands over my face and blow out a breath. "I'm taking off in ten minutes, after I close out this invoice. I'll be back Monday morning. Text me with any emergencies," I tell him, pausing to add, "And no, Dante clogging the toilet again is not an emergency. Plumber's number is in the break room."

Both of his hands fly up, palms forward. "Hey now, we ain't gonna disrupt your romantic weekend. That doll deserves to be wined and dined and treated like a queen." He winks. "Too bad you're the king she got stuck with."

I level him with a glare.

Since my flu bug finally decided to leave me the fuck alone, I invited Lucy up to Door County for a couple of nights for a relaxing getaway. It's not intended to be the "romantic weekend" Ike's implying—more so a chance

to connect on a deeper level and work through some of my issues. Talk, eat some good food in Ephraim, maybe do a wine tasting. Some of my fondest memories as a kid were of visiting Door County in the summertime and sucking down chili dogs and banana splits by the water while taking in the views of the bluffs across Eagle Harbor.

Lucy and her family even came along one year when I was nine, and she was seven, and we explored Cave Point, went kayaking, and splashed around in the hotel pool until our skin pruned.

It'll be a different experience in the winter—and as adults—but I'm looking forward to it just the same.

Ike's laughter follows him as he turns to head back into the garage, but I stop him before he pushes through. "Hey."

He spins. "Yeah?"

My chest tightens a bit as I glance up at his clear blue eyes, and a wave of gratitude spills through me. Swallowing, I say, "Thanks. For having my back," I tell him, voice strained.

I don't need to elaborate; he knows what I'm referring to.

The levity dissipates from his expression, and he nods slowly, pulling the sucker from his mouth. "You know I've been there, Bishop," he says. "Ruined my life, then had to rebuild it from the ground up. It wasn't a fuckin' cakewalk, that's for sure—I'll be damned if I watch a buddy of mine go through that same hell for a second time."

My throat stings, muscles locking. I know exactly what he went through because we went through that shit together. Opiate addiction is no joke, and while we both had our own reasons, our own personal demons, the destruction looked the same.

I'm not cured, and I'm not healed. It doesn't work like that.

A wake-up call isn't a full recovery—it's a first step.

It's awareness.

It's a slap in the face, a reminder that we all have something worth losing and the real breakthrough is in the uphill battle we fight to keep it.

Not everybody wakes up. Some of us go right back to sleep, and I refuse to be that person.

I duck my head for a beat and look up, catching the soft smile he sends me. It never occurred to me that I ever had any real friends before. People said they cared, people even *showed* they cared. But when you don't see yourself as being worthy of good things in your life, you become ignorant to

those things.

I clear my throat, returning the smile as vulnerability skates through me. “I appreciate it.”

He holds up his lollipop. “Any time, friend. And hey, if you need something to curb the itch, these things ain’t half bad.” Ike tosses another wrapped Dum Dum at me, and I catch it this time. “I’ll take a cavity or two over the alternative.”

Nodding my thanks, I spin the little white stick between my fingers and watch as he disappears through the service door and heads back to work.

I unwrap the lollipop and pop it in my mouth.

Tastes like bubblegum, just like her kiss.



I make one more pitstop before heading home to pick up Lucy.

“Oh, hi there!” Vera chirps, standing from her perch behind the welcome desk. Her short hair is clipped back from her forehead with a pawprint barrette. “If it’s not my favorite good Samaritan.”

She beams at me as I trudge forward, tugging my beanie farther down my head. “Sorry I missed you last month. Been a rough winter.”

“Oh, don’t you ever apologize for that. We appreciate everything you’ve done for our sanctuary. The animals, too.”

Fishing through my pockets, I pull out my wallet and pluck out a wad of cash—one-thousand dollars, to be exact. I never write a check because I’ve wanted to remain anonymous. I didn’t want Lucy to find out I’ve been donating to *Forever Young* since early fall of last year, when I discovered she did volunteer work for the organization. This isn’t about impressing her or earning brownie points. This is about doing a good thing, especially when that thing is something important to her.

I’ve been stopping in once a month on a day she’s not working, refusing to give my name, and only dealing with Vera at the desk. The redhead must’ve spotted me at some point, though—almost gave me away at the wine bar that night in November. And it’s a miracle Vera didn’t attend Lucy’s surprise party, or my act would’ve been up.

Vera's eyes glisten as she accepts the cash donation. "Oh, goodness gracious. You're a true angel, I swear you are." She places both hands to her heart, shaking her head with amazement. "You have no idea how much this means to our little sanctuary."

I do know what it means.

I see it in Lucy's eyes when she tells me about a new donation that came in, filling me in on Freckles and her successful spay, or Mr. Perkins' dental surgery, or how they were able to accept a new intake with a full set of vaccinations and a wellness exam.

She lights up like a firefly. She even cried once.

I know exactly what it means and the difference that it makes.

Another surprise came my way one afternoon when I discovered Cricket hiding under someone's car in the parking lot. Thinking back, I probably should've taken the mangy kitten back inside and had Vera take care of her—but I knew the shelter only took in senior pets, and I was afraid the kitten would be taken to animal control and wouldn't stand a chance.

So, when she poked her head out from behind the tire and slinked toward me as I crouched down and held a hand out, I decided to take her in myself. After a vet visit determined she had no microchip or owners to speak of, it made sense to bring her home and call her my own.

It was strange how easily the kitten warmed up to me, given my gruff disposition and towering build. I'm kind of a dick, and certainly no magnet for cute, homeless kittens. Hell, most *people* never warm up to me—but Cricket did. Quickly and effortlessly. And maybe it was because she sensed a kindred spirit in me. Another broken, lonely soul.

And so, suddenly I became the caregiver to something other than my own misery.

Shoving my wallet back into my pocket, I send Vera a soft nod as I traipse backward to the door. "It's not a problem. The least I can do."

"It's more than most do," she says, misty-eyed and rosy-cheeked. "Thank you. Truly."

A small smile stretches as a damn good feeling sweeps through me. "You're welcome." I push back out through the main door, then ride my bike the five-mile trek back home.

That's where I discover Lucy cramming a concerning amount of suitcases into the backseat of her Volkswagen Passat. Lifting my eyebrows, I kill the engine and swing a leg over my bike to meet her in the driveway. "Where are

you going? An African safari?”

She moves to straighten and knocks her head against the car roof. Wincing, she still manages to send me a beaming smile. “Hey!” she greets, massaging the bump. “Sorry, I probably panicked. I wasn’t sure what to bring. A few winter coats, boots, snow suits, books, swimsuits if there’s an indoor pool, travel snacks, fine dining clothes for—” She stops off my blank expression, blinking half a dozen times. “I overpacked, I know. I was nervous, so I just started tossing things into luggage bags. I brought the blender.” My eyebrows arc higher. “For smoothies. Or shakes. You never know.”

“Jesus.” I scratch my head, taking a step toward her. “It’s only two nights.”

She strains a smile, flashing me her teeth. Two long braids spill out from her pastel pink pom-pom hat as she fidgets in place, swiping both hands down her buttoned peacoat.

Nerves radiate off of her.

I suppose I can’t blame her for being nervous. I’m whisking her off on a dreamy, two-night getaway, where I reserved us dinner at a nice seafood restaurant and booked a hotel room with only one bed.

Insensible, I know—I, too, panicked.

I figured we had shared a bed together a few times already, and I’d managed to keep my hands to myself. One bed doesn’t automatically equal sex.

I can be good.

We can start over and take this slow, just like I promised.

Lucy clears her throat and tinkers with the ends of her braids. “Okay, well, I dropped the animals off at my mom’s already. I gave her your number, and the hotel’s number, and the restaurant’s number for dinner tonight, just in case. You know how she worries.” She laughs lightly. “I, um...I’m really looking forward to this, Cal. I’m a little nervous, but...I’m excited.”

*Fuck...me, too.*

I try not to envision Lucy in her bathing suit, or wearing something soft and skimpy as we crawl into the singular bed together later tonight.

Instead, I picture her in a pretty dress and a smile, all dolled up for dinner. Dinner with me.

*A date.*

Swallowing down my own tickle of nerves, I approach her on the

driveway and watch her eyes widen and her cheeks pinken from the late February chill. I reach out and graze my knuckles down her jaw, tracking the way her tongue pokes out to wet her lips. “No expectations,” I murmur, forcing my eyes off those lips. “We’ll have a nice dinner, we’ll talk, maybe we can go ice skating in Sister Bay and watch the stars glimmer off the ice...” Sounds romantic as fuck. I need to pivot. “We’ll take it slow,” I clear my throat. “Enjoy ourselves. It’ll be fun and easy, okay?”

Lucy heaves in a shaky breath, and my hand falls from her face. She nods, her eyes like snow globes as they reflect the winter backdrop. “Okay,” she grins. “Let me go grab my purse and keys, then we can take off.”

“All right.”

She spins around and shuffles up the driveway.

I recall my restless night of fever dreams earlier in the week when I asked Lucy if she thought everything happened for a reason. I was really fucking out of it, but her words managed to stick.

She said: “*No, but I believe we’re capable of finding reason in everything.*”

I was too sick to make sense of it then, but while I linger in the driveway beneath an overcast sky, I think I get it.

Emma didn’t die for any reason, other than that she met with a cruel, unfair twist of fate.

My father didn’t die for any reason, other than by his own hand and insurmountable grief.

There was no *reason* for the loss of them.

There is no *reason* for any awful, senseless thing.

But, as I watch Lucy disappear into the house to fetch her purse, her braids bouncing at her back, a smile thrown over her shoulder in my direction...I get it.

I do.

There’s no reason for suffering, but there’s always a reason to keep going.

## CHAPTER 16

### LUCY

“Cal, this is incredible!” I drop the bag at my feet as Cal carries in the rest of the unnecessary luggage I stuffed into the car like I was going on a final voyage. As soon as we enter the hotel room, we’re greeted with a prime view of the water across the street, glimmering in through the wall-wide window.

The hotel is situated in cozy Ephraim, the quiet, laidback counterpart to the more touristy Sturgeon Bay. I have hazy memories of skipping down the sidewalk with Emma’s arm linked through mine, drinking root beer from a glass bottle as we begged our parents to stop in every downtown shop we passed.

Cal discards the suitcases beside the lone bed and plants his hands on his hips as he takes a moment to drink in the view, then turns to face me. “Not bad, yeah? This was the last room available with a water view.” He glances at the bed and scratches his cheek.

I smile, brimful of appreciation and awe. “It’s amazing...it’s too much.” Unbuttoning my peacoat, I let it glide off my arms as I traipse toward the big window. Passersby stroll down the uncrowded street, bundled to the max in colorful scarves and winter hats.

When I spin back around to face Cal, he’s standing right behind me, eyes on mine. No longer on the view, and not on the water—just on me.

My breath catches for a beat before a silly memory stretches my smile. “Remember when you slammed that chili dog into my face while we ate lunch on the shore?”

Amusement replaces his serious expression. “And then you stuffed sand down my swim trunks.”



“One of my finer moments,” I grin.

The heaviness slowly returns as our eyes hold, and Cal inhales a deep breath. “I haven’t let myself think about that vacation for a long time,” he says, looking off to the side. “Hurt too much.”

My own smile fades, a somber feeling sneaking its way in. “I think about it all the time,” I confess.

Cal nods, still holding onto that faraway look until he clears his throat and ushers me away from the window. “Come on. Let’s get dressed and explore a bit before dinner.”

Two hours later, we’re guided to a candlelit table for two at a nearby seafood restaurant.

I vividly recall the last trip when we attended a popular seafood boil in Fish Creek and were seated by the fire, pressed together on a long bench as flames danced before us and colored us in orange. It was a magical experience, and I can’t wait to return one day during the warmer months.

Cal looks nervous as we take our respective seats across from each other in a small booth, and I shed my coat. My hair is down and curled, my makeup subtle but shaded with hints of berry and mauve to highlight the cranberry hue of my dress. I watch Cal’s eyes roll over me as I flip my hair back, showcasing my bare shoulders only encased in two thin straps. The neckline is low, my skin porcelain white thanks to the sunless, winter months. My scar looks even more striking, matching the red tones of my dress.

Fidgeting in his seat, Cal tinkers with the collar of his slate gray, athletic-fit button-down and pulls his eyes away from me. I’m about to speak, to temper his nerves with some inevitable rambling story I’ll put together as I go—but he speaks first.

He speaks, and his words shock me, ice to my lungs.

“I was an addict,” he announces. “Opiates.”

I’m mid-reach for my water glass, but my hand freezes before I can curl my fingers around it. I blink at him from across the table, wondering if I misheard. “What?” I reply, just a breath.

With a bone-deep sigh, he leans forward on his elbows and steeples his hands to his chin. “Sorry. Probably should’ve eased you into that...but, fuck it. You need to know, and there’s no easy way to say it. I was addicted to opiates for over a year. OxyContin. I’d pulled something in my back working on a bike repair, and a friend of Jolene’s hooked me up with some painkillers that could help.” He doesn’t look directly at me. Just somewhere over my

shoulder, as if it's too hard to say the words and face me at the same time. "It helped. Helped a little too much—and I sank. Fast. Couldn't function without them, which led me on this downward spiral that almost killed me."

My brows bend with bewilderment and horror. Empathy sluices me, and I reach across the table to hold his hand. "Cal..."

He pulls away. "Don't, Lucy," he says, jaw tight. "Don't feel sorry for me. Please. I did it to myself, and I fucked over a lot of people. Did shit I'm not proud of—things that'll always be a stain on my memory. Jolene dumped me when the drugs started taking over my life, so I spiraled further. I treated women like dirt, treated sex like a hollow escape."

I recoil at that, glancing down at the tablecloth, my stomach queasy.

A waiter stops by to take our drink orders, and I mumble something about a Diet Coke, only partly aware of him disappearing to fetch the drinks.

"Jolene and I tried to work things out again, a little over two years ago," Cal continues, once the waiter is out of sight. "Told her I'd clean up, get my shit together. She'd officially received her license to become a tattoo artist, and she was having this epic celebration with family and friends. It was a big deal for her, meant a lot." Pausing, he takes a sip of his water and leans back in the booth. "So, what did I do? Got high as fuck and spun out on my bike on the way over. Almost died. I still dragged myself to the party and stumbled in, covered in blood and mud and rain, acting like an idiot. Ruined everything, and she spent the whole night in the ER with me instead of celebrating her big achievement. We officially parted ways after that, and I'm lucky she stuck around in my life. She's a good person, and we work well as friends. But, I knew I had to make a change—so, I gave it all up cold turkey. Drugs, sex, even cigarettes. I just kept thinking about how disappointed Emma would be if she were there to see me."

Tears leak from the corner of my eyes as I listen. As I hurt. Inhaling a shaky breath, I swing my head back and forth, wishing he would've shared this with me sooner; wishing I could have *been* there for him sooner. "I'm sorry," I say, unsure of what *else* to say. "God, I'm so sorry you went through that."

His eyes darken through the flickering firelight. "I almost put myself through it all over again, you know," he tells me. "After your health scare. I bought pills and kept them in my bedside drawer just in case it ever became too much. In case I lost you...in case I ruined you."

*No.*

I make a choking sound, a gasp. “Cal, no. Please tell me you didn’t—”

“I didn’t take anything. I flushed them,” he answers quickly. “The morning after your party. After we...” His eyes slide back over to mine for the first time. “After we had sex. You came to my house and *hugged* me, Lucy. You hugged me when you should’ve slapped me across the fucking face for making your first time so...dirty. So cheap and meaningless. In a disgusting bar bathroom, for fuck’s sake.”

Hands trembling, I swipe away the falling tears. “It wasn’t meaningless at all,” I insist. That word slams into me, making me feel sick inside. The last thing I want is for Cal to think back on our first time together and consider it *meaningless*. My bottom lip quivers as I ask, “Did you...feel nothing?” I swallow, closing my eyes and adding, “When you were inside of me?”

He goes quiet for a moment. Restaurant bustle drowns out as I keep my eyes squeezed shut, too afraid to see the answer in his eyes. Too afraid to know the truth.

My heart all but stops, just as petrified, my cheeks burning.

I feel his fingers tickle mine as he laces them together atop the table linen. My eyes flutter open, and he’s staring at me so earnestly, with so much gravity.

“I felt a hell of a lot more than nothing, Lucy.”

My throat feels tight, my chest full of weights and bricks. “But...you didn’t feel what I felt,” I state, my words a whisper.

He frowns. “What did you feel?”

I look away, pursing my lips together to keep the little sob from breaking through. Then I answer softly, “Everything.”

The waiter returns at that moment with a Diet Coke for me and a water refill for Cal. I realize I haven’t even browsed the menu yet, so I order the special he rattles off—Chilean sea bass and sauteed scallops in lemon butter. Cal orders a surf and turf combination, and moments later, we return to our own private bubble of confessions and hard truths.

My face is hot, my heartbeats thumping fast and recklessly. “You don’t... you don’t need to answer that,” I say, flattening the napkin across my lap as a distraction. “I’m sorry.”

“Of course I felt everything.”

I glance up, frozen. Cal stares at me across the table, his features pinched and troubled.

“I felt everything I told myself I wouldn’t feel. Couldn’t feel,” he says.

“Everything I didn’t *want* to feel because *feeling* always turns into suffering. Love equals loss. Building a home means building something that will eventually collapse and bury us alive. And you...” He reaches for my hand again, squeezing it with a sense of desperation. “You’re the one good, sweet thing left in my life, Lucy. The thought of hurting you, of breaking you down...it would be the end of me.”

My eyes lower to my silverware as I nibble my cheek.

“I thought I lost you that Christmas morning,” he says gravely. “My last good thing, my tether, and I just...I fell back into that hole. All I could see when I closed my eyes was you, dangling like a ragdoll in my arms, hearing your heartache from the night before ringing in my ears. Heartache that I fucking put there because I was a goddamn coward. It broke me.”

I look back up at him, vision blurry. “I understand that fear,” I murmur through the grit in my throat. “I do. I rejected the idea of falling in love, too, because I was terrified I wouldn’t live long enough to see it through. That I’d leave my other half behind, stranded in love all alone. Like Greg. God, he was so broken when Jess died...” I pause to rein in my emotion, heaving in a deep breath. “But love isn’t a curse, Cal. It’s not anything to fear—not at all. Christmas opened my eyes to that. I’ve been running from it, thinking my time here was limited...but limited or not, time is a precious thing. Every minute of it. Our time here is a gift, and love is the prize if we’re lucky enough to find it. The holy grail. Love is what it’s all about.”

He stares at me, poignantly, his jaw flexing.

“The only thing stronger than fear is our tenacity to overcome it.” I force a watery smile. “Fear of death, fear of loss, fear of hurting the people we care about. You’ve come so far, Cal. *So far*. I know how unfairly life has treated you, and you’re still here, still fighting.” My smile brightens as he dusts his thumb across my knuckles, eyes still locked on mine. “Your struggles don’t scare me. Your flaws don’t make me want to run the other way. They only make me want to fight *with* you.”

Cal lets out a sharp breath and rubs a hand down his face, scratching at his jaw. He looks away, then back to me, absorbing my words. “Deceptive Cadence,” he says, a throaty whisper. “Emma used to talk about that—wanted to start a band with that name.” A chuckle falls out of him, just a burst of breath. “She used to say that life itself was like a Deceptive Cadence, just a giant musical trick to keep you on your toes. When you think something is going in a certain direction, a curveball is thrown at you.

Something you don't expect."

I harness my smile, imagining Emma's toothy grin when she told me that same thing on a spring afternoon in the schoolyard. She was passionate about music. About life.

*About love.*

Cal finishes, "Kind of like you. Just when I think I'm at rock bottom, at the end of my rope...you give me that sweet smile. And everything feels a lot less hard."

Pathetically, I cry.

And even more pathetically, I jump from my seat and collapse beside Cal on his side of the booth, wrapping my arms around him and burying my face into his shoulder. He smells like oak and amber, feels like warmth and shelter. He feels like... "Home," I murmur into the sleeve of his dress shirt. "That's what you remind me of. That's what you've always reminded me of."

His hand reaches out, fingers dipping underneath my chin to tip my head up. He's so close, I can almost feel his kiss pressed against my lips, his eyes shining with purpose.

"Home is something I buried a long time ago," he tells me, voice cracking with sentiment. A breath passes between us, a drumbeat. And then he whispers, "But I buried it inside you. Just in case I ever wanted to go back."

The words become stamped upon my soul.

Lips parting, trembling, I grasp his hand and cradle it to my cheek, brushing a kiss to his inner palm. I want to lean in and find his lips, but the waiter stops by the table again, infiltrating the moment, reminding us we're not alone.

Food is brought by a while later, and the conversation softens, lightens, laughter stealing away my tears. We share the better, more palatable, parts of our pasts, like when Cal took over the auto shop, and how the name "Cal's Corner" was an easy decision—a little part of Emma he'd always carried with him. He also tells me about the day he received the storefront signage, and it came with an extra *O* in "Corner," prompting the guys to call him "D.O.A." for months.

The story reminded me of my faulty batch of t-shirts, and I wondered if there was a crossover employee somewhere with a colorful sense of humor.

And then I shared the moment I played my first live show, petrified with stage fright, but feeling so, so proud and fulfilled when that final note rang out and brought with it a raucous round of cheers.

I tell him about my dad, and how he played the guitar, too, and how he always harnessed my musical aspirations.

We share little pieces of each other, our shoulders pressed together, elbows knocking.

I stay there all night, through dinner and dessert, on Cal's side of the booth.



“Oof!”

I land on my ass, the epitome of inelegance.

My tailbone burns as I try to pull myself up and immediately fail, then fail again, and I laugh so hard, I'm confident I'm deteriorating into madness.

Cal bends over to help me, but his legs keep slipping, skates sliding with equal clumsiness along the ice, until he lands in a heap beside me, muttering curses into the frosty night.

We glance at each other, and his scowl only makes me laugh harder. Giving up, I fall backward and collapse onto the rink, gazing up at the stars. “We're ridiculous.”

“And here I was worried this would be too romantic,” Cal mumbles.

Well.

It is pretty romantic.

I bite down on my lip to keep the words inside.

“C'mon,” he says, reaching for my hand to pull me upright. It takes at least a dozen attempts, but eventually, we're teetering across from each other, face-to-face, both hands clinging to one another to keep us standing. “Jesus, I used to be better at this.”

“Really?” I smile.

“When I was twelve, yeah. Thought it would be like riding a bike.”

“You're too big and hulky now,” I tease. “It's impossible to be graceful.”

He narrows his eyes. “Hulky. Very flattering.”

I laugh again, my feet trying to turn in on themselves as we zig-zag through a cluster of people with far more finesse than us. Our hands are locked tight, holding on for dear life. Cal's nut-brown beanie matches his

leather coat as he focuses on maintaining his balance, little plummy breaths escaping his lips. A smile pulls when we manage a steady rhythm across the frozen pond. “Tell me something you’ve always wanted to do but haven’t done yet,” I say, almost stumbling when a skater bumps into me.

His eyes lift briefly, then he returns his attention to the ice. “I wanted to write a song.”

My eyes pop. “You did?”

“Yeah.” He’s tense and focused, his bare hands curled around my ivory mittens. “I started one, a long time ago. Wasn’t any good, but I think about it sometimes—wonder what it would be like to finish it, to turn it into something worth sharing.”

“Do you still have it?” There’s a thrilling pitter-patter in my chest, a burst of elation. I’d give anything to hear Cal’s song. “Would you consider finishing it?”

One of his shoulders pops up, his gaze still lowered, pinned on our skates winding left and right. “Pretty sure Mom got rid of all that shit when we moved. My music, my clarinet...Emma’s things,” he murmurs, voice hitching. “Her diary.”

The feeling in my chest freezes to icicles.

I try not to stutter or shake as my grip on his hands tightens.

Cal has no idea Emma’s treasured belongings were still hiding in the floorboards of her old bedroom. I never told him about it because he made me promise not to talk about her, made me swear that I wouldn’t bring up any old wounds. While moments and memories have slipped out over the last few months, telling him about the diary felt...*bigger*.

Harder.

More detrimental.

And then time kept passing us by, making it more difficult to unveil.

I realize that now would be the time to tell him.

Right now.

*Tell him, Lucy.*

He looks up at me then, almost as if he’s waiting for the truth. Almost as if he knows I’ve been keeping this from him like a dirty little secret. Hazel eyes glimmer through the rink lights and starry glow. But the moment sweeps by, and he looks away.

“Emma accidentally busted my clarinet a few weeks before...” His jaw clamps up as he ducks his head. “She felt horrible. Promised she’d fix it, but I

told her it wasn't a big deal. I threw it in the trash, only to find her fishing it out later that day and disappearing into her bedroom. I never knew what happened to it, but I figured she was trying to put it back together."

My eyes mist, guilt turning my stomach into a lump of black coal.

"She was always doing shit like that," he breathes out, his tone softer than ever. "Fixing things. Repairing broken pieces." A small smile claims him. "She was always the glue."

A desperate feeling clogs my throat, and I look off to the side, pulling my lips between my teeth and holding in the sob.

"I think that's part of why I unraveled, you know? She wasn't there to keep me together. To keep my pieces from falling apart." Cal sighs, and we slow to a stop in the middle of the rink. "Anyway, I guess I'll never know what happened to that stuff. Mom swore she never got rid of it, but I didn't believe her. It was so easy for her to get rid of *them*, discard their memory like they meant nothing—would've been just as easy for her to toss the diary."

"No...no, she wouldn't do that," I speak up, my words sounding fractured. My heart thumps with anxiety and shame. "I know she wouldn't. I promise it's still out there somewhere, and we'll find it."

"You don't know that. She remarried a year after Dad died...a *year*, Lucy. That's so fucked," he says. The admission hangs between us, a heaviness tainting the air. "She told me she needed to move on, or she'd drown in her grief, but moving on felt a hell of a lot like finding a replacement. The guy had a daughter, Emma's age. Madeleine. She moved me away from everything I knew, from *you*—and I was just supposed to accept that. I was supposed to move on, too." He shakes his head, dislodging the bleak thoughts. A sigh escapes him, and he gives my hands a squeeze. "Sorry...didn't mean to drop all that on you. This is supposed to be the fun and easy part of the night. No more depressing shit."

"It's okay...I've been wanting to hear more about your mom. I've missed her."

He grumbles. "Another time. We can talk more about it later," he says. "C'mon, let's grab some hot chocolate and warm up."

Inhaling a shaky breath, I let Cal pull toward the edge of the ice where we step onto stable land and change back into our boots. I have no idea what to say. I'm going to tell him about the diary, about Emma's things, but I shouldn't do it here—not right here, not during this special weekend.



When we get home.

As soon as we get home, I'll show him. I'll give him everything, then apologize until my tongue falls out.

I slip back into my UGGs while Cal laces his black snow boots. Moonlight guides us to a small concession stand where we order two hot cocoas and stroll away from the rink, finding a quiet path along the water. Silence fills the space between us for a while as we lose ourselves to old memories and prospects of what's still to come.

Before I can breach the wordless moment, Cal speaks first.

"Tell me something you've always wanted to do," he says.

I glance out at the frost-tipped water and bring the cup to my lips. My answer comes easy. "Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to build my own animal sanctuary. A place that takes in the unwanted animals, either because they're sick or have special needs. The older ones, the broken ones. Kind of like *Forever Young*, but...I wanted to make it more interactive and unique. Have a coffee bar, a stage to sing and play music. I'd host events where people would bring their pets and enjoy some entertainment, while using the funds to keep the shelter running." Pursing my lips, I look up at Cal who's staring down at me with a thoughtful expression. "It's a big dream, but maybe someday. I should probably figure out what I'm going to do to pay the bills first," I chuckle lightly. "I'll probably pick up more live gigs. The wine bar, maybe a few other establishments. I'm making a name for myself, so it feels doable."

"Hmm." Cal nods slowly, taking a long pull of his drink. He licks his lips and looks straight ahead as we walk side by side. "That sounds like you."

"The music gigs?"

"The animal dream," he replies. "Making a difference, all while doing something you love."

I smile, bobbing my head. "Sounds like something a perpetual overachiever with too many big ideas would do. I want to do everything, but I feel like I've done nothing."

"Not true. You've done more than you know." He pins me with a hard stare, a look that goes bone-deep.

And then he's setting down his cocoa and stepping backward toward the snowy grass behind us. I watch as he drops into a big white mound, just like he did on Thanksgiving in my mom's front yard. His arms slide up and down, legs left to right.

He's making a snow angel.

I just stand there for a moment, drinking him in. Observing this lighter, walls-down Cal who doesn't shy away from the easier, carefree moments.

Who doesn't shy away from me.

"You coming?"

Swallowing, I set my cup beside his and fall beside him in the snow. We laugh when our hands bump and icy chunks of snow lodge inside our boots. I gather a ball between my mittens, then toss it at him, watching it disintegrate against the front of his coat. Cal retaliates, as he should, and the stars watch as I collapse into giggles and squeals as snow gets stuffed into my peacoat.

He rolls over and hovers above me.

My breath catches on the laugh, and I go quiet.

Cal lifts his hand, moving a piece of hair from my lips, his eyes skimming over my pink cheeks and wide eyes. He inhales a sharp breath. "I wanted to kiss you on Thanksgiving...just like this," he tells me, throat bobbing through a swallow. "I wanted to kiss you so fucking much."

A whimper snags in my throat.

I wanted that, too, but I wouldn't allow it then. Fear slithered through me, keeping me stalled and stagnant.

I raise both hands to grip the collar of his coat, pulling his face closer to mine. "I wouldn't say no this time," I whisper. "I'd kiss you back."

Heat brightens his eyes as he stares at my parted lips. "Yeah?"

I nod, one knee lifting and grazing his hip.

"I promised you that I'd take this slow," he states, voice deep and dark.

"So kiss me slow."

His eyes raise, looking for a spark of hesitation, but it doesn't exist. I squeeze his collar tighter until he's inching closer and closer, our lips brushing together, featherlight.

"I'll kiss you slow," he says raggedly, pressing a kiss to the bow of my lip. "Soft, hard, messy, sweet." Another kiss with a touch of tongue. "I'll kiss you here..." His mouth drags down my jaw, finding my neck. "And here." One hand trails the length of my peacoat, slips underneath, and grazes the juncture between my thighs. "Here, if you'll let me." And then he dips his lips to my ear and rasps out, "I'm fucking dying to kiss you there."

When he cups me harder, I let out a moan that sounds pornographic, and my legs fall open. "Cal..."

A growl catches in his throat as he takes both of my wrists in his hands

and tugs them up over my head, pinning me in place. His face looms above me, irises swirling with gold and moonlight. “I’ll kiss you as long as you’ll let me, Lucy.”

I don’t hesitate. I lift up, capturing his mouth and inhaling the groan he releases when our lips collide. He parts my mouth with his, tongue slipping inside, a blazing warmth against the cold ground. One hand releases my wrist to cradle my cheek, grip tightening as our kiss burns hotter. Tongues tangling in a wet slide, I angle my head, lifting up higher to taste all of him. The kiss is messy and hungry, passionate and slow. He pulls back to nip my bottom lip between his teeth, tugging gently, then dives back in and holds my face between both hands.

When we’re out of breath and trembling, Cal presses his forehead to mine, eyes closing as he cherishes me, and places a final kiss to my mouth.

And I know, without a doubt, I’d let him kiss me forever.

I just hope forever is long enough.

## CHAPTER 17

CAL

Lucy changes into a crop top and little pink boy shorts after we return to the room. Hair long and tangled from wearing a hat all night, she's never looked sexier as I sweep my eyes over her more times than what feels safe if we plan on *just* sleeping tonight. She strolls toward the bed with a yawn, smoothing back a clump of hair that doesn't seem to know what to do with itself.

As her feet slow to a stop near the edge of the bed, she becomes noticeably aware of the fact that there is only one. Tucking her hair behind her ears a few times in rapid motion, she glances at me already sprawled out on one side, the vacant space to my left ripe with implication.

I'm not entirely sure what to say or do, which makes me feel itchy. Normally, I have no trouble voicing my intentions, and my intentions are definitely leaning toward burying my face between her thighs until she's coming on my tongue and chanting my name.

My dick immediately hardens at the notion, and I tug the bedsheet higher up my waist to hide the evidence. "You tired?" I try to gauge her expectations for the evening as she slides a knee onto the mattress, and it creaks beneath her weight. "I know it's been a long day."

I'm giving her an out if she's not ready.

All I want to do is sink inside of her again, but more than that, I want her to feel safe and comfortable. I want our bathroom encounter to be scrubbed from her mind because her first time should not have happened like that, despite her insistence otherwise.

Lucy smiles as she climbs in beside me, but it's a nervous smile. She's blinking too much, fidgeting with a loose string on the pillowcase. "I am a

little tired, I guess.”

*Dick: meet cold water.*

I get my shit under control and nod, rolling onto my side to face her. Propping my head up with one hand, I watch as she settles under the covers and pulls them up to her chin. “All right.”

“Did you want to watch a movie or something?”

“Nah. Sleep sounds good.”

Sleep sounds miserable, but I can be patient.

Gnawing on her lip until it’s red and deliciously plump, she sends another nervous smile my way. Two big blue eyes roam over me. I’m wearing a white tee and sweatpants, despite my usual nighttime attire of boxers only. Didn’t want to spook her with too much skin.

Although now I’m wondering if I did manage to scare her away with all the dirty details of my past. She didn’t give me the impression she was turned off, or having any second thoughts, but after that mind-blowing kiss we shared in the snowbank, I was sort of expecting the night to go differently.

The memory of her curious tongue teasing the roof of my mouth as I swallowed her squeaky little moans have my dick acting up again.

One bed was probably a bad idea.

I reach down to adjust myself and hope she doesn’t notice before switching off the bedside lamp. Darkness floods us. I feel the mattress dip a few times as Lucy gets comfortable through a long, wordless stretch, and the silence has me wanting to crawl out of my skin.

I flip the light back on.

She’s on her back, fingers curled around the bedcovers, when she tilts her head toward me. “Everything okay?” she wonders.

Mussing my already disheveled hair, I scoot closer to her and make a humming sound. A sigh laced with question. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Okay.”

Lucy blinks, glancing at me, and then peers up at the ceiling. “Yes. I – I just...I’m not sure what comes next. You know...with us.”

“Whatever you want,” I answer easily, reaching out to wrap a finger around a piece of hair that’s spilling across her pillowtop. “Whatever you feel comfortable with.”

Her lips pucker with thought as she continues to blink a dozen times, her lashes tickling her light brown eyebrows. “I think...” Trailing off, she closes

her eyes for a few tense beats. When they flutter back open, she finishes softly, “I think I want you to hold me for a little while. If that’s okay.”

“Of course that’s okay.”

Her smile loses a touch of its apprehension, stretching bright enough to reach her eyes. My own smile tips to match, assuring her that her request is absolutely fucking okay.

I reach over to turn the light back off, then curl up beside her and tug her to my chest with one arm. She instantly lightens. A weightless feather in my embrace. Her breath leaves her, taking with it the nerves and jitters, and we both relax as I trail a finger along her collarbone.

This feels right.

Falling asleep with Lucy pressed against me, warm and alive, seeking comfort in my arms. There was no comfort that night at the bar when I hauled her up the graffiti-spattered door and thrust myself between her legs. There was no tenderness, no care. I was an animal, my control hanging by a thin thread as I inched my way inside of her tight heat and gracelessly unraveled.

Lucy inches as close as she can get until we’re spooned and twined, my hand roving over her, a soothing caress. It lands across her bare stomach that peeks out through the crop top, lightly grazing, delicately lingering. The sigh she makes is damn near perfect. Arching her head back, so my face is buried in her tousled mound of hair, she goes still as I breathe in deep.

Sweet pears and a trace of flowery musk.

Fucking divine.

The silence turns peaceful, saturating me with a shot of contentment I’m not sure I’ve ever felt before. It’s not long before she goes completely lax within my hold, her breathing steadying as she falls into a restful slumber.

It’s not sex.

But it feels just as good.



I open my eyes to a dark room, pulled awake by a dream.

An erotic dream involving a hand stroking my dick.

*Lucy’s hand.*

Sensual moans snake through me, almost enough to send me straight to orgasm. When I get a hold of my bearings and remember where I am, who I'm sleeping next to, I'm struck with the awareness that it wasn't a dream at all. We're face-to-face on the bed, legs completely entangled, lips nearly touching. My palm is plastered to her ass, fingers squeezing, my hips gyrating ever so slowly.

And Lucy's hand is groping the rock-hard tent in my sweatpants as she writhes against me, making these obscene mewling sounds that have me teetering on the edge.

I snatch up her wrist before I blow a load in my pants. "Lucy...fuck..."

She stretches languidly, her free hand finding its way back to my raging hard-on while the other sweeps her hair off her forehead. "Hmm..." she moans, oblivious.

*Jesus.*

"Are you dreaming?" My voice is all gravel, rough with sleep and lust.

"Wha...?" A few seconds tick by as she brings herself back to reality, groggy and disoriented. A subtle shaft of moonglow trickles in through the large crack in the blackout curtains, highlighting the exact moment her eyes ping open, wide with abject horror.

Then she jumps back with a shriek, yanking her hand away like my cock is a king cobra preparing to strike.

Not a terrible analogy.

Pressing the heel of my palm to my erection, I count to six because I can't make it to ten, and twist toward her. "Christ." I blow out a breath. "Were you having a sex dream?"

*Were we both having a sex dream?*

I've never woken up in the midst of dry-humping somebody before. Now I'm painfully pent up, my cock throbbing, refusing to deflate.

"Cal?" Lucy squeaks out, rubbing the sleep from her eyes before blinking over at me and clutching the bedsheets like some sort of protective armor. "A...sex dream?"

"Yeah. I woke up to a gorgeous woman in bed with me, stroking my dick."

*Blunt but true.*

"Oh..." She falters, her gaze dipping south, landing on the incline in the sheets. Then she flings the covers off of her, feet kicking and flailing as she tries to make an escape. "Oh my God."

My hand flies out to grab her arm before she leaps from the bed. “Whoa, hey...it’s okay.”

“Oh my God,” she repeats, still mid-getaway.

“Seriously. It’s fine...come over here.” Not my brightest suggestion, but the last thing I want is for her to freak out and bolt into the night. “You’re good. Come here.”

Hesitating, she curls her legs back onto the bed and slowly turns to face me. “I...I don’t know what happened. I guess I was dreaming, and...” Her embarrassment is palpable. Flustered, she drags her fingers through her hair and ducks her head. “I’m so sorry. This is humiliating.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I give her arm another tug until she’s inching toward me, whole body trembling. When she melts into a mortified puddle against my chest, I braid my fingers through her hair and press a kiss to the crown of her head. “It’s all good, sunshine. No complaints here.”

Still muffling her horror into my t-shirt, she shakes her head, long tresses knotting between the cracks in my fingers. “Are you...um...” Chin popping up with timidity, her eyes search my face through the low-lit room. “Okay?”

*Am I okay?*

The girl of my dreams is nestled in my arms, pressed up against my hard-on, smelling like an orchard on a breezy summer day.

Instinct has my leg slipping between hers until we’re intertwining again. All wrapped up, limbs gliding over soft sheets, skin brushing and teasing. She can’t mask the whimper that meets the center of my neck when my upper thigh nudges the heat between her legs. It’s not on purpose, but I find myself doing it one more time, just to hear that sound again. “I’m more than okay, Lucy,” I tell her hoarsely, barely holding it together. This night is either going to end with Lucy breaking apart around my dick, or me in the shower jacking off with her name on my tongue.

Lucy grinds against me in her painted-on boy shorts. I’d bet my fucking house on the fact that they’re soaked through, and the thought alone has a growl rattling my chest. “Are you okay?” I return the question, my lips twisting in her hair, inhaling her fruity scent.

“Yes.” She’s panting now, breathy little noises warming the skin along my neck. Her hips pick up speed as she seeks more friction against my thigh. “I’m...more than okay, too.”

*Goddamn.*

I’m thinking the night is heading toward option number one. Just



imagining sliding into her again, such a tight, sweet fit, has the beast inside me roaring to the surface. “Yeah?” I fist her hair, my opposite hand traveling down her spine until I’m palming her ass. Pulling her forehead to mine, I meet her eyes through the dark and watch as her pupils dilate, irises looking almost black. “Tell me how wet you are right now.”

I’m so fucking turned on, I sound demonic.

Her moan skims my lips, eyes fluttering closed as she clamps her thighs around my leg. Deciding she’d rather show me, Lucy boldly finds my hand and drags it from her backside to the wetness pooling the front of her shorts.

My groan vibrates through us both, and I cup her pussy through her shorts in a firm grip until she jerks, releasing a high-pitched mewl. “You’re fucking soaked,” I rasp, fingers teasing. “Knew you would be. Drives me wild.”

“Cal...” She keeps pumping those hips, keeps writhing and moaning. So needy. Shaky fingers find their way to the waistband of my sweatpants, and she starts tugging them down my hips. “I need you.”

This girl is going to be the fucking end of me.

My erection bounces free, angry and demanding. I buck forward, grinding against her stomach with a deep groan, and I almost lose it. “You need my cock inside you?” I ground out, tightening my grip on her hair until our lips are hovering just a hair’s breadth apart. I touch my tongue to the bow of her lips, a permission for entry.

A weakened sigh falls out of her, and she breathes out a breathy little yes before lifting up and crashing our mouths together. The desperation takes over like it did in the bar bathroom, and I devour her, teeth nicking, my hand tugging her jaw open wider for my tongue to seek and explore. My cock presses firmly against her abdomen, my hips jerking with little control when she winds a leg around my hip, trying to get closer.

In a blink, I hook a hand underneath her thigh and flip her onto her back until I’m parked between her legs, and her flushed face is gazing up at me, partially illuminated by the moon-drunk room. A sliver of starlight kisses the deep blue of her eyes, a potent swirl of fire and indigo.

Bending to kiss her, I slip my fingers into the waistband of her shorts as our tongues meet hungrily, then I pull them down her legs until she’s kicking them free. Our clothes land in a pile beside the bed as I tug off my t-shirt one-handed, slide the rest of the way out of my sweatpants, and damn near tear the crop top off of her.

Lucy collapses backward onto the mattress, hair splaying in a thousand

different directions over the pillow, golden brown against stark white, her tits bouncing beneath me. My eyes meet her exposed breasts for the first time. Full and perfect, tipped with dusky areolas that pucker and tighten when I lean down with a sharp grunt of need and suck them into my mouth. Her fingers sift through my hair, back bowing off the bed as she moans.

“Oh God...” Nails digging into my scalp, her legs wrap around my middle, ankles crossing at the center of my back. “Cal, please...”

“Fuck, your tits are perfect,” I groan, pulling a nipple between my teeth, then laving it with my tongue before doing the same to the other. “So damn perfect.”

Cupping her breasts in my palms, I inch down her body, grazing my nose along her soft belly as her legs fall away and part on either side of me. When my lips travel lower and lower, teasing the juncture to where I’m dying to taste, her curls glistening and neatly trimmed, she tautens, muscles locking up. She tries to slam her knees together, and I lift up. “No?”

Lucy tugs at my hair, beckoning me back up her body. “I don’t know...”

I army-crawl my way up, my tongue licking and tasting the salt of her skin, until we’re face-to-face again. Swallowing, I tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, then lower my lips to whisper, “You don’t want me to eat you out?”

She’s trembling beneath me as she answers, her arm draping over her eyes like she wants to hide. “I’m...nervous,” she admits, lips parted and wobbly. “Shy.”

I tug her arm away, needing her to see me. Needing her to know there’s no rush, no pressure. “It’s okay. We don’t have to do that yet.” I press a kiss to the skin below her ear, scattering more along the expanse of her throat. “You’re gonna love it though. Gonna break apart so beautifully when my tongue is deep inside you.”

Craning her neck back with a small nod, she offers me more skin to kiss and adore. Knees drawing up, she slides both hands up and down the sun tattoo etched across my back and whispers, “Make love to me, Cal.”

The words trickle through me, touching someplace deep and long-buried.

*Make love.*

I’ve never done that—not before Lucy.

Never thought I ever would.

But even in that bathroom, there was something there, something beyond sex—beyond just *fucking*. It was raw and dirty and urgent, but it was also terrifyingly soul-deep.

Magic and mayhem.

A fundamental elixir.

I was inside her, but she was inside me, too. Every sound she made, every touch to my skin and breath whispered against my lips, brought me back to life, kiss by kiss, and made me wonder why I ever wanted to stay dead in the first place.

Every heartbeat felt perfectly, fatefully aligned.

I push her legs apart with one hand as my other cradles her cheek, cupping with careful intensity. I bend to brush my lips to hers, sweet and gentle. A promise. It's the answer I refused to give her that night on the sidewalk, too ensnared by the ugly claws of fear.

Lucy's breath hitches like she knows—like she knows exactly what this is. Her heart snags on the cloud of awareness as our eyes lock.

I reach down to grip my cock, sliding the tip along her slickness, keeping the groan in my throat as I hold her gaze. She whimpers, the sound splintering on her tongue. I feel her trembling beneath me. Quaking, already coming undone.

Our noses brush together as I inch inside.

*Fuck...* she's so tight, gripping me like a vice as I work my way in. I force my eyes to stay open, needing to keep this tether from snapping. Nothing has ever made me hotter than knowing I'm the only man who's been inside of her. It's a primal, primitive feeling.

"Ohh..." is the sound that meets my lips, hers parted against mine. It's drawn-out, full of added syllables. Laced with desire, for this moment, for more. Her hands cling to my shoulder blades, nails biting the skin. Digging and desperate.

With a hard thrust of my hips, I sheathe myself all the way in, reaching for her hands and dragging them up the pillow above her head as we both moan in perfect time. I draw our foreheads together. She pants against my open mouth, her eyes still wide, still open and watching. Still spellbound.

Another deep, potent pump of my hips, and her legs wind around me, hands moving to grip the back of my neck as she tenses with a sharp cry.

*Christ, she's perfect.*

Our fingers interlace as I thrust again, already on the peak of detonating as her internal muscles quiver and squeeze. "You're so gorgeous, so fucking sweet," I say raggedly, taking both of her hands in one of mine, and dragging the other to her throat, then down her breast, then to the curve of her ass as I

hold her steady, rutting into her with slow, deliberate pumps. I find her mouth as she practically sobs with bliss against my tongue. “You’re my light,” I groan, biting at the sweep of her jawline. “My muse.” My tongue trails down her throat, nicking the tender skin. “My laughter.” Another thrust, and then another. My pace quickens, desire unfurling low and deep. “You’re mine.”

The words send her over the edge. I feel her shatter beneath me, her orgasm blindsiding us both.

“Fuck,” I growl, pulling up to my knees and clinching her waist as she unfetters. Lucy’s hips meet with mine, our skin slapping together. I drive into her, her tits bouncing as she massages them with her palms, head thrown back with a throaty moan. She’s a goddess sprawled below me, pure light and the sweetest kind of sin.

My balls tighten as my release hits me, the image of my cock sliding in and out of her, her thighs slick and glistening, enough to shoot me straight over the edge. Such a perfect fit. So right. I come apart with a final thrust, heat funneling through me in sharp, debilitating waves, a gravelly moan spilling out as I empty inside of her.

I collapse over her as the sparks ebb and scatter, catching myself on my elbows. Her chest heaves up and down with labored breaths, and we come down together. Lucy lifts a hand to sweep a strand of damp hair off my forehead, then pulls my face to hers, kissing my temple. Sweet and soft. When I inch back up, our eyes holding with more than I know what to do with, a smile spreads across her face. Blue eyes shimmer up at me. They dance and glow, and I see everything in the pools of them.

A future.

A life.

A *good* life.

A *home*.

I curl up beside her, tugging her to me, her hair knotted in my roving fingers, her skin slick with sweat and sweetness.

She’s warm, she’s alive, she’s breathing.

And she’s all mine.

## CHAPTER 18

### LUCY

The weekend passes us by like a gravitational wave, and a dreamy Sunday morning seeps in through the curtains as I curl into the big arm slung around my middle. Intricate tattoos coil around his forearm and triceps, a canvas of black ink and onyx against his skin. He's less bronzed thanks to a dreary winter hanging overhead, but has a warmer, balmier tone than me.

I tickle a finger up and down his arm, over his elbow, until he jostles awake. "It's our last day," I murmur softly, my head canted on the double pillows as I watch the way his eyelids twitter at the sound of my voice.

He wakes fully, only one eyeball peeling open with a sleepy squint. "Hm."

"I want to eat muffins and go sledding."

Face burrowing into the pillow, his arm around me tightens as he drags me closer. "Sounds like an adventure for future me," he mumbles, words muffled by cotton and downy.

It's true that it's only quarter past six, but I'm eager to enjoy our final hours in this little winter wonderland. It feels like we're temporarily preserved in a snow globe that's about to be dropped, fracturing our fragile glass bubble. "I brought you a coffee from the café downstairs. Americano with a splash of heavy cream," I tell him, sifting my fingers through his ruffled bedhead.

His back muscles and shoulder blades ripple as he pulls his face from the pillow to look over at me. Hazel eyes swirl with sleep and affection. "You're a fucking dream," he says, all raspy and low.

My insides tingle, imagining that same voice threaded with lust as he

made love to me only hours ago. I wouldn't say we wasted our Door County Saturday holed up in the hotel room for an obscene amount of hours—not at all—but our productivity was scarce, and my achy, thoroughly explored body is feeling the aftermath of the excessive cardio. A languid smile spreads. “I'm real,” I assure him.

He hums, rolling onto his back and taking me with him until I'm strewn across his bare torso. “Promise?”

I touch our noses together, then move in for a chaste kiss. “If you're real, I'm real.”

“Verdict is out 'til I've had my coffee.”

Grinning, I deepen the kiss with my tongue, hot pressure building down low as my body melts against him.

Cal braids his fingers through my freshly blow-dried hair, narrowing his eyes at me through the morning haze seeping in. “You're all dressed and ready. How long have you been up?”

“Since five. I'm almost always up at five.”

His lips twist with displeasure. “So you do have a toxic trait—knew you were too perfect.”

I swat at his shoulder, then roll off of him until my fuzzy spaghetti-and-meatball socks meet the floor. I'm not partial or impartial to spaghetti, but an old co-worker had mistaken my love for corgis as a love for Borghi—a commune in Italy. She purchased me the socks as a holiday grab bag gift.

They happen to be extremely comfortable.

I slip into my boots and fluff my hair in the rectangular mirror as Cal brings himself back to life with a long stretch. He digs the heels of his palms into his eye sockets before kicking free of the covers and sitting up, reaching for his coffee that is still piping hot.

“Mmm. This is perfect,” he states as a moan follows, a sound laced with indecency.

A shiver snakes down my spine and has my belly flip-flopping. The sensation only escalates when Cal stands from the mattress in only a pair of boxers and scratches at his dark, mussed hair. Muscles flex and bulge, and my eyes dip south to the accompanying bulge between his legs.

Memories sluice me like a warm summer rain.

Our bodies twisted and twined, learning and exploring. Lights on, lights off. Half-clothed, wholly bare. We only managed to leave the hotel room once yesterday when a third order of room service sounded unappealing,

bundling up and taking a trolley ride to wine tasting, then splurging on greasy bar food at the restaurant next door. I stuffed myself with jalapeño poppers and fries, giving Cal my crispy ones while I hoarded the floppy, mushy ones. He indulged in a bacon cheeseburger that oozed with Gorgonzola and barbecue sauce before we stumbled back to the room, hands eager and pulling at clothing, and then we indulged in each other until exhaustion stole us from the tangle of bliss.

I wonder if he's thinking about the same thing.

Hooded eyes stare me down from across the room, his coffee seemingly less vital as it was moments ago when he returns it to the bedside table. Cal stalks toward me like a skilled predator, hunger in his gait. While I'm fully dressed in a caramel-brown sweater and dark jeans, I might as well be stark naked by the look gleaming in his eyes.

"Muffins and sledding, yeah?" he practically purrs, moving around the foot of the bed and closing the gap. "That really what you want right now?"

Yes.

Cal's hand lashes out, expertly snaking around my wrist and tugging me to him. His hips grind into me, erection hard as steel.

No.

It takes five seconds for his boxers to pool around his ankles and for my knees to hit the floor. I take his cock inside my mouth as his hands cradle the back of my head and his neck arches back with a primitive groan that has my core clenching. I suck him deep into my throat, fisting him at the thick base, reveling in the way his legs tremble and his hands tighten in my hair.

"*Fuck, Lucy...fuck, that's good.*" He hisses, grunts, bucks his hips. "God, you're so fucking sexy on your knees, taking my big dick with that pretty little mouth. Such a good girl. Such a good, sweet girl." Filthy words spill out of him, a slew of mumbles and moans, and I match them with my own needy whimpers.

It only takes a few minutes for him to come undone, jerking and emptying down the back of my throat.

And then another two hours go by before we finally leave the room.



The toboggan we rent is big enough for two as we glide down the giant hill and tip over in the snow. Laughter falls out of me as big, fat snowflakes sheathe my wool hat in sprinkles of white.

I feel like a kid again, my jeans soaked and walls down. The air is a perfect thirty-five degrees, void of wind, and my cheeks feel tight from the gleeful grin that hasn't left my face all morning.

The child in me screams internally, "*Again! Again!*," but I manage to stay marginally mature by chucking a plump snowball at Cal instead.

He retaliates, and we collapse backward at the base of the hill.

I glance at him, noting the cold flush on his cheeks that travels to his nose and tinges the tops of his ears with bright pink. A smile pulls. "I have this vivid memory of you sliding down the hill in your backyard on the garbage bin lid with a Pop Tart in your mouth."

Cal lifts on his elbows, and they disappear into the snow. "Cherry. Best flavor."

"You choked on it when you slammed into the maple tree," I wince through a laugh.

Emma and I raced down the hill in our clunky boots, slipping and sliding the whole way. I'm pretty sure I did some sort of "stop, drop, and roll" maneuver, tipping over like a goat and rolling my way down the hill in hopes that I'd reach him sooner to save his life.

Thankfully, Cal did not meet his end with a cherry Pop Tart.

"I was trying to multitask," he grouses, adjusting the navy beanie over his reddening ears. "The bottom of a prime sledding hill is a damn inconvenient place for a maple tree."

I love that tree.

It makes me nostalgic for seasons long since passed.

And I think that's why I love doing these things with Cal—sledding, making angels in the snow, riding the Ferris wheel and eating banana bread until our bellies ache.

Moments fade, but they never die. We can always recreate them, bring them back to life, and make them even sweeter.

I push up from the snow mound and grab Cal's hand as a young sledder careens toward us. We trip and stumble out of the way, our laughter light and effortless. Before we trudge back up the hill, I bend to pick up another armful of snow, then dump it over his beanie.

He turns to face me with a glare.



Shrugging, I send him a wink, but I'm certain it looks like I have a muscle deformity in my face thanks to the cold.

And then he lunges.

I shriek, diving out of the way before his arms envelop me, begging my legs to carry me up the hill before he attacks. But his legs are longer, faster, and he hauls me up over his shoulder as I squawk with mock terror and belly laughter. My flailing boots cause his balance to teeter in the heavy snow, and we both go down, a graceless plummet. Cal catches me, pulling me onto his chest before rolling us over and caging me in.

He holds me down with one hand while the other scoops up snowflakes and smashes them into my face. A scream breaks free when the cold hits, and I sputter and spit, laughing so hard it hurts. Cal laughs, too, eventually clearing away the snow and melting the rest with a hot kiss. We both melt then, my arms winding around him, his mouth opening, tongue warm and wet as we forget that the world around us exists.

When he pulls back, my breath tails off. He's so beautiful above me, haloed in a grayish winter glow. A hint of a smile paints his lips as he sweeps a damp strand of hair off my cheek.

I swallow.

*God, I love him.*

I do—I *know* I do, and maybe I never stopped. It was young love back then, shallow and depthless, steeped in childhood fantasies and Ferris wheel kisses.

It's different now.

It's matured, developed, morphed into a future I can envision crystal clear. A beautiful life spans out before my eyes as I stare deep into his.

I see it all, glimmering in the browns and golds, a marrying of warmth and lovelight.

And I want to tell him; I want to spill my heart out in this snowbank as sledders squeal and howl, and snowfall blankets us in pretty clumps of white.

But I'm afraid he doesn't feel it, too—I'm scared he doesn't ache and bleed and yearn the same way I do, and I don't want to ruin this moment.

So, I kiss him instead, hoping and praying he can taste the words locked behind my lips.

*I love you, Cal Bishop.*



I glance over at Cal perched in the driver's seat of my little Volkswagen as we make the drive back home, his wrist dangling over the wheel while a bluesy song purrs through the speakers. Shaggy hair shimmies around his forehead from the cool air sneaking inside through a small crack in the window because I cranked the heat up to a level that Satan would appreciate. His eyes are half-lidded, deep in thought, his sleek jaw hard and clenched, shaded in dark stubble. He doesn't look mad, but he looks tense, so I dance my fingers over to his thigh and give him a squeeze.

Cal blinks, coming back from wherever he was. He pulls his attention off the road for a second, casting his focus over to me with the shadow of a smile. "Hey." Hazel eyes brighten like he's seeing me for the first time all day.

"Where did you go?" I smile back.

Cupping his jaw with his unoccupied hand, he scratches at the bristles as he mulls over his reply. "Thinking," he murmurs before a long pause—evidently, still thinking. A few quiet beats pass, traffic and saxophones filling the space. He clears his throat. "Sorry, that was ominous. Just thinking about some stuff."

I frown. "Not any less ominous."

"Sorry." He shakes his head, eyebrows bending as he sighs. "I want you to move in with me."

My heart stutters to a stop.

I wasn't expecting that.

A tingly feeling skips across my skin as my fingers curl into his denim-clad thigh. "You do?"

"Yeah. Makes sense, I think," he shrugs with nonchalance, like the suggestion was as mundane as asking me to fetch him a cup of coffee. "You're already staying with me. We can just make it...more official, you know?"

My chest tightens with confliction.

I love my little house.

I've only recently settled in, sprinkling it with pieces of my heart and

soul, and it would feel like a disservice to abandon it so soon.

The alternative would be Cal moving in with *me*, but...that doesn't seem fair.

Not with his history in that house.

Words twist and tangle in my throat as I stumble for a response. "I, um... I'd love that, Cal. I really would. But...what should I do about my house?"

He rubs at his jaw again, his opposite hand fisting the wheel, knuckles bleaching white. "You can put it up for rent. Or sell it. I can help you."

I nod as my teeth dig into my bottom lip. "Okay."

"Yeah?" His eyes round as he glances at me. "You want to?"

"I do."

I don't hesitate because it's the truth...*I do*. Nothing feels more certain than a future with this man. A house is just a house, after all—it's the *home* my heart craves.

And that's him.

His shoulders relax at my words, hand unclenching on the wheel. "Shit," he breathes out, as if not expecting my answer to be a positive one. "All right. I just...I worry about you, Lucy. I think about you all the damn time. You're still recovering, and I want to take care of you, make sure you're okay. Make sure you're close. The thought of you leaving and living alone again..." His throat bobs as he trips his gaze back over to me, eyes searching. "You're sure?"

I swallow through a nod. "I'm sure. It'll take some time to get everything sorted, but I can start the transition process."

Another breath of relief falls out of him as he pans back to the road.

Nibbling my cheek, I wonder if we should be sharing love confessions and discussing the future before jumping into permanent cohabitation. But I think about how Alyssa has moved in with three separate boyfriends since she turned eighteen, and I decide that this is a typical next step in a relationship these days. People move in together all the time.

Then I think about how Alyssa has broken up with all three boyfriends, only to find herself moving in with her parents time and time again.

Clearing my throat, I slink back in the seat.

*It's different with Cal.*

Our circumstances are different, and he's right that I'm not a picture of health. My heart isn't built like everyone else's.

This does make sense.

We pull into my narrow driveway two hours later, and Cal kills the engine. We decided to make a quick stop at my house before heading back to his, and then we'll pick up the animals from my mother's place tomorrow morning after we rest and recoup.

I spare him a questioning glance, eyes shifting between the little brick ranch and him, my teeth clicking together. "You can stay out here if you want. I'm just going to grab a few things and water the plants."

His jaw ticks with consideration. "Nah, it's fine."

"Are you sure?"

Our eyes lock when he tilts his head toward me. "Yeah. It's fine."

Nodding through a soft smile, I kick open the passenger door and slip out into the crisp Sunday air. Cal trails behind, winding through the grass, avoiding any close proximity with the garage, and stands a few feet away as I unlock the front door. I send him another small smile over my shoulder before pushing through. "I'll just be a few minutes. I'm going to pack some more clothes. Did you want anything to drink?" Setting down my purse, I make my way into the kitchen, already pulling a mug from the cabinet before he can answer. I twist the water on cold and fill the mug, handing it to him as he hesitantly comes up behind me.

He eyes the mug. "Fancy."

"I love mugs," I shrug. Then I proceed to open my slew of cabinets, showcasing how much I really do love them. "See?"

There's an infinite amount. Whites, blues, greens, purples. Some have cartoon dogs and cats, some have inspirational quotes, some have happy, smiling suns.

Most have dogs.

Cal takes a sip of his water, frowning with a pinch of perplexity. "You have zero glassware besides mugs. You only started drinking coffee a month ago."

"Mugs *are* glasses but with handles. You know, like dresses with pockets. Why get a dress without pockets when you can get one with pockets?"

The peachy ceramic decorated in an assortment of corgi faces hides Cal's smile, but I see it in his eyes.

I grin, my nose crinkling. "I'll be right back."

He gives me a tight nod as I sweep around him and make my way down the hallway to my bedroom—Cal's old room. He saw it once, the night he staggered into my living room, collapsing on my couch with mourning in his

eyes and whisky on his breath. It was the only time he saw it, and it'll probably remain that way.

This feels right, moving in with Cal.

This house was a mere stepping stone to a past I was desperate to reclaim. It was a link to Emma.

*To him.*

I found my way back to them both, and now it's time for my real journey to begin. A future with the man I love—new roots to grow from, fresh soil and earth to build a strong home.

*Our home...together.*

The tickle of excitement replaces any remaining trepidation as I fish out another luggage bag from my closet and stuff it full of sweaters, leggings, dresses, and t-shirts. I throw in my single piece of lingerie I picked out while boutique shopping with Alyssa that afternoon not long ago, somehow knowing, deep down, this was inevitable between us. I'd never purchased lingerie before, truly believing I was destined to die a maidenly virgin.

My life has shifted in such an unexpected direction from where it had stalled last August when I trotted into Cal's auto shop, only intent on looking for my long lost friend.

I plop down on the edge of my bed, scrolling through all the missed text messages from my mother and idly aware of the sound of Cal's feet shuffling past my bedroom door. The floors are creaky, laden with old age and timeless memories. Leaning back on one hand, I let Mom know I didn't succumb to any freak accidents or health crises over the weekend, then take my time perusing the bedroom for any more items I may need.

As I'm sifting through a dresser drawer, a strange feeling pitches in my gut.

A hum of awareness.

A tight ball of anxiety, curling deep.

I straighten, my heart palpitating, skin crawling.

*Oh no...*

Instantly, I dart from the bedroom and make a sharp left, jogging all the way to Emma's old room where the door is wide open, even though I know it was closed tight only moments ago.

*Oh God.*

I find him there, crouched down beside the hole in the floor.

The wood plank was already moved aside from when I'd last been here,

exposing my secret. I was reading through an entry with tears spilling from my eyes that bled into the pages.

My feet come to a screeching halt inside the doorway as a hand twists around the fabric at the front of my sweater. A little gasp pours out, and he hears me, he does, but he doesn't glance up.

Not right away.

Cal looks pale, stricken. He's hunched over on his knees with the diary in his hands, a dark tension tightening every muscle in his body.

"Cal," I squeak out, swallowing down the lump of shame in my throat.

I didn't want him to find out like this.

*Not like this.*

This moment was supposed to be a revelation, but now it only feels like a betrayal.

Slowly, so slowly, his head lifts. There's a cloud over his eyes, a bleak film. He stares at me from across the room and raises the diary in his hand, holding it up like a shining infidelity. "All this time?" he murmurs, voice low, gritty and deep. "You've had it...all this time?"

I swing my head back and forth. "I – I wasn't trying to hide it from you, Cal—I swear. You made me promise not to talk about Emma, and I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't want to give you any more wounds." Burning hot pressure swells behind my eyes as my heart twists inside my chest. "I didn't even know you were looking for it, or if you even remembered it existed... not until this weekend."

The excuse sounds thin, the layers flaky.

"Why didn't you tell me right then?" He shakes the diary, punctuating the last two words. "Of course I remembered it. Of course I've looked, of course I've torn apart my mother's goddamn house trying to find it. I've resented her for years, thinking she trashed it."

I flinch when he slams it on the floor beside him, my heart shattering with regret.

Cal pushes his hair back with both hands, fisting the strands. He glances back down into the hole and lands on the pieced-back-together clarinet.

A sound dislodges from his throat.

Something devastating, broken.

He reaches into the floorboards and pulls it out, slowly spinning it between his fingers as he takes in the dried-up glue and lovingly repaired splinters.

I take a distraught step forward. “Cal, please. I was never trying to be devious or cruel. I genuinely didn’t know how you’d react, and I was afraid to push you away. I was going to tell you...”

“But you didn’t.” It’s nothing but a raspy whisper, a tapered breath of disappointment. He continues to stare at the old clarinet, spinning it back and forth as it glints off the window light.

Then he stands, taking the diary and clarinet with him as he stomps across the floor.

“Cal,” I choke, knowing he’s about to leave, knowing he’s about to walk out. “Please, wait.”

“Don’t, Lucy,” he shakes his head, avoiding my pleading stare. “I can’t.”

Desperately, I curl my fingers around his bicep as he moves around me toward the door. “I want to talk about this. I want to explain.”

He’s a brick wall of anger and tense muscle as he halts to a stop, still refusing to look at me. Exhaling long and hard, he ducks his chin to his chest, jaw flexing. “You had six months to talk about it. To explain,” he bites out. “I can’t be here right now.”

Tears trickle from my eyes and dangle from my lips.

Finally, *finally*, he pulls his eyes to mine, and as they burn hot with the sting of deceit, I almost wish he didn’t.

“Lucy,” he says, my name a warning. “Let me go.”

Three words.

Three little words, and my whole world feels annihilated. I pull my hand away like I’ve been scalded, then watch as he walks right past me without a second glance.

Someone told me once that I was born with half a heart.

I never allowed myself to believe that, never felt like it was true.

But as Cal storms out of my house, the door slamming shut and rattling the walls, I fall to my knees and sob into my hands, because for the very first time...

My heart feels carved in half.

## CHAPTER 19

CAL

5/25/2013

"Heartsong"

According to the online dictionary, "heartsong" is an obsolete word. Isn't that weird? Isn't that unfortunate? It has a few different meanings, the obvious being a heartfelt song, and the less obvious being my favorite definition:

"The expression of a person's inner essence, underlying identity, and reason for existence."

Wow! It really made me think about my reason for existence. Of course there's the birds and the bees and all that (gross), but what is it that really makes us live? People, places, feelings, things?

Love?

I don't know much about love yet, but what I've learned I've learned through people. I've learned about love through Mom and Dad by the way they always do nice things for each other, and how they protect and support my brother and me no matter what. I've learned about love through Cal, the best big brother in the world, who always puts me first (even though he's really annoying sometimes).



Quick example...he was supposed to go to an important basketball game tonight, but he's canceling it to come to my recital instead. That feels like love to me.

And then there's Lucy, my best friend. She's shown me love in lots of ways, like how she makes me smile when I'm sad, makes me laugh when I'm angry, and bakes me and Cal muffins and banana bread with her mom. She creates music with me, listens to my secrets and never tells a soul. She's the kindest person in the world, and I think we could all learn more about love through Lucy.

Heartsong.

I think I'll write a song about it.

And hopefully, somehow, I can bring that word back to life...

Toodles,  
Emma



**M**ay 25<sup>th</sup>.

The day she left.

The day she never came back.

*The day she died.*

Devastation stabs me like a shot of venom to my heart. The diary trembles in my hands as I stare down at her last entry, her final words, her swansong.

She didn't even know.

She had no idea it would be the last time her pen touched paper, the last time she'd open her diary and fill it with beautiful, hopeful daydreams.

Burning heat stings behind my eyes. I feel sick inside, heartbroken all

over again.

Collapsing back against the couch, I toss the diary beside me and throw an arm over my eyes to keep the grief from spilling out. My cell phone buzzes from the coffee table. A metallic ping.

I already know it's Lucy.

She's been texting and calling nonstop over the last twenty-four hours, but I haven't had the guts to respond. I need a minute. I need a few minutes to process everything, to recover from the bomb she dropped at my feet just when I thought my world was finally reassembling.

My fingers itch to touch her, arms yearn to hold her. My tongue aches to taste her, kiss her, drink her in. And my heart...

My heart is just fucked.

Sitting upright, I lean forward, elbows to knees, and scrub both hands over my face. I glance at the cell phone lighting up, the screen illuminated with a picture of Lucy's smiling face. It's a picture I took at the skating rink last Friday night as Lucy lay sprawled out across the ice, her hair fanned out over the crystal canvas like she was some sort of ice princess. Her nose was a rosy shade of pink, the apples of her cheeks matching, and the smile she wore had me fishing my phone out of my pocket and immortalizing the moment. I uploaded it to my Instagram feed later that night—my one of two photos—captioning it with two simple emojis, a snowflake and a red heart.

I don't think she's seen it.

The photo was snapped only minutes before I told her about searching for Emma's diary. Lucy said nothing. Not a damn word. I noticed her tense up, her fingers tightening around mine, her face losing a little bit of color. But I didn't think it was anything more than the topic.

She should have told me. Right then, right in that moment when my heart was bleeding out on the ice as I envisioned my mother trashing Emma's precious things.

I truly believed that.

Lucy had the opportunity to tell me then, to tell me otherwise.

Grinding my molars, I blow out a breath and snatch up the phone just as the screen goes dark. I avoid the missed calls and swipe open her latest text message.

LUCY:

I miss you so much. It's killing me that you're hurting, and that I caused you that pain. It's the last thing I ever wanted to do. Please, Cal...call me. At least let me know that you're okay.

A string of broken-heart emojis follow up the text, and I clench my jaw.

She's hurting, too, and that hurts me even more. I don't want her to hurt. And the rational part of me knows that she never intended to cause me pain—that's not Lucy. There's not a cruel bone in her body. But that still doesn't fix it, doesn't lessen the sting.

And I just can't shake it.

Not yet.

My thumb hovers over the screen as I debate sending her a reply. I know my silence is eating at her. I close my eyes for a moment, reel in my thoughts and scratch my forehead.

Then I send off a brief response.

ME:

I'm fine. Need some time to think.

Powering my phone off, I decide to do just that.

I stand from the couch, grab my coat, and hop on my bike.



I'm not sure why I end up here of all places.

It's not anywhere close to my house, and I'm not even drinking. I can't. A wine tasting with Lucy was all I allowed myself, but I can't drink like this, under these circumstances. Not when I'm freefalling, only one weak moment away from coming undone.

Nash throws me a wary look as I pull out a bar stool and take a seat. "Uh, hey." He scratches his honeyed hair, then presses forward on the bar top with his palms. We both briefly glance over at the empty stage to the right, as if wondering why I'm here and Lucy's not. "What can I get you?"

I slide a hand through my bangs and fold my arms on the counter without looking up. "Just a Coke. Thanks."

He hesitates in my peripheral vision for a beat before giving the counter a

tap. “You got it.”

My eyes lift, watching as he fills a glass with ice and Coke from the soda dispenser. Our gazes catch and snag for a split second before he sets the beverage down in front of me.

I curl a hand around it, zoning in on the clinking ice cubes.

“Anything else?”

Clearly, he’s confused as all fuck as to why I’m sitting at his wine bar forty-five minutes from my house, sans Lucy, ordering a non-alcoholic soda, after acting like a jealous dick to him on multiple occasions. I shake my head. “Nah. This is good.”

Silence ripples between us. I discover him cautiously staring at me, a frown furrowing between his eyes. He’s got a spattering of freckles on the bridge of nose and a set of dimples that I was certain were sweeping Lucy off her spaghetti-socked feet. Evidently, that wasn’t the case. For whatever fucked up reason, I’m the one who won her over with my shitty attitude and avoidant personality.

Still trying to make sense of that math.

Since Nash doesn’t indicate that he’s eager to dismiss me just yet, I glance back down at my fizzing drink and mutter, “Is that whole bartender stereotype actually true?”

Our eyes meet again, and his shoulders marginally relax. “That we’re all closet alcoholics?”

“That you’re all makeshift therapists.”

Half his mouth turns up with a smile, a dimple hollowing out his cheek. He gives me a pop of one shoulder, then leans forward on his arms. “Why, you need me to lend an ear?”

“Thinking about it.”

His eyes narrow, like he’s wondering how much I’ve already had to drink before stumbling into his bar. But I haven’t even had a drop.

If I’m drunk on anything, it’s sadness.

Sadness and memories.

Nash brings a hand to his jaw and rubs at his stubble-free chin. “I charge by the hour. Results not guaranteed, and advice subpar at best.” His eyes lighten off my nod. “First, I encourage something stronger. Jim Beam is on special tonight.”

“Can’t. Recovering alcoholic.”

“I’ll retract that.”

I press my tongue against my cheek, mulling over my words. Truth is, I have no clue what I want to say, what I want to purge. I've never had much luck with therapists, and that's probably because I'd convinced myself it was all bullshit. Men in crisp suits and women with perfectly manicured nails tapping their pens against a blank notepad, staring at the clock while I felt the money drain from my wallet with no valuable epiphany to show for it.

Soda bubbles on my tongue as I exhale through a sip, spurring it to life. "You ever lose someone important to you?"

"Yeah," he says. "My mom passed away last winter. Skiing accident."

"Sorry to hear." I spin the glass, watching the ice cubes evaporate. "My sister walked to her friend's house for a sleepover one night, about ten years ago. Never came home," I confess.

"Cal, I'll be fine."

"I promise I'll text you."

"Toodles!"

My throat tightens as her sugar sweet voice echoes in my mind. Nash smiles at a customer, waving a hand at the second bartender to beckon her over for assistance, then returns his attention to me as the smile fades.

I press on. "She ran into this kid. Some eighteen-year-old who lived in the neighborhood, someone our father hired to mow the lawn once a week. I'd met him a couple of times. Emma was always nice to him, saying hi and sending him big smiles when he'd stop by."

A memory flashes behind my eyes.

A police officer with his hand on my shoulder. Squeezing with apology. He had a mustache that was longer on one side, and I don't know why I remember that.

Probably because I couldn't look him in the eyes.

I just stared at his mouth as he spoke.

"We have him in custody, son. He turned himself in. Your sister will have justice."

He said it as if something as trivial as *justice* would make me feel better, would fix everything.

I didn't care about that. I just wanted her back.

Dad was catatonic on the living room couch while Mom sobbed on the floor in the fetal position.

I said nothing.

I could hardly breathe.

“Malcom James Creed was his name,” I say, puckering my lips, the name an affliction on my tongue. Something like cancer, or poison. Arsenic and cyanide. “I always wondered why murderers were presented with their full names, you know?” My eyes pan up to Nash, whose expression is taut with steep regard. “They don’t deserve to have their name spoken at all, let alone their middle name, too. It’s a slap in the face to everybody they ruined.” I swallow, my skin tingling with heat. “It’s like, here’s an extra name to haunt you ‘til the end of time.”

My grip tightens on the glass, and I wonder how much force it would take to break it.

Feel it shatter in my bare hands.

I wanted to do that to Malcom fucking Creed. Wanted to wrap my hands around his throat until he snapped in two. I still think about it, still dream about it.

Nash pulls up from the counter, forced to tend to a patron who slides up beside me, but his tone is less cheerful, his focus skipping over to me every few seconds.

When he returns, settling in front of me again, I continue. “He did an interview once. Malcom,” I bite out. “He said he saw my sister walking down the sidewalk, and he just wanted to talk to her. Said she was always so nice and sweet, and he wanted to hear her voice. Wanted to see that pretty smile.”

Nash’s tone is eerily low, just a whisper. “Shit,” he breathes out.

He already knows where the story is going.

I wonder if Emma knew, too.

I wonder how she felt the moment she realized Malcom didn’t want to talk anymore.

A sickly feeling crawls up my chest and laces my next words. “He said he made a joke. And she laughed. And then he strangled her.”

Nash leans forward on his elbows, tents his hands to his mouth. He taps his fingertips to his lips, and his eyes look glassy, a little teary.

“He couldn’t say why he did it. Just that he wanted to. He wanted to know what it was like to talk to her, to see her smile, and then he wanted to know what it was like to kill her. So he did.” I take a long pull of my drink and swallow down an ice cube, letting it catch in my throat, letting it freeze the hot ball of agony curling and blooming. “He tossed her into the woods, then walked himself over to the police department to confess. She was only thirteen.”

“Fuck, man,” Nash chokes out, glancing down at the counter and shaking his head with sorrow. “I’m sorry. That’s...”

“Too much to unload on a bartender I hardly know,” I nod. “Yeah.”

He massages the back of his neck. “I mean, we all need to unpack sometimes.” Swallowing, he spares me a heedful glance. “Was he put away at least?”

I give him a slow nod. “Yeah, he got life. Rotting in a cell as we speak.”

My father wasn’t around long enough to discover Malcom’s fate—not that it would have made any difference. Dad was wracked with guilt, felt responsible for bringing Emma’s killer onto our property in the first place, for introducing him to her in a roundabout way. I never blamed him. Nobody blamed him. Malcom, and only Malcom, was responsible for what happened to Emma.

But, my father couldn’t fucking deal.

So he didn’t.

I think about that very last day at the house. Lucy stood on her front lawn in a pair of minty green overalls with a flowery t-shirt underneath and sent me a timid, mournful wave. Her hair was down, billowing over her bony shoulders. More golden than it is now, and even more so beneath the hot July sun. It was three days before my sixteenth birthday, and I had no idea my mother was driving me away for good. That she’d already sold the house to a private buyer and was sending a moving company to collect our things at a later date.

I had no fucking clue it was the last time I was going to see Lucy.

If I’d known, I would’ve said goodbye. I would’ve kissed her again, would’ve told her I’d come back for her.

Maybe I never would have left at all.

And while I did drive up to see her at her old house—just that one time—I was already so far gone, so lost to my toxic coping mechanisms, that I took her not being there as a sign to let her go.

Nash distractedly helps another customer, nodding his thanks as he pockets a tip, and turns back toward me. He hesitates, swiping a hand through his rumpled hair. “You know, when I lost my mom over a year ago, I hit rock bottom. It was the worst year of my life.”

I lift my near-empty glass, as if to say, “*Cheers. Been there myself.*”

I want to ask him what it was like...if it felt the same for him as it did for me. Is rock bottom a place, a feeling, a purgatory? Do the rocks and shrapnel

cut just as deep?

“I had a great therapist, tried not to isolate, did my best to stay positive. Surrounded myself with good people.”

Mentally, I take notes. Nash seems to have his shit together, so maybe there’s something to all this.

“Nothing helped,” he sighs.

*Never mind.*

An invisible pen slashes through my internal bullet points.

“It’s funny what *did* help though...” Trailing off, his eyes pan over to the stage draped with muted string lights glowing amber and orange. “She started singing.”

I stiffen on the stool.

*Lucy.*

The flex of my biceps and clench of my jaw must tip him off that he’s struck a nerve. Nash shakes his head, fingers curling around the edge of the bar. “That ship has sailed, don’t worry,” he assures me. “I’m just saying... Lucy gave me something to look forward to. Every Friday she’d breeze in through that door with a beam of sunshine trailing her heels, and she’d light this place up. Pure magic. Everybody noticed, everybody felt that warmth. She has a gift, and it’s not just music—it’s more than that.” The green of his eyes cloud over, a touch of sadness seeping in. “Anyway, all she sees is you, and I knew that the moment you walked in here and watched her from that same stool. It was painfully obvious,” he concludes. “It’s okay. I’m lucky to have her as a friend.”

A tickle of empathy hums inside my chest, trumping any remnants of jealousy. I rub a hand across my chin, scratching at the bristles as I peer into my watered-down Coke.

Pretty sure I fucked that up, too.

She blindsided me, and I fell back into my old reactive patterns of lashing out and avoiding.

“I’m sorry about your sister,” he adds earnestly, eyes pinned on me. “It was the end of something, and I know that can feel like the end of everything. That’s what it felt like for me, anyway.” A melancholy smile tips as he studies me, gaze brightening back to jade. “But it doesn’t have to be. We’re all capable of starting over, it’s just a matter of finding that meaning. That little something to look forward to.”

I blink up at him, still unsure as to why I came here.



But also kind of glad I did.

Finally, he finishes, “Even a tragedy can have a happy ending. Sometimes we just need to write it in ourselves.”

Knocking his knuckles on the counter, Nash pulls upright and quickly gets summoned down to the other end of the bar by his co-worker. A few minutes later, he sets my bill down in front of me.

“Thanks,” I mutter, still stewing in his words.

“Any time.”

I sign off on my credit card receipt, adding a hefty tip, and slide it forward, my gaze pulling to the little napkin that’s been placed beside me as well.

A frown settles between my eyes, a knot in my throat. I look up at Nash who’s busy pouring orange juice into amaretto a few seats down, his attention elsewhere.

Swallowing, I inch the napkin closer to me with two fingers and read over the words.

*“Sorry I didn’t have better advice, but your happy ending seems pretty clear to me. Look to your right.”*

My head twists right.

The empty stage stares back at me with just a stool and a microphone.

It’s lonely and songless, just like me.

I’m about to turn away when my eyes catch on something else. A poster. I blink, narrowing in on the piece of white paper taped to the wall behind the stage.

It’s a picture of Lucy, a guitar in her hands, a smile on her face.

I recognize the dress she’s wearing. It’s a rusty, autumn color with little white daisies, the sleeves ruffled and billowing down her arms as her shoulders peek out the top. The picture was taken that night I came in and watched her sing, hypnotized and bewitched at the edge of the bar. Lucy twitched with nerves the second our eyes locked, the moment she noticed me. She fumbled over the words before collecting herself, closing her eyes, and pouring that untouchable magic into the room.

Into me.

I don’t know much about falling in love, but the way my heart stuttered when she skipped over to me with enchantment in her eyes, had me wondering if it was something I was capable of.

Worthy of.

I think about Emma's last diary entry, about all the things she learned from love.

If I've learned anything, it's that it always comes with an unsavory side of heartache. There's no joy without grief, no fulfillment without loss, no laughter without pain. Yin and yang. That's just the way the world works, and I guess it's up to us to weigh the good and the bad.

How much suffering are we willing to commit to, for the sake of one good day? One perfect kiss? A single moment of bliss?

I read over the lettering typed onto the poster.

***“Imogen: returning to Bliss this March”***

When I glance back at Nash, there's a soft smile on his mouth as he looks my way. Just a knowing upturn of his lips.

He nods at me, then gets back to work.

Exhaling a deep breath, I toss an extra twenty onto the bar and walk out.

## CHAPTER 20

### LUCY

While the Christmas season is my favorite time of year, that moment the sun starts to warm, and winter melts into a balmy spring, is a very close second.

March arrives like a lamb, which should be a sure sign the lion is lying in wait, preparing to strike. But, I latch onto the sunshine and fifty-seven degree day and make my way through the door of my favorite wine bar. Alyssa waves madly from a high-top table, already halfway through her glass of wine. I'm strolling in twenty minutes late after getting stuck at the sanctuary, muddling through the fine print on an adoption contract for one of our senior dogs, Sully. I finally started my part-time employee hours earlier this week, and it's been wonderful.

Therapeutic.

A necessary outlet.

Alyssa whistles loudly, enough to make me blush when heads twist in my direction. "Damn, girl! What a *fine*apple." She wiggles her eyebrows at the pineapple design decorating my scarf.

*Oh, Lys.*

I pinch the bridge of my nose as my opposite hand curls around the handle of my guitar case. My chin dips to my chest, shorter hair curtaining my flushed cheeks.

Gemma gave me a trim yesterday. Nothing too drastic, just some layers and added character as she touched up my highlights. On the days I don't feel so great, I go out of my way to do little things that make me feel better.

Depositing my Hummingbird guitar near the table, I slide into the seat across from my friend. It's almost showtime, our half-hour window of wine

pre-gaming nearly gone due to my tardiness.

“Um, let’s tackle the elephants in the room,” Alyssa says, slurping her last few sips of wine. “There are three. First off, your face.”

“My face?” My nose scrunches up as I scratch my cheek. “Is it bad?”

“No. It’s extra glowy. New moisturizer?” She squints at me, then gasps. “It’s Botox.”

“I’m twenty-three, Lys. I’m glowing because I’m sweating. I had to park three blocks away and lug my guitar through the melted snow puddles in heels.”

“Makes sense,” she nods, pushing her bangs out of her eyes. “Secondly, your hair. Gemma?”

I perk up at that and give it a fluff. “Yep. She’s a sorceress.”

“Gah. I love it. Okay, and third: peep Nash and the cute redhead at four o’clock.”

Interest piqued, I swivel in my seat and glance over my shoulder at Nash leaning forward on his arms with two dimples in full swing as he chats with the girl across from him. She’s perched beside a notably drunk patron, inching away from him and sliding Nash an assortment of repulsed expressions as they laugh. She’s familiar—a regular patron at my Friday night shows.

And she’s absolutely adorable with rich, auburn hair and a mulberry sweater dipping off one shoulder.

Grinning, I turn back to Alyssa, and we share a knowing smile.

*Good for him.*

At least one of us isn’t wallowing in heartache and self-loathing.

“There were actually four elephants,” Alyssa adds softly, “but we don’t have to talk about the fourth one.” Her eyes de-sparkle a bit, noticing the moment the light leaves mine. “Maybe after the show you can fill me in on any new developments.”

I clear my throat. “It’s fine. No new developments.”

Therein lies the heartache.

Cal came by two days after his dramatic exit that left me in a heap of ruin on Emma’s bedroom floor, right beside the giant hole in the floorboards that matched the hole in my heart.

He came by to pick up Cricket.

I had texted him amid my hopeless flurry of panic-apologies, letting him know I’d hold onto her until he cooled down enough for us to get together

and discuss. The kitten was a bundle of flighty nerves, hiding under my bed for the majority of that time, but Lemon and Kiki were familiar enough friends that she warmed up not long before Cal knocked on my front door.

He looked tired. Sad, worn down.

Just like me.

For once in my life, I didn't ambush him with tears and a slew of word vomit, or with a desperate need to make things right. I gave him space as he sauntered in, walls still up, dark beanie hiding the stress lines on his forehead. We didn't say much to one another. I just leaned back against the armrest of my sofa, watching as Cricket sprinted out of hiding and curled around his ankles.

Cal glanced over at me before bending to pet his cat, irises catching with gold against my display of flameless pillar candles. Our eyes held tight, twisting my stomach into achy little knots. I held my breath, wrung my hands together, and begged my heart to stop thumping like a symphony of dissonant drumbeats.

"How are you?" he asked, voice cracked and threadbare.

The question punctured my heart with a breath of harmony.

I smiled because I didn't know what else to do. "I'm doing okay. I..." The lie died on my tongue. "I've been better."

His jaw ticked, muscles flexing as he stuffed his hands into his pockets while Cricket wound herself into a furball at his feet. "Yeah," he nodded, looking away. "Me, too."

"I, um—"

"Lucy, I—"

We spoke, then stopped at the same time. I held in another breath, long enough to make me woozy.

A clear of his throat, and then, "I need a little time...if that's okay," he told me, a sober inflection lacing his tone. "To sort my shit out."

My chest caved in with the knowing that I was the "shit" he needed to sort out.

Only days before, I was certain we'd been indelibly sorted. I saw our future sprinkling to life within our magical snow globe weekend. I felt the spellbinding intimacy as Cal made love to me, and could almost hear the *I love you* he never did say. There was affection in his touches, promise in his kisses. Our bodies moved together with sweat and certainty, a magic I could taste.

But, the little glass globe slipped from my hands and shattered at my feet. Shards and spillage. And now all I could do was pick up the splinters on my own and try not to cut myself any deeper.

I nodded, almost manically, an attempt to keep the tears from purging. “I understand.” It was partly true. I understood my role in it, understood why Cal felt betrayed.

I didn’t fully understand why we couldn’t work it out.

I suppose, though, when someone hurts another person, they lose all say in the recovery process. They give up their share of control. And that’s fair.

It’s heart wrenching, but fair.

So, I gave him the space he needed and stayed rooted to the edge of my couch.

Pain glimmered in his eyes. Soul-deep pain. It took everything in my power to latch my fingers around the armrest and dig my claws in, just so I wouldn’t race to him, fall against his chest, and beg him to give me the chance to make it right.

I didn’t do that.

I let him go.

Cal made a sound that sounded an awful lot like despair before he bent down to scoop up his kitten. Cricket slithered her way up to his shoulder, stretching her front legs as he sent another devastating look in my direction before turning around and walking out.

That was the last I’ve heard from him, two-and-a-half weeks ago.

Alyssa puckers her peachy lips with a solemn nod, finishing off the rest of her Merlot. Long, silvery earrings shimmer in the subdued bar lighting as she sends me a sympathetic smile. “You know I love you, right?”

The sadness rolls off of me, and a grin stretches. “Only half as much as I love you.”

“Despicable lies,” she teases. “I’m serious, though. I adore you. I’m so proud of who you are, and what you’re made of. You’re strong and brave, and effortlessly glowing, even when you’re hurting.” Her nose crinkles. “It’s not the sweat.”

We share a laugh as Nash brings over a wine refill for Alyssa, says his hellos to me, and then it’s time to play.

It’s time to make music again.

It’s my first live performance since December, so the nerves are higher than usual as I glide over to the stage and climb the familiar steps. I unbuckle

my case, pulling out the guitar and falling onto the stool as if I never left. The coral hue of sunset dissipates outside the windows, leaving me only with the diffused indoor lighting and a flame flickering inside of me.

The bar goes eerily quiet when I start to sing. More than usual. I glance out at the crowd, reveling in the impressed stares as conversation fades out and everyone becomes entranced by the melodies pouring out of me. My voice is a little husky, raw from practicing all night, but my tone doesn't waver, and the words never jumble.

I'm focused.

I'm tethered.

I'm at peace.

And then I see him.

Dark leather jacket, tapered blue jeans. A black ball cap.

Two hazel eyes instantly pan over to me as he trudges in through the door. Cal pulls the hat from his head and sweeps his fingers through disheveled hair, gaze blazing as he steps away from the entrance and leans back against the wall to watch me from a few feet away.

I almost choke.

The audience follows my stare as my fingers pluck the wrong strings and my throat clogs with grit. I'm forced to look away, down at my biscuit-colored heels, as my knees clack together in my whitewashed jeans, and my heart stumbles over its own beats.

*Breathe, Lucy.*

I almost hear him say it, and maybe he does.

I swear he does.

Drinking in a calming breath, I harness my smile and regroup. Miraculously, I finish the song—my own acoustic version of *I Think We're Alone Now*, my hand tapping the face of the guitar to mimic the sound of heartbeats—and duck my head with a timid smile when the room erupts with applause. Biting my lip, I glance back up and find him still standing there, leaning back, eyes boring into me with that same look he had the first night he came to watch me play.

Then he claps.

Slow, slow claps, his gaze never leaving my face.

I smile wider.

“Thank you,” I say into the microphone, clearing the hitch from my voice. “I, um...” Another little cough as I blink through the Cal haze. “I had a

medical scare a few months ago. Cardiac arrest, actually. I collapsed while walking my dogs on Christmas morning.” A few gasps meet my ears, all eyes on me. “That’s why I’ve missed a few months playing here.”

Cal’s brows tilt downward, lips thinning as he studies me hard.

“And when I say missed, I truly mean *missed*. I can’t tell you what it means to me, singing for you all every week.”

My vision blurs as I gaze out at the crowd. It’s jam-packed, filled to the brim with customers. Every seat is filled, and so is my heart.

“When I was just a kid, I had a best friend who lived next door. She was goofy and strong, silly and sweet. She loved music and fireflies, dancing in the rain, and making angels in the snow. She was a brilliant piano player before she even hit her teens, and she’s the reason I started playing music in the first place.” I skip my attention over to Cal and linger. “She was the reason for a lot of things.”

He doesn’t blink, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t even take a breath.

I look back out at the crowd, smiling when I see Alyssa tearing up and swiping at her cheeks.

“My stage name is Imogen because Imogen Cooper was her favorite piano player. I use it as a tribute, as an honor to everything she means to me,” I continue. “But, my real name is Lucy. And it’s funny because my friend used to name things—all things. Animals, objects, even the stars. She said that once something had a name, it had meaning. It became something tangible and real. It was brought to life, no matter how insignificant it was.”

My own tears threaten, but I keep them contained. I force my hands to stop shaking by squeezing the neck of my guitar and grazing my fingertips along the strings.

“So, today I am Lucy. And she is Emma. And she’s not here with us anymore, but she’s still very real. She’s still Emma, and she’s still my forever best friend,” I say. “I wrote her this song, and I named it *Deceptive Cadence*. I hope I can bring her to life for you, in the same way she will always live inside me.”

It’s so quiet in the bar, I can hear my own heartbeats.

*Th-thump, th-thump, th-thump.*

Straightening on the stool, I drink in a breath of courage and start to play. I sing of firefly nights and rainy afternoons, of music and moonbeams, of colors and stars. I sing of friendship and loss, sad endings and beautiful, new beginnings. Maple trees, snowfall, and laughter that haunts my dreams.



Adventure, wishes, and infinite love.

It's melancholy and hope, all rolled into lyrics written from my soul.

When I strum the last note, my voice breaking on the final word, the silence in the room hovers, stretches out across the bar. I lift my chin, finding Cal's tortured stare pinned on me. His hand is cupping his jaw, shoulders tense and squared.

I let out a breath, the one I felt like I was holding onto for three long minutes.

And then, everyone claps.

People stand from their chairs, Alyssa whistles, Nash hollers from behind the bar, slapping his hands together high above his head.

I whisper my thanks into the microphone, my watery smile spread from ear to ear. Instinct has me glancing back at Cal, catching the second his own smile lifts and meets with mine.

It's real, it's beautiful, and I tuck it away, so it'll live inside me, too.

There's a name for this moment.

*Heartsong.*



I wrap up my set two hours later, exhausted but inherently fulfilled.

Cal stood rooted to that same spot near the door, his back flush against the wall the whole time. I'm not sure what to say to him, not even sure why he's here. Why he came to watch me play tonight, or how he knew I would be playing at all.

Nerves tingle inside my chest as I pack up my guitar, thanking patrons for tips when they sprinkle tens and twenties into my case. As I make my way down the three steps and adjust my pale green blouse, Cal finally pushes up from the wall and meets me by the edge of the stage. I falter, my heart shooting up to my throat.

"Hey," he says, hands in his pockets, an unreadable expression on his face. "You were..." Scratching the back of his neck, he looks down, then glances back up. "Fucking unbelievable."

I clear my throat, blinking at him through the simmering emotion. "Thank

you. It's sweet that you came to watch."

He nods slowly. "Can we talk? At my place?"

Folding my lips between my teeth, I glance out at the sea of people, at Alyssa ushering me over to the table where a glass of wine has been placed in front of my chair. "Sure...um, let me say goodbye to Lys." My heart gallops at a stampede-like pace. "I just need a few minutes."

"Take your time." His eyes glint with heat as he saunters a few steps backward. "I'll wait."

Smiling, I bob my chin and turn to head toward the table. Alyssa pops up from her seat, attacking me in a bone-crushing hug.

"You're a superstar," she murmurs into my neck, squeezing me tight. "I'm so, so proud of you. That was really beautiful and brave."

"Thank you," I hug her back, breathing in the lavender musk of her hair. "That means a lot."

When she inches back, she peeps a glance at Cal who's sprawled out in a booth scrolling through his phone. "I'm assuming you need to bounce?" she wonders through a sly grin.

I nibble my cheek. "He wants to talk back at his place."

"Ooh, shit. Okay. Well, you don't have to worry about me. I'm dying to go eavesdrop on Nash and his mystery girl, anyway. I'm sure I'll be texting you all the juicy details by sunrise."

"I'll keep my ringer on," I laugh.

As we say our final goodbyes and make plans for the following Friday night, I slide her my glass of wine and giggle when she starts to chug while blessing the universe for the invention of Ubers. Before I can dip out, a stranger wanders over to our table, teetering on unstable legs.

It's the drunk man who was seated at the bar, hitting on Nash's female friend.

Cautiously, I send him a smile when I realize he's beelining toward me, his drink sloshing over the rim of his glass and leaving puddles at his feet.

"You're...*beautiful*," he slurs, inching closer. Too close. "Heavenly... jus' perfect. You kiss as good as you sing, baby?"

My stomach curdles.

Alyssa and I share a wary look as I move away. "Thank you for watching the show. Have a nice night," I dismiss.

His crooked teeth flash in my direction, gums looking like he hasn't been to a dentist since the eighties. He's older, hair stringy and threaded with gray.

Beady eyes roam over me, landing on my chest and leering. “Jus’ one kiss, baby doll. I’ll give you’s a good tip, promise.”

*Eww.*

“Scram, asshole,” Alyssa chimes in, flicking her hand, motioning him to shoo. “You smell like gangrene.”

Booze and rot roll off of him, making me queasy. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I lean over to fetch my guitar. When I straighten, he snaps his hand out, bony fingers curling around my wrist.

A shot of fear sluices me. Nightmares flash behind my eyes, nightmares I’ve had about Emma. Thinking about that night, about what she could have went through, the terror she experienced. I see her attacker’s face in my mind’s eye, his concave nose and dead stare. The unassuming dimples that framed his mouth, making him look trustful.

Did she scream? Pray? Try to run? Fight?

*What was the last thing she thought about?*

I’m sucked into the nightmare as the man tugs me toward him, drool dribbling from the corner of his chapped lips.

“You’s look too sweet not to kiss.”

The moment feels endless, but it’s only a blink. Only a second, maybe two.

I don’t even have time to push him away when Cal barrels into my periphery and charges at the man, ripping him away from me with a hair-rising growl and shoving him toward the far wall.

“Oh my God,” Alyssa murmurs.

The stranger’s head slams into the wood paneling as Cal yanks him up the wall, hands curling around the man’s checkered collar. I watch with horror, massaging my wrist, scratching away the eerie tickle left behind from his cold grasp.

“You piece of shit.” Cal shoves him again, the drunk’s head clunking backward. “Don’t you *ever* put your disgusting fucking hands on my girl.”

I rush over to the scene, just as Nash and another male bartender come careening from the opposite direction. Nash pushes his way between the two men, grabbing the patron by the sleeve of his jacket and yanking him forward, while the other bartender grips his other arm.

They drag him from the bar as the man continues to slur obscenities, too drunk to put up a fight.

Cal steps back, radiating fury.

Pure rage.

He sweeps a hand through his hair, looking over at me as he cracks his neck. Swallowing, I race toward him, wrapping my hands around his arm and finding his eyes, forcing his gaze on me. "I'm okay, Cal," I whisper, giving him a gentle squeeze. "It's okay."

"Fuck." He sucks in a deep, unsteady breath and shakes his head. "Fuck, sorry. You sure you're good?"

"I'm good. I'm totally fine. He just spooked me."

Alyssa floats over to us, her face a mask of concern. "Holy shit, Lucy. What a creep." She rubs a hand down my back, pulling me into her for a side hug.

We both look up at Cal as the tension starts to ebb. His shoulders deflate, his eyes blinking away the fog of frenzy.

I turn to Alyssa. "I'm going to head out. Are you okay here? Do you need a ride?"

"I'm fine now that Creepazoid has been removed from the premises. Nash can be my bodyguard. He looks like he's been working out."

Nodding, I clear my throat. "Okay. Text me when you make it home."

We embrace with a final hug as Cal takes my hand in his and guides me through the bar toward the entrance, scooping up my guitar case along the way.

My own nerves fly away as our fingers interlock and his words flutter through my mind.

*My girl.*

## CHAPTER 21

### LUCY

**I** *think we're alone now.*

I'm not sure what brings me more relief—the familiar scent of amber and spice as I stroll in through Cal's front door, or the fact that Cricket darts out from underneath a piece of furniture to coil around my ankles.

Grinning wide, I crouch down to pet the squirrely kitten, relishing in her soft purrs and nose kisses. "She's finally warming up to me," I note with pride, glancing up at Cal as he tosses his keys and wallet onto the coffee table.

"Hm." He peels off his ball cap and throws it beside the other items.

I stand. Tension crackles between us as reality sets in. I'm still not sure why Cal brought me here, or what he wants to talk about. I have no idea if he wants to make amends, discuss my side of the story, my reasons for keeping the diary a secret...or if he wants to end things for good.

Go back to the way things were before August rolled in, bringing with it a new season between us.

Winter is finally melting away, and the last thing I want to do is step back into the cold.

Plucking off my pineapple scarf, I hang it on his coat rack along with my jacket, then slip out of my heels. Cal is still standing in the middle of the living room, watching me through thoughtful eyes.

"So, um..." I clear my throat. "What did you want to talk about?"

Clearly, it's about us.

Clearly, it's about that dreary, awful Sunday in Emma's old bedroom.

What I really need to know is if I should slip my coat and shoes back on and go home to cry myself to sleep, or if spring is breaking free of the snow

clouds.

*He called you "his girl," Lucy. It's going to be okay.*

He looks around the room as if searching for the answer within his khaki-colored walls and ceiling beams. When he finds my eyes again through the dimly lit room, he nods his head toward the hallway. "I want to give you something."

"Give me something?"

"Yeah. Something I was going to give you for Christmas, before..."

I swallow, understanding. "Okay." It's a short trek down his hallway as we curve into the master bedroom where Cal's sheets are slightly ruffled, floor strewn with a few stray pieces of clothing. It smells like him. Earthy and oaky. A tingle blossoms low in my belly as he guides me toward the bed.

"C'mere," he says. He takes a seat at the edge of the mattress near his nightstand, then pops open the drawer.

Tentatively, I sit next to him, our knees grazing.

Before he reaches into the drawer, Cal looks over at me, brushes his knee against mine again. His eyes dip to my hands folded in my lap with translucent knuckles. "You okay?"

I'm not entirely sure if he's referring to the altercation at the bar, or in general.

I don't think he does either.

"I'm fine," I answer softly. A long breath leaves me when he trails his hand to one of mine, pulling it free of my clutch. "Thank you for stepping in tonight. That was..."

According to the insta-text I received from Alyssa as Cal walked me to my car, it was:

ALYSSA:

That was the HOTTEST THING I've ever seen in my life!!!  
\*melting emojis\*

"Chivalrous." My cheeks heat following my word choice. "Heroic," I pivot.

"Heroic," he echoes, giving my hand a squeeze. "If you knew the things I wanted to do to that guy, you might not be using that word."

I think about the red film clouding his eyes as he tore the man off of me. He went somewhere else.

He went to the same place I went to, I'm sure of it.

"I wanted to kill him, Lucy," he says darkly. "Tear him apart. I swear I might have—*could* have. All I saw were his hands around your neck, stealing you away from me."

Our gazes tangle, charged with memory and pain.

And then I whisper, "I thought about her, too." Swallowing, I watch the way his pupils dilate, a muscle in his cheek twitching. "It was just a flash. A flicker."

He breathes in deep through his nose, grip on my hand strengthening. "I get why you did it."

"Did what?"

"Kept the diary from me. Emma's things."

My blood chills, and I look down at my lap.

Cal props a finger under my chin, pulling my eyes back to his. "I get it, Lucy. And I know your intentions were pure. I gave you little reason to believe I wouldn't spiral and shut you out if I saw that...if I read over her words and thoughts. I made you promise not to talk about her."

Water stings behind my eyes. "Cal, I'm so sorry. I should have told you at the skating rink when you told me you thought your mom threw it all away—I got scared. I didn't want to ruin our weekend, or turn it into something sad."

"I know."

"You do?" My bottom lip wobbles as I inch closer to him on the mattress. "I didn't think you'd ever forgive me."

"It wasn't about forgiving you, Lucy," he tells me, tucking my hair behind my ear and placing a kiss to my forehead. "It was about forgiving myself. I needed time to sort my shit out, come to terms with the fact that I didn't kill my sister. That I wasn't responsible for what happened to her."

"Of course you weren't," I murmur, rattled he'd even think something like that.

"I offered to walk her to the sleepover. She didn't want me to, but I should have pushed it. Something *told* me to go with her, and I ignored it, because nobody ever really thinks the worst possible thing will happen to them. To the people they love."

My heart wilts at his words. At the years-long guilt he's kept buried inside.

"And then when you experience that worst possible thing, you see it happening again. And again. You see it everywhere, in everyone you get

close to. You wonder if that text or phone call is going to be the last one you'll ever get. You wonder if you'll ever see that person again when they walk out your front door. You lose touch with the present moment, with all the moments that make us live and thrive and breathe. You're always in your head, dreading the next moment, and the one after that, when all we should be doing is cherishing the ones we have."

A tear falls, a slow slide down my cheek. He brushes it away with his thumb, and I nuzzle into the heel of his palm.

"Because that's *all* we have," Cal says, grazing that calloused thumb up and down my cheekbone, catching every tear. "And that's how you've always lived, isn't it? In the now. In the right now. That's what keeps you smiling, keeps you truly living."

Nodding, I place a kiss to the underside of his hand, and he cups it around my neck and holds. Our foreheads press together, and I wonder if he's going to kiss me. I want him to so much it makes my chest hurt.

He doesn't, though.

Cal pulls back with a shaky breath, then reaches into his bedside drawer for a little wrapped box. It's decorated with red-and-white striped paper, a tiny green bow still taped to the top. "This is for you. It's not much, but I wanted to get you something special. Something that held meaning." He shuffles the gift between both hands. "Something that expressed everything you mean to me."

I pluck it from his hold, my throat tight. Carefully, I peel back the wrapping and ease the paper off the white box. Then I shimmy off the top and peer inside.

It's a necklace.

A heart pendant woven in with a treble clef.

It's the same necklace Cal wears around his neck, right against his heart.

I glance up, my eyes shimmering, vision blurred through the burning sentiment. He swipes his hair back, looking nervous. "Cal..."

"I had it custom-made, just like mine," he tells me, staring into the box of cotton and a chain made of silver. The heart is red, the treble clef a shiny black. "Emma's initials are on the back of mine, and yours says Hope. Your last name." He smiles. "More than your last name."

"It's beautiful," I croak out, grazing my touch over the jewelry. I pull it out and let it dance over my fingers as it catches on the ceiling light. "It's perfect."



Cal gently takes it from my hand and unclasps it, leaning over to secure it around my neck. I gather my hair over my shoulder, my skin warming as his breath plumes along the side of my cheek, a big arm circling around me. When he moves back and lets it fall, the pendant lies across my breastbone, a tiny treasure near my heart.

“Thank you,” I say softly, poignantly. “I love it.”

*I love you.*

He bends to kiss the top of my shoulder, lips warm and lingering. As he lifts up, he whispers, “There was a note tucked inside the diary. Emma drew a picture of my clarinet, ringed with little doodles. Hearts and smiley faces.” His forehead falls back to my shoulder as he finishes, “It said... ‘*You knew I would put it back together. I’ll always be your glue.*’”

I wrap my arms around him with a stifled sob. Cal does the same thing, at the same time, and we hold each other, both of us weeping as we fall sideways on the bed. His body shakes with quiet tears. I curl myself into him and let him hold me, let him cry with me.

I have to believe my wish came true that night as I begged for the stars to bring her back.

She did come back, in a different way.

A different form.

Maybe she never left at all.



My empty stomach wakes me up a little after midnight, forcing me to untangle myself from Cal’s arms and stumble from the bedroom in search of something to eat.

Cricket greets me in the kitchen, winding in and out of my legs as I rummage through the refrigerator and settle on a snack cup of lime Jell-O. A smile spreads at the notion he even has them, a whole drawerful glimmering green from the fridge light. Cricket purrs, hopping up onto the counter as I pull out a spoon and peel the top back. “Are you hungry, too?” I ask the kitten, leaning over the counter to scratch between her ears. She meows contentedly, which stretches my smile. I wasn’t sure if this little cat would

ever warm up to me.

Truthfully, I wasn't sure Cal would either.

As I finish off the last spoonful of Jell-O, I feel a presence close in behind me, followed by two hands curling around my waist. My body reacts, a shot of heat swelling in my core as his bare chest grazes my back.

"Hey." The word is a drowsy rumble against my neck as he leans in.

My heart kicks up speed. "Hey. Sorry if I woke you," I murmur, shivering when his lips tickle the shell of my ear.

"You didn't. I never fell asleep."

I sigh, arching my spine as his hands tighten around me. "You looked peaceful."

"I was." Cal trails kisses along my throat, fingers inching downward, then underneath the hem of my blouse. "I want you."

The spoon falls from my grip as my body turns into the Jell-O I just consumed. Cal and I dozed off—or at least I did—after holding each other and tugging the covers up over our bodies. I shed my jeans and bra before cozying up to him and drifting away, stolen by sweet dreams.

The blouse hangs just over my hips, hardly covering my strip of underwear.

"Can I have you?" he whispers raggedly into my neck, kissing my shoulder and tinkering with the hem of my panties.

Wetness pools between my legs. "Yes."

"Fuck." Hooking his fingers under the waistband, he slides the underwear down my legs with ease until they fall at my feet. "I missed you like crazy."

"Mmm..." My body is singing, alive, burning for his touch. His hands, his mouth. "I missed you, too."

He grips me by the hips and moves me toward the refrigerator. "Put your hands on the fridge."

I let out a moan and do as he says. Palms planted, I instinctively arc my back, jutting out my backside. The sound he makes is more growl than groan as his hands glide down my body and he edges my shirt up over my waist.

I can't move, can hardly breathe. Cool air grazes the throbbing space between my thighs. I'm totally bare from the waist down, only wearing a thin minty blouse.

I realize Cal has fallen to his knees behind me when his warm breath beats against my core. I'm dripping wet, the evidence of my need tickling my inner thighs. My legs shake, ready to buckle.

He palms my cheeks with both hands, his grip bruising, and slides his nose along my center. "I'm fucking dying to taste you," he rasps out, biting the flesh along my upper thigh. "It's killing me."

A whiny, needy sound falls out of me. I'm trembling all over, terrified, but too turned on to care. I bite my lip, squeeze my eyes shut, and I wait. Wait for more hands, more words, more bites. I wait for his tongue to dip inside of me in a way I haven't experienced before.

I realize he needs permission.

The last time he tried to taste me like this, I froze up. Nerves and insecurity pulled me from the moment. Dropping my forehead to the door of the fridge, I give him a nod. "Taste me."

Another growl. Pure, masculine need.

And then his mouth is on me, tongue plunging into me from behind. "Oh...my god..." I almost die on the spot. My legs can hardly hold me up. "Oh, shit..."

"Mm, fuck..." Cal's mouth plunders me, devours me. Tongue thrusting in and out, as deep as he can go. He licks me, nibbles the sensitive skin, one arm enveloping my waist to finger me from the front. "You love it, don't you?" he groans, his voice vibrating through me.

"Uhhh," is all that falls out.

Cal pulls back to pick me up and carry me over to the kitchen table. Cricket scurries away, disappearing down the hallway as I'm deposited, spread eagle, on the tabletop. He yanks my knees apart as wide as they'll go, then bends over to thrust his tongue back inside. The noises he makes as his mouth works me; the way he sounds like he's coming undone himself, even though I'm the one unraveling...

It's electrifying.

I lift up on my elbows to watch his head moving, feasting between my legs, but I can't keep myself upright because I'm trembling too much, so I collapse backward and bury my hands in his hair instead. I scratch and claw, squeezing the soft strands, making him moan with added urgency.

He sucks my clit into his mouth, two fingers filling me.

My eyes pop as the ceiling above me blurs.

*Oh my god.*

He does it over and over, mouth moving in time with his fingers, my thighs clamping around his head. My orgasm bursts to life, starting deep and low and climbing up my body like a waterfall of pleasure, until I see stars.

“Cal, Cal,” I chant, arching my back, squeezing my eyes shut as I shatter and squirm. “Oh god...”

“Fuck yes,” he growls against me as I soak his fingers. He plunges them in and out while I nearly rip out his hair.

I’m a panting, sweaty mess on his kitchen table as I come back down. My knees are quivering, body like a tattered sail after a storm. I’m weightless, floating.

I’ve hardly recovered when Cal scoops me up again, gathering me into his arms, and moves us from the kitchen to the living room. He falls back onto the couch until I’m sprawled across his lap, my limbs still putty.

Breathing heavily, he unfastens his jeans and unloops the belt. My hands jolt back to life, needing more. Needing everything. I want him inside of me, I crave that joining. That intimacy.

“Need you...” I whisper against his lips, fingers shaking as they latch onto his zipper and tug.

He lifts his hips. We both yank the jeans and boxers down his thighs until his cock springs free, hard and eager. “Ride me,” he grinds out, tearing my blouse in half until the buttons pop open and my breasts meet his eyes. Cal heaves me up, sucking a nipple into his mouth as he lines me up with his erection and sheathes me onto it.

I’m still sensitive, still tingling, and I almost come again when he spears me deep. I feel him in my womb. I’ve never been on top before, and the feeling is different. Undefined. My head arcs back, hair falling across my back as my fingernails carve into his shoulders.

“*Fuck*,” he grits through his teeth, face buried between my breasts as he holds me still. “Don’t move for a second, or this’ll be over way too soon.”

My internal muscles quiver and clench—I can’t help it. It feels too good.

He moans, then nicks my nipple between his teeth like a punishment. “You like watching me come apart, don’t you?” Laving his tongue over the pebbled bud, his hands slide up my spine to tangle in my hair. “You love bringing me to my knees.”

“Yes...” I do love it. It makes me feel powerful and wanted. Desirable, craved. I lean forward, finding his mouth and pushing my tongue past his lips. Cal groans, fingers fisting my hair as his hips start to pump. I follow his lead, riding him slow, inching up and down on his lap as our tongues weave together in a messy kiss.

His eyes close.

I continue to move, taking over the rhythm, clenching and squeezing, sliding and grinding. My hands are in his hair, on his cheeks, cradling his jaw shaded in stubble. I kiss him lightly, then rough, as his head falls back against the couch and his hands cinch around my waist to guide my thrusts. The expression he wears is moonstruck, charmed.

Drunk on me, on this, on the way I'm making love to him because that's exactly what this feels like.

So, I say it.

I don't even care, I just have to say it.

"I love you." It's a broken whisper pressed to his lips. A breath. The most pivotal breath I've ever taken. "I love you, Cal."

I watch his eyes flutter open, glazed over. We keep moving together, skin slapping, thrusts both languid and urgent. He holds me tighter, lips parting with a sharp breath.

And then he comes.

Eyes on me, one hand squeezing my hip bone, the other cradling the side of my face, he doesn't break eye contact as he untethers. His face twists with pleasure, body trembling below me.

I follow behind. The moment, the feeling, the angle he's hitting, all culminate into an explosion that leaves me in beautiful ruins. A moan pours out as I pull our mouths back together and swallow down his own grunts and groans.

When the sparks scatter and fade, I'm a boneless heap against his chest. Sweat-soaked and satisfied, I tuck my face between his neck and shoulder and breathe in his scent. We stay there for a while. Bare chests pressed together, skin slick and buzzing, and his arms encircling me, holding me close.

I start to doze.

With Cal inside me, still firm and thick, my lashes flutter, eyelids turning drowsy. There's the rumble of an engine outside the window, the hum of the refrigerator in the next room, a kitten snoring from the edge of the hallway, and the sound of his heartbeats making music with mine.

And through it all, I swear I hear three little words as I drift off to sleep...

*"I love you."*

## CHAPTER 22

### LUCY

The coffee shop is packed, everyone eager to spend this sunny Saturday socializing and caffeinated after an extra miserable winter. I breeze through the entrance in a polka-dotted jumpsuit, my hair in two neat braids.

I spot him by a corner window, and I'm not sure whether to smile or break.

"Hey, Lucy," he says, standing from the chair and eyeing me with a mix of sadness and familiarity as I approach. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

*Me, ditch out on plans?*

Even if I wasn't wired to spontaneously vaporize at the notion of being a single minute late—let alone no-show—I *wanted* to come.

It's been too long.

A smile wins out because I've come too far to break now. "Of course I came. It was so nice to hear from you." His shoulders relax a fraction, the wariness leaving his eyes, and I lean in for a hug. "How are you?"

Greg pulls back and scratches at his toffee-colored hair, then fiddles with the cuff of his long-sleeved burgundy sweater. The smile that touches his lips looks genuine, like he *is* okay.

He's okay now. As okay as he can be.

"I'm good, Lucy...I'm doing really good." We both pull out our respective chairs and take a seat across from each other. Greg spins a tall coffee cup between his hands, glancing out the window for a beat before looking at me, smile still in place. "It's been a rough road, but we always find our way eventually, right?" he adds. "You look great, by the way. How has your recovery been?"

It was a pleasant surprise to see Greg while I was hospital-bound, depressed and bone-weary. He didn't visit long, just long enough to bring me a potted plant and a semblance of cheer. Something I desperately needed during those dark weeks. "It's actually been really positive. I haven't had any setbacks and got back to my regular routines pretty quickly. I was sore, and it took a while for me to walk my dogs again, but I've had a great support system." I smile wider. "The slew of doctor appointments haven't been fun, but I've been in good hands."

He nods slowly, watching me, eyes fading with memories of the past before he blinks them away, and a flicker of light returns. "I knew you'd be okay," he tells me. "What Jess had...it wasn't the same. She..." His chin dips lower. "Her prognosis was never optimistic."

I frown at that as Jessica skips through my mind. Bright blue eyes, sunny hair, and endless enthusiasm that always managed to infiltrate me, even amid the cloudiest skies. I always believed she helped mold me into the person I am today. She's always harnessed my smile, even after she left.

Clearing my throat, I tell him, "I mean, we had the same thing. I didn't realize her condition was more serious than mine."

"Well, it wasn't exactly the same. You have TOF, and she had HLHS—Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome. A similar vein of congenital heart defect, but hers was more severe. The mortality rate is higher. Most patients don't live past their twenties."

My hands clasp and squeeze atop the table.

I didn't know that.

Jessica always told me she had what I had—and that we'd be okay. That our life expectancy was strong and hopeful. We met in the hospital undergoing the same surgery due to a leakage in our pulmonary valve, and she promised we'd make it out together.

She said we'd live until we were old and gray, have babies and go on family vacations, marry the loves of our lives.

Greg notices the tension fill me as he takes a long pull of his coffee, eyes squinting over the cup. "You didn't know?"

My head twists side to side in slow motion, the revelation causing my chest to tighten. I swallow. "She didn't tell me that. I thought..."

I thought was I going to die young, just like her.

A potent breath leaves me as I blink down at my white-knuckled hands.

"Shit," he whispers, fingers curling around his cup. "That sounds like

Jess. She never wanted to worry you or allow you to think she was... temporary, you know? You two were so close. And she knew about your friend that passed away, so I guess...I guess she was just trying to protect you.”

I nod, tears brimming in my eyes.

How similar we are, Jess and me. It strikes me, then, that I did the exact same thing with Cal—I was less than truthful about my condition, not wanting him to worry. I underplayed my health issues, too scared to let him think I was going to leave him.

That *I* was temporary.

Jessica had no idea the fib would do the opposite of what she’d intended, that I’d fester in it, that I’d believe I was destined to experience the same fate. She probably assumed I’d learn the truth not long after her death.

And I should have known better than to think the worst. My diagnosis was always hopeful, my doctors always optimistic. But the loss of Jessica shook me up and rattled me to the core.

If it happened to her, it could happen to me, too.

I swipe at a tear that slips free and suck in a quick breath. “Sorry, that was just a shock.” I force a smile to my face, shaking away the melancholy. “I thought...this whole time I thought—”

“You’re not going to die.” Greg sends me a pointed look across the table, his eyes a rich dark brown, filled with candor. “Not from this. Not any time soon.”

My smile is watery, apprehensive.

“Look,” he says, sliding his cup aside and folding his arms on the table. “We’re all temporary. Every one of us. Jessica knew that, and I knew that. I knew she’d leave this world sooner than most, but I didn’t know when. Hell, I didn’t even know if it would be before me. Life is unexpected, fortuitus. All we can do is appreciate the moments we have while we have them.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. It’s the same motto I’ve always tried to cling to. “You stayed with her...even though you knew it would hurt,” I murmur.

His sad smile matches mine. “Of course I did. I loved her. I loved her more than anything, and I still love her...I wouldn’t give up a second of that time I shared with her, even knowing what came next.” Greg glances out the window again, his voice cracking, eyes clouding over. “The loss of her almost killed me, but I still wouldn’t trade those years for anything in this world. I’d do it all over again if I had to. If I could bring her back for just one



more moment, one more hug, one more kiss, I would—even if it meant I had to relive the heartbreak that came after.”

I extend my hand across the table, clasping his in mine and holding tight.

Greg blinks back to me with an emotion-laced sigh. “Don’t let this define your life, Lucy. Make every moment count. Find love, hold onto it, and don’t ever let the fear allow it to slip through your fingers.” He squeezes my hand, his expression softening. “I’m happy now...with Angie. I haven’t moved on, but I’ve moved forward. And I think that’s all we can ever do. We store the past away, seal it up tight and carry it with us, but we don’t live in it anymore. We learn from it. That’s how we keep going,” he says.

I carry his words with me long after I leave the café that morning.

I carry those words, and the words we shared after, filled with sweet memories, jokes, laughter, and love. I carry the stories I’ll never forget, the moments I’ll hold onto forever.

I carry Jessica, Dad, Emma.

There’s a place in my heart reserved just for them.

And there’s a place for every new, beautiful experience that comes my way.

There’s room for it all.



The house smells like burnt sugar when I step through Cal’s front door and drop my purse in the foyer. My nose wrinkles as a cloud of smoke floats out from the kitchen, and the dogs clamber at my feet for attention. “Cal?”

“Shit. In here.”

I follow his voice, waving away the remnants of his apparent cooking malfunction. “Are you okay?”

“Not really. Cooking is hard, and baking is harder.” Dish rags are swiping through the air as Cal attempts to move the smoke out through the kitchen window. “The sugary liquid shit dripped into the oven. I tried to make you monkey bread.” He sighs, planting his hands on his hips. “Even went out to pick up that circular, bumpy baking thing. I guess I should have placed it on a tray or something.”

Unable to hide my smile, I poke my head in the oven and spot the “circular, bumpy baking thing,” which is actually just called a bundt pan. “Cal, this is so sweet,” I tell him, holding in my cough as I shut the oven door.

“It’s embarrassing. I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be. It looks like it’s cooking perfectly.”

“It’s probably infused with toxic oven fumes now, and I’ll end up killing you with monkey bread. It’s fucked.”

I scratch my cheek, trying not to laugh. “It’s not. It’ll be delicious.” Pivoting back to the stove, I reach for an oven mitt and prop the monkey bread on a sheet pan, then close the door again. When I turn back to Cal, he looks miserable. “Seriously, it looks amazing. This is the sweetest.”

He just shakes his head, not believing a word I’m saying.

It’s been over a week since our reconciliation, since the night I passed out on his chest, a contented heap of bliss. I wouldn’t say I’ve officially moved back in...but, I sort of moved back in. I only stopped home the following morning to collect my dogs and a suitcase brimful of belongings. While our days have been filled with him working long shifts at the auto shop, and me bringing in extra hours at the sanctuary, our evenings have been filled with dinners for two, movie marathons, long walks with the dogs, and an intimacy I’ve never quite experienced before.

And sex.

*So much sex.*

We’ve been addicted to each other, spending every night tangled in bedsheets, sheened in sweat, muttering delicious words into each other’s ears as we christen furniture, walls, and even the backseat of my car after Friday’s wine bar performance. He told me that nothing turns him on more than listening to me sing.

I’m insatiable.

We’re insatiable.

And these are the moments I’m clinging to, savoring. I’m refusing to dwell on anything but *this*.

*Whatever this is.*

Pacing forward, I wrap my arms around Cal’s waist and tug him flush against me, burrowing my face into his cologne-scented t-shirt. A trace of smoke mingles with oaky bourbon, and I smile into the planks of his chest. “Why did you make me monkey bread?” I ask, voice muffled as he pulls me

closer and rubs his hands up and down my back.

“You’d eat it every Christmas morning,” he whispers. “We didn’t get to have it last Christmas.”

It’s true—monkey bread was always a breakfast tradition on Christmas, and additionally, my birthday. Mom would make it especially for me, until I took over the custom.

Cal presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Emma and I would come over to open presents before lunch, and the house would still smell like cinnamon and sugar,” he says softly. “And then we’d run over to our house next door and open more presents, while Emma played songs on the piano.”

The memories don’t make me cry this time. My throat doesn’t sting, and my heart doesn’t weep. I stay tethered to Cal, to this moment, safe inside his arms.

“I want to play you a song.”

I blink, my head popping up. He stares down at me, eyes glassy, smile nervous. My arms tighten around him as a breath leaves me in a plume of stunned elation. “You do?”

He nods. “I never did find the old song I was writing for you before...” Trailing off, his throat bobs with sentiment. “I think I trashed it, believing I’d never find joy in music again,” he tells me. “I trashed a lot of things.”

My heartbeats skip. “You were writing it...for me?”

“Yeah,” he swallows again. “I was going to play it for you on your fourteenth birthday. It was months away at the time, but I didn’t know how long it’d take to write. Anyway, I remembered some of it, so I tried to piece it all together with some new stuff. I’d been practicing on the piano in those weeks I told you I needed space. I wanted to take some time to make it perfect.”

I’m not sure whether to pull back and cry, or hold him tighter. “Cal...”

“It’s not perfect, Lucy,” he dismisses with a self-deprecating chuckle. “It’s about as perfect as the pitiful monkey bread in the oven.”

“So, it’s delightfully perfect,” I smile.

“Sure. We’ll go with that.” Cal untangles us and takes a step back to ruffle his hair. “I’ve hardly played in years. It’s rusty at best.”

I feel blindsided in the most incredible way.

My eyes skim his face, seeing the uncertainty there, the vulnerability. I fiddle with one of my braids, blinking up at him, not knowing what to say. All I manage is a croaked, “Play it for me.”

His eyes soften through the lingering smoke.

A nod follows, and then he guides me into the living room by my hand and pulls out the piano bench.

The piano top lifts, and I take my place beside him in the loveseat, my heart beating a mile a minute. I watch his fingers press to white and black keys, his posture straight, expression sober. His eyes close briefly as Kiki hops up beside me on the cushion and Lemon snuggles up near my feet. Cricket slinks over as well, curling into Lemon's tummy.

"It's called *Heartsong*," he says, voice threaded with rawness. "There's no lyrics because I'm far from a poet, but maybe you can add them sometime. I wrote it in Dorian mode. It was Emma's favorite."

My eyes glisten as I think about her final diary entry.

***Heartsong:*** "The expression of a person's inner essence, underlying identity, and reason for existence."

I hold my breath and wait.

The first note punctures the silence, and heavy emotion catches in my throat. And when the next note rings out, the tears fall. Happy, glorious tears. Salty and warm, physical evidence of this moment, of the power in it.

It's magic.

His form is simple, still a little unrefined, but it's unwavering in its honesty.

I close my eyes and zone out, drinking in melodies that remind me of cotton candy kisses and starlight in his eyes. How promises of forever flickered out the moment we left the sky.

Little girls lost, and firefly dreams. How the stars sat down without us, and the years came in between.

Tragedy and memories, resurrections and wishes.

Music in our heartbeats, cadence in our kisses.

*A heartsong.*

The last note vibrates throughout the room, and Kiki lets out a little sigh, her chin resting on my lap. I feel breathless. Wordless. Cal's eyes remain closed long after the note fades out. He sighs, too, and it's more than just a breath. It's an epilogue.

His eyes find mine a minute later as his stance loosens on the bench, and his fingers fall away from the keys. He blinks once, twice. Slow and searching.

Then he says: "And that is why I'm a mechanic."

I jump from the loveseat and race toward him.

My arms are around his neck in a flash, a joyous sob finding his ear. He twists around on the bench and pulls me into his lap until I'm straddling him, his back bending as a muddle of dissonant chords blare from the keys. "That was beautiful," I whisper, fingers sliding into his hair. Our eyes meet when he tips his head back to look at me. "So beautiful, so perfect. It sounded like —"

"I love you."

The rest of my words turn to dust on my tongue. Only a gasp falls out. I swallow, blink at him, the confession echoing through me. "What?" I breathe out.

"I love you." He repeats it with certainty. There's no faltering, no stumble. "You begged me to love you someday as you clung to me on that downtown sidewalk, tears reflecting off the falling snow," he says hoarsely. "Truth is, I was already there—but I was so damn determined to fight it, thinking you deserved better. God, I was stupid." Cal kisses me, my lips already parted with shock, his hands cradling the back of my head. "It's so easy to say, and I wonder why it ever felt hard. I love you, Lucy."

I cry into the kiss, letting him pepper more kisses down my neck.

"It's effortless," he says. "It's so effortless to love you."

Tears mingle with soul-deep laughter as I hold him, squeezing tight. "I love you," I tell him. "I've loved you since the day you tossed me a basketball in your driveway, gave me a wink, and said if I made the shot, you'd be my friend."

"You didn't make the shot."

I press my lips to his and feel him smile through the kiss. "I guess I didn't want to be friends."

## CHAPTER 23

CAL

**I**t's the first time I've laid eyes on her in seven years. She looks the same, save for the threads of silver dappled into her chin-length bob and a wrinkling of crow's feet that frame two watery eyes.

And the giant diamond ring on her finger that did not come from my father.

"Callahan."

My hold on Lucy's arm turns draconian tight. "Hey, Mom."

I feel frozen to the porch step. It's a sprawling porch, probably bigger than the whole fucking house I grew up in. Black resentment tries to sneak its way inside, but I temper it by wrapping my arm around Lucy's waist and stroking her lower back. She cozies into me, her smile bright enough to make up for the one I notably lack.

"It's so wonderful to see you, Dana. You look amazing," she chirps beside me.

"Come inside, please, before I start to cry. Is your mother coming, Lucy?"

Lucy nods, tugging me forward because, apparently, I'm incapable of doing it on my own. "She'll be here soon. She left right after us."

The conversation muddles into meaningless words as I step inside the grand foyer and glance up at a chandelier that probably cost more than my bike.

This isn't me.

I live simply, humbly, and maybe that's part of the reason why I cut myself loose. It was just another layer forced upon me that didn't mesh. It

was another reminder that my old life was over, Dad and Emma were gone, and nothing would ever be the same.

I'm more rigid than a metal beam.

Mom flutters across the foyer, fluffing her hair, chatting effortlessly with Lucy about frivolous things, while I try not to go completely numb.

But then Lucy whispers against my shoulder in time with a comforting squeeze on my bicep, "Breathe, Cal."

I melt a little.

Drinking in a deep breath, I let it warm my frozen center like her touch has my muscles loosening and anxiety coming down a few notches.

I squeeze her back.

Mom stops talking about quiche for a minute to stare at me. She stares at me like she hasn't seen me in seven years, and I stare back like I'm seeing her for the first time ever.

It feels like it's been that long. Forever. She's a stranger, and this big, hollow house is a dwelling I never once called home.

"I'm...so happy you came, Callahan." She wrings her hands together, fingers bonier, skin more leathery from all the years of sunlight I've missed out on. "Eric is out back hiding Easter eggs with Madeleine and Sophie."

*Sophie.*

According to email updates from my mother that I've only skimmed throughout the years, Sophie is Madeleine's two-year-old daughter.

I wonder if Emma would have a child by now. She'd only be twenty-three, but it's possible. She was so full of love, I can imagine her settling down young and growing a family.

Swallowing, I send her a tense nod. "Okay."

Nobody says anything. We just stare at each other, and it's awkward, and I want to turn around and dive headfirst out the glass window.

It would hurt, but probably less than this does.

Lucy takes over, putting her word-vomiting abilities to good use. "So!" she beams. "You look so beautiful. I love your dress. And your house is a dream. It looks like something out of a painting."

It does look like something out of a painting.

Manmade.

It's not overflowing with memories and magic that can only come from truly living.

I glance around, flattening my lips. "It's nice," I mutter, an attempt to be

cordial, even if it's a boldfaced lie.

My mother sees right through it, just like I see through this gimmicky façade. "Callahan, can I..." She clears her throat, smooths out her light blue dress. "Can I have a word?"

A word.

I'm sure she has a lot of words, and I have none.

When she invited me to Easter brunch last week, as she does every year, every holiday, since I've gone off the grid, my gut reaction was to pretend like the invitation didn't exist. But Lucy saw the text come through as we lay draped across each other in my bed after making love, and she encouraged me to accept. A peace offering of sorts. A first step toward fixing a big, broken piece in my life.

I didn't have Emma around to glue anything back together, but I had Lucy and her optimism, her gallant heart and sun-kissed eyes.

I relented, but it could have been coercion because her mouth was wrapped around my dick at the time. I'd probably agree to anything with her between my legs.

An entire day of cleaning toilets. A root canal, just for fun. Paying bills I don't even have. Eating fermented grasshoppers as my daily source of protein.

Sure. Awesome.

*Just keep using that perfect mouth.*

An itchiness slithers through me, and I scratch at my chest, wanting nothing more than to hand over Lucy instead, so I can skip this part of the day. Amends, small talk, apologies. Lucy is good at that shit.

It all sounds terrible to me...but I need to get it over with. I should do this. Lucy wants me to, and I think it's what Emma would want, too.

"Yeah, okay," I say, my voice like sandpaper, throat desert dry.

Mom lights up, and she looks just like my sister for a minute. Same greenish eyes, same crooked grin with little dimples that pop when the joy is pure and real.

I look down at my feet, focusing on my scuffed sneakers instead of the extravagant porcelain tile.

Lucy drags her hand down my arm, links our fingers together for a quick squeeze, then lets me go. "I'll head out back and introduce myself. I'm here if you need me."

I glance at her with the best smile I can muster, then nod.



Guess I'm on my own now.

My mother leads the way through endless hallways lined with photographs and décor she probably purchased at fancy ass art galleries with another man's money. I skim the photos, taking in the memories I missed out on—my stepfather, Eric, and his daughter through a previous marriage. All the framed pictures portray a perfect little family. No dark history, no tragic past. Mom is happy and smiling in all of them, and that hurts.

I hate that it hurts.

And then I land on one before we curve into a bedroom.

It's us—me, Emma, Mom, and Dad. We're sitting on a bench beside the shoreline in Door County. Emma has a vanilla cone tucked inside a sticky fist, while I lick a strawberry one. Dad is giving Emma bunny ears. Mom has her arm wrapped around me, head dipped to my shoulder. She asked a passerby to snap the shot so we could have the whole family in it.

A split second later, Emma dropped her entire cone into my lap, and I shrieked because it was cold and started dribbling into my swim trunks.

Then I chased her into the water, ducked her underneath the surface, and we laughed until we couldn't breathe.

I go stock-still in the hallway, eyes pinned on the photo. Mind lost to the memory.

"I think about that day a lot," Mom whispers, her hand pressing to my arm.

I flinch, not realizing she was standing so close. Forgetting she was even there at all. There's a lump in my throat, a big, painful one, metallic and briny. "I think about it every day."

She swallows before looking down, then sweeping back up. "Tiger—"

"Don't." I cringe, holding up a hand. "Don't, Mom. You haven't called me that in years."

"I haven't *seen* you in years."

"Well, you only have yourself to blame for that." Anger simmers, overriding my apathy. I clench my jaw and find her wounded eyes fixed on me. "I'm here, and that'll have to be enough for now. I'm trying," I tell her. "I haven't forgiven you...I'm not there yet."

I know it's not the words she wanted to hear, but it's all I have to offer right now.

This is going to take time. More time than a superficial Easter brunch.

My mother presses her lips together and bobs her head, holding back

tears. “All I ever wanted was the best for you,” she croaks out. “For all of us.”

“You wanted the best for *you*,” I counter, jabbing a finger in the air. “You jumped into a new relationship while the dirt on Dad’s grave was still fresh.”

“Because if I didn’t do that, I would have suffered the same fate he did,” she shoots back, words breaking with emotion. “Nobody grieves the same. Nobody handles the aftermath of tragedy the same. I was sinking, and I needed something to look forward to, a new beginning to pull me back up before I drowned. That’s how I handled it. Maybe it seemed callous to you, but that was what I needed to do. And I thought you’d *see* that—I thought you’d see me trying to start over and create a good life for you. But you hated me for it.” Her lip wobbles, tears slipping free and smudging her makeup. “I was desperate to keep you thriving and stable.”

“You stole me from the only home I had. From the girl next door, my only real friend. You replaced them the second the opportunity arose.”

She looks gut-punched. “I didn’t replace them, Callahan. How could you think that?” Blowing out a slow breath, she shakes her head back and forth. “They were *everything* to me. And when you lose your everything, you’ll look for *anything* to fill that gaping hole.”

My fists clench. “Why wasn’t I enough? Why wasn’t I enough to fulfill you?”

“Tiger...” More tears fall freely down flushed cheeks. “I was trying to fulfill us *both*. You were all I had left, and if I was going to be strong enough to raise you, heal you, guide you through the pain, I needed to become the best version of myself I could possibly be. Living in that house...” Her eyes close, tight with agony. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t stay there, and I thought a quick break was for the best. If I handled it poorly...I’m sorry, baby. I’m so, so sorry. I hardly remember those months because I was completely devastated, blindsided by loss.”

The tiniest hum of empathy pings inside my chest.

I know she was hurting.

She was gutted, just like me, and I have a vivid memory of discovering her curled up in the fetal position on Emma’s bedroom floor, clutching a rosary in her fist, praying through her sobs.

Praying for healing, for guidance.

“*Tell me what to do. Just tell me what to do,*” she pleaded to the empty room.

My throat tightens as I look away, linking my fingers behind my head. “You acted like they never existed,” I tell her, voice threaded with rawness. “You introduced me to this stranger who was supposed to be my new dad, and his daughter who was supposed to be my new sister, inside this house that never felt like mine. You smiled as you did it. You looked happy, overjoyed.”

She bites her lip, blinking back tears. “A mother does what she has to do,” she says softly. “I wasn’t happy...not yet, not then. I was hopeful. And that’s what I wanted you to see. Hope for a better future, for a good life—that there was still a *good life* to be had, despite the heartbreak.”

“Do you love him?”

A sharp breath escapes her, her eyes clouding over. “Of course I love him. Loving someone else doesn’t lessen the love I felt for your father, or for Emmalee. There’s room for everyone. There’s always room for more love if you’re willing to accept it.”

I don’t reply to that. Truth is, I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to think about any of this. Part of me understands. I realize people handle grief in their own way, and my way was to self-isolate and lash out, turn to drugs and toxic vices. That wasn’t any better.

I suppose there is no *better*.

There’s no *better* way to survive the worst possible scenario life hands you. There’s only the way you choose. She chose her way, I chose mine.

They did not align.

And maybe it’s up to me to accept that, pick up the pieces of our collision, and try to move forward the best I can. Staying rooted in my blame and resentment feels like shit, and being the bigger person and letting it all go sounds hard as fuck, too.

I guess it’s up to me to choose which way I want to go.

Mom doesn’t need an answer right away. She sees the way I soften, the conflict in my eyes, so she takes it for what it is and nods her head toward the bedroom.

“I want to show you something,” she says gently, then steps into the master suite.

Inhaling a deep breath, I follow. And when I step through the threshold, I lose that breath. It falls out like a gasp, a choking sound.

The room is a flashback to the past, a shadow box. It’s lined with Emma’s recital ribbons, my basketball trophies. Childhood artwork, tapestries, a

handmade quilt Mom crocheted with my sister on a chilly winter day. Ornaments, family photos, Dad's old auto shop sign when it was called "Bishop Auto & Repair." His fishing rods and sports memorabilia.

And a glass jar filled with old orchids. The petals are brown and dead now, but they're still there. Still preserved.

My mother steps over to me, takes my hand in hers, and grazes her thumb across my knuckles. Then she whispers with all the strength she can muster, "I never replaced them, Callahan. I never forgot about them."

I blink over to her, trying to keep the emotion from breaking free.

"I promise you...they're still very much alive."



I can hardly take my eyes off her.

She's ivory skin and lavender lace, all tied up with a smile that hasn't waned since we stepped inside. Lucy has made herself right at home here, and I envy her a little for that...at how easily she can make a house a home with a pinch of laughter and a touch of light.

Farrah and my mother converse in the next room, deep in years-worth of stories, as I remain seated at the sprawling dining room table, watching Lucy nibble the rest of her dessert. Key lime pie. Mom made it, and it wasn't as good as Lucy's, but I ate every last bite.

I push my plate aside as Sophie toddles up to me and tugs at my pant leg. "Cake," she says.

I don't speak "kid," but I think she means pie.

Lucy holds out a forkful, and the little girl skips around the table to inhale a bite. They both giggle when a dribble of cream drips down her chin.

My stepsister, Madeleine, crosses over from the kitchen with a dish towel between her hands. Her hair is pulled up into a neat bun, a ruddy brown, tied with a yellow bow.

Emma loved yellow. It was her favorite color.

"The munchkin seems to adore you two," she says with a smile, her teeth flashing white. Her eyes pan over to me, specifically, and the smile widens a fraction more. "It was so nice to see you today, Cal. It's been a long time."

Last time I saw Madeleine, she was a hormonal sixteen-year-old storming out the front door because her father wouldn't let her drive his Audi to a boyfriend's house.

All I could think about was how damn lucky she was to still have a father. That was the night I left and never came back.

I swallow through a nod. "Yeah. Sorry I've been...absent. I'm trying to change that."

"I get it," she nods, still smiling. She presses her hand to my shoulder with an understanding squeeze. "Take all the time you need. We're not going anywhere."

I watch her scoop up Sophie, blow raspberries to her belly, then saunter back into the kitchen, laughter trailing them. My stepfather steps in through the patio door to ruffle Sophie's springy curls, then kisses his daughter on the head before sending me a kind wave.

I nod back.

"I'm proud of you," Lucy says softly. Our eyes catch before she scoots her chair back and rises up, moving over to my side of the table. Without hesitation, she spills into my lap, her hair tickling my cheeks as she leans in for a kiss. Her hands plant along my jaw when she inches back, eyes shimmering. "So proud."

I encircle my arms around her, feeling a weight lift now that she's wrapped around me. She smells like sweet nectar and springtime. "Mm. You know I'm only here because of your mouth."

She blinks, registering the implication. Then she knocks our foreheads together as she snorts a laugh. "I'm glad I could be persuasive."

"I think I am, too."

Honesty bleeds through my words, and she lifts back up, earnestness lighting up her eyes. "Good."

I nod, throat tight.

Lucy kisses me again, slower, softer, then collapses across my chest, fingers sifting through the hair along the nape of my neck as she sighs with contentment. "There's something I want to do," she murmurs into my collar. "Need to do."

"Yeah?"

Her head bobs slowly. "I'll tell you about it when we get home."

*Home.*

Giving her a squeeze, I glance out the window as sunlight streams in

through the glass. A little cherry tree starts to bloom in the backyard, pink buds sprouting from the branches.

Spring is here.

And for the very first time, it doesn't feel like the start of another long winter.

## CHAPTER 24

CAL

4/8/13

"Thirteen"

Today is my thirteenth birthday.

Mom threw a big party for me since it's my first year as a teenager, but I don't really care about the bells and whistles, or even the presents. I'm just excited to see my friends and family and have a dance party and eat cake with raspberry filling. Yum!

I know Mom and Dad are going to tell me to make a wish when I blow out my candles later, so I've been thinking about that a lot this week. It's a big deal, you know?

One wish. Just one.

And then you have to wait a whole year to make another wish.

The good news is that I think I thought of my wish—just now, as I'm glancing out my bedroom window watching Cal and Lucy shoot basketball hoops in the driveway. I know what I'm going to wish for tonight.

Sorry, but I can't tell you.

*Because then it won't come true.*

*Toodles,  
Emma*



I kill the engine of my bike as I pull into the driveway and push my sunglasses up the top of my head. Sunset blankets her in magenta and gold as she stands in the front yard, just staring out at the horizon. Her arms are folded, hair taking flight on a warm breeze.

Ten years ago today, there was no sunset. It was hidden behind storm clouds, drowned out by the threat of rain. I'm not sure why I remember that as we drove to Emma's piano recital, because it wasn't a pivotal moment or anything. She was doodling beside me in the backseat, chewing on her pen, one leg crossed over the other as she fidgeted in her pretty red dress. Dad turned the radio way up when a CCR song came to life over the speaker—*Who'll Stop the Rain*.

I glanced over at Emma drawing raindrops with happy faces into her spiral notebook and it made me smile. She always liked the rain. She liked golden sunsets, too, but the rain made her feel free. Emma was the girl who danced in puddles and made mudpies, telling me once that rain meant the sky just wanted to have a little adventure.

I laughed at her, called her a big doof and ruffled her hair until it sprouted in a thousand crazy directions, and then she punched me on the arm and told me to go to my corner.

*Fuck.*

I really miss her.

Lucy finally pivots on the lawn to glance at me over her shoulder, the skirt of her dress sashaying around her knees. Lemony yellow with white pinstripes. Her face is a mix of magic and melancholy, her mouth curving up into a smile but her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

I hop off the bike and trudge toward her, fingers slipping into my front



pockets. “Everyone should be here soon,” I say, glancing over her head at the orange-kissed sky. When I blink back to her, she’s nodding slowly. “You okay?”

Her chest expands with a heavy sigh. She looks across the yard at her old house, a faded cornflower blue. The shutters are white now, instead of navy, but I swear the breeze sings with ancient laughter spilling out from the upstairs window, where Lucy and Emma would write songs and have dance parties until they collapsed onto sleeping bags and slipped into wholesome dreams.

Lucy smooths down her dress. “Was this a good idea?” Her lip catches between her teeth with worry, uncertainty brimming in her eyes. “Was this a mistake?”

I’ll admit, I wasn’t sure I could go through with it when she announced her plans to host a ten-year vigil for my little sister in the backyard of our childhood home.

May 25<sup>th</sup> has always been a heavy day of mourning for me. The thought of adding any more weights to an already dismal day sounded...*painful*.

I wasn’t certain I could stomach another funeral.

But, I had a change of heart as I flipped through the pages of Emma’s diary one night as Lucy’s dog, Lemon, lay sprawled across my feet, and Kiki and Cricket curled up together in the little pink dog bed across the room. Lucy slept soundly beside me on the couch, her hair tickling my thigh, and the piano to my left shined like a beacon of rosewood and ivory keys. As my eyes cased the carved lettering of Emma’s name in the wood, I finally saw the meaning in Lucy’s idea; the closure in it.

It wasn’t a funeral at all—it was a celebration of life.

Her life.

It’s hard to celebrate a life in those heart-rending days post-loss. There’s no dancing, no laughter, no party poppers or noise makers. There’s no celebration to be felt when you’re putting your loved one in the ground and covering them with dirt and weeds.

You’re not thinking about the time they had here, or the beautiful moments you were lucky enough to share with them while they were still alive—you’re only thinking about the gaping hole they’re leaving behind. The hard days ahead. A long, lonely life without them.

No...there was no celebration to be had. Not then.

But Emma deserves to be celebrated in the same way she celebrated every

small, precious thing. Raindrops and orchids. Mud puddles and snowfall. Music, stars, and lightning bugs.

Nothing was too insignificant.

Everything had a name. Everything had a purpose.

I shake my head at Lucy as she waits for my reply. “It’s not a mistake,” I tell her, the truth of it bleeding into my words. “It’s not a mistake at all.”

She drinks in another deep sigh, letting the worry fall off her shoulders. I watch them deflate. I watch the smile return, a real, beaming smile. Nodding, she steps into the breadth of my arms and presses her cheek to my chest. “I think I needed this,” she whispers.

I kiss the top of her head, dragging my palms up and down her back. “I think we all needed this.”

She hums into the front of my t-shirt, her breath warm. “Cal?”

“Yeah?” I wonder.

“What do you think she wished for that day?”

Swallowing, I think back to Emma’s birthday entry written a month before all of her wishes were snuffed out forever. There’s no way to know the answer to that, of course, but if I know anything about my sister, it’s this:

She never wished for herself. The people she loved came first, always.

“I’m not sure,” I admit, stroking her hair, looking off into the setting sun. “But...I like to think it came true.”

“Yeah,” she smiles against me. “Me, too.”



I glance around at the sea of people, awestruck.

I wasn’t expecting this kind of turnout. Lucy spread the word about the vigil over the past month, hanging flyers in coffee shops and leaving invitations tucked into the flags of neighborhood mailboxes. She was anticipating a small crowd, family and close friends, maybe a few neighbors that remembered Emma and our family’s history.

But, this is bigger.

*This is more.*

Hundreds of people are crammed shoulder-to-shoulder in the backyard of

my old house, sharing stories. Some laughs, some tears. I'm leaning back against a patio pillar as somebody smokes a cigar beside me, and I watch the smoke rise up, curling around the stars. Clusters of people lean into each other, arms woven, hands entwined, and I skip my eyes from face to face. My mother, stepfather, stepsister, and Sophie. Lucy's mom and extended family. Roy Allanson and his wife, Joan. Alyssa, Nash, Gemma, and Knox. Jolene. A slew of neighbors and locals. Vera, who's been sending me curious glances all night, and a handful of nameless sanctuary volunteers.

And then there's Lucy, tuning her guitar.

She's singing tonight. She's singing a song she's tried to sing for years but never could. I catch her eyes across the yard, glimmering in the lantern light.

I smile as she sets her guitar down and strolls toward me, a bundle of nerves. "I...I can't believe the turnout," she stammers, sweeping back her hair. Her hands linger at the nape of her neck, irises glittering with silver flecks among the blue. Stars and wishes. "This is..." Her voice trails off as she looks around the yard. She can't find the words.

"It's everything you meant for it to be," I finish for her. "Everything she deserves."

Lucy gives me a teary nod, then reaches for my hand. "I'm nervous to sing. I haven't ever been able to get through this song."

I flash back to the funeral: Lucy, standing at the podium with her guitar shaking desperately in her hands. Tears streaking down her chalk-white face. Voice quivering, body nearly collapsing under the weight of her grief.

Apologies poured out of her as she stumbled down the steps, threw down her guitar, and ran into her mother's arms.

She only got four words out.

I pull her to me, taking her face between my hands. There's color in her cheeks today, courage in her eyes. There's no doubt in my mind she'll get through this. "Just pretend you're on that stage at the wine bar. Draped in the glow of the string lights, vibrating with purpose," I tell her, kissing her hairline. "So beautiful, so strong. You captivated me. You captivate everyone who hears you sing." I kiss her again, the final words muffled against her baby hairs, "You're just singing for her tonight. Sing for Emma. No one else exists."

She falls into me, clutching the front of my shirt with two fists. "Thank you."

Tilting her face up to mine, I bend down and find her mouth, drinking in a soft kiss. I nuzzle her bottom lip until her jaw unhinges, and my tongue slips inside. Sensual, sweet. Nerves fizzle from her stiff limbs as she melts into the kiss, her hands dragging up my biceps and holding tight.

I pull away and smooth her hair back, staring right into her eyes. “Sing like a fucking angel.”

A smile lights up her face, brighter than the lanterns preparing for launch.

She gives me a thankful nod and leans up for one more kiss before she’s ushered away by her mother. Lucy skips across the yard and grabs her guitar, hugging her mom with a long embrace.

Then I startle, yanked from the moment, when someone comes up behind me.

Dante throws an arm around my shoulders, surprising me, as Ike and Kenny trail his heels. I voiced my half-hearted invitation to the guys before I left work today, but I didn’t think they’d actually show. I didn’t think we were...*close* like that.

“How you holding up, boss man?” he says, giving my back a slap before moving in beside me, hands stuffed into cargo pockets. “I almost didn’t recognize you without the perma-scowl.”

I huff a laugh. “Didn’t think you assholes were coming.”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t we?”

A response crawls up my throat, then fizzles out.

I don’t have an answer.

I glance from Dante, to Ike, to Kenny, all three of them here, all supportive.

All doing what friends do.

Maybe I’ve been wrong this whole time, scoffing at their friendship claims, unable to believe anyone truly cared about me.

Dante holds up his beer in cheers and slings back a swallow, while Kenny slides a cup of coffee my way. I reach for it, nodding my thanks. Ike bumps shoulders with me, and there’s no tension, no weirdness. Everything feels easy.

The way it should be.

They huddle beside me as Lucy taps the microphone she set up beneath the towering maple tree and plucks at her guitar strings. She makes a heartfelt announcement, an outpouring of gratitude.

Everyone goes quiet as they lean against their loved one, heads bowed

and waiting.

And then she sings.

*If I Die Young.*

Her eyes remain closed, posture rigid as she sits perched on a tall stool beneath the maple. There's a crack in her voice when the first four words fall out, but she regroups quickly, her hold on the guitar tightening like a safety blanket. A comforting hug.

She sings the song from start to finish, belting out the lyrics with strength and surety. Just like I knew she would. The tears are there, but they don't suffocate her. They don't detract from everything she wants to say.

Claps ring out when the last note fades into the late-spring night, and Lucy looks right at me, holding the guitar high above her head with pride, releasing a strangled sob of relief.

My own arms lift, just like they did on the basketball court all those years ago when the ball swished through the net and my two favorite girls jumped from the bleachers with a gleeful shriek.

A winning shot.

*Victory.*

My eyes pan from Lucy to my mother who smiles at me across the orange-tipped yard, tears inching down her cheeks. She nods, and I'm not sure what it means, but I allow it to mean what I want it to mean.

We'll be okay.

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday.

I smile back.

As I make my way toward Lucy through the lawn and take her hand in mine, we walk over to the array of glowing lanterns and bend to pick up two. The crowd joins us. Lanterns are chosen, cradled in warm hands, and lifted skyward. And on the count of three, Lucy and I share a tender glance and let them go.

They rise up and up, floating and swaying, as Lucy gives my hand a squeeze and then runs into her mother's arms, just like she did on that dreary, rain-laden day ten years ago. The image steals my attention for a beat before something else catches my eye.

I think it's a lantern at first. A tiny beam of light inching its way into my peripheral vision.

When my head twists to the left, I blink.

I blink again.

It's not a lantern light...*it's a firefly.*

My breath catches and holds in the back of my throat because it's still May. I've never seen a lightning bug before June.

And there's only one.

It flutters over to me, flickering among the sea of lanterns. One little firefly lighting up the sky. On instinct, I lift my index finger, my chest squeezing as my heart thunders beneath my ribs.

I almost choke when it lands on me.

Maybe I do choke.

I make a sound—joy and heartbreak, wonder and disbelief.

The firefly skitters across my knuckle, wings flapping as its lower belly glows like a luminary. It doesn't stay long, its tiny legs tickling my finger as my whole arm trembles with a feeling I can't put into words. My pulse is revving, blood pumping hot, but my body is frozen, stunned eyes trained on the insect as it illuminates one more time like a final farewell.

Then it flies away.

I watch it disappear into the sky, becoming one with the lanterns as they float up to the endless stretch of stars.

And a tear tracks down my cheek.

One tear. One little firefly.

I glance over at Lucy, but her eyes are on the sky, misty and moonstruck, as she's held within her mother's arms. She didn't see, wasn't witness.

The moment was only meant for me.

Within the tangled roots of grief, we stand to lose so much. But no one ever acknowledges what we stand to gain.

Strength. Perspective. Appreciation. Resilience.

Those things are often buried, overpowered by grief's mighty right hand—suffering.

They exist, though. There's beauty in the breakdown, a glimmer of light hidden in the smoke.

And sometimes, every once in a while, if you're truly lucky...

There is love.

## CHAPTER 25

### LUCY

#### *FIVE MONTHS LATER*

**M**y hair is tangled in his fist, my neck craning backward when he gives it a sharp tug.

“Oohhh,” I moan, his opposite hand trailing from my breast to my hipbone and latching on tight. I’m sprawled face-down on the bed as Cal rails into me from behind, the towel I was wearing now a halo of cream around my ankles. “Yes, yes...” He’s still fully clothed after spotting me strolling from the bathroom post-shower, only managing to inch his jeans halfway down his thighs before flipping me around, bending me over, and sliding between my legs.

I love the spontaneous moments; the ones where Cal sees me, has to have me, and takes me. No foreplay, no lead-up, just raw, urgent sex.

I curl my fingernails into the bedspread as dog claws scratch at the bedroom door. Kiki always mistakes my moans of pleasure for a murder-in-progress.

Groaning, Cal twists my hair in his hand and yanks me up onto my knees until I’m in the doggy-style position and picks up the pace.

*Oh my God.*

It feels so good. Too good.

So that’s when my phone starts ringing with the *Cheers* theme song at full volume, which means my mother is worried about something. Probably my

car. I got an oil change yesterday, so she'll inevitably assume there was catastrophic damage discovered and the car was deemed totaled.

Blindly, I extend one arm to silence the ringtone as Cal holds me up by the middle, and my phone slips off the nightstand, toppling to the floor. The theme song promptly ends, and Cal thrusts into me with a purposeful stroke, hitting deep.

"Ohh...my God." I nearly face-plant, but he keeps his hold on me, leaning forward to bite my shoulder.

"So fucking good. So tight and sweet," he groans. The bedsprings squeak in time with his thrusts. "You love my cock, don't you?" Cal trails his tongue up my shoulder, nicking the side of my throat. "I know you fucking love it."

"Yes, please...don't stop. Ohhh."

"Lucy?"

I think I hear my name whispered from a galaxy far, far away, but I'm too far gone. The orgasm bursts to life with telltale sparks as Cal slips a hand between my thighs and brings me all the way there.

"Come for me, sunshine. Tell me how much you love it." He buries his face in the crook of my neck and shoulder, panting and grunting as he pounds into me. "Fuck yes."

I detonate, screaming his name and moaning louder than a trumpeting stampede of elephants.

"Lucy!"

I'm still coming down from the high, my face crashing to the mattress, when the voice registers. Horror sluices me. "*Mom?*" I scramble into a sitting position as Cal pulls out of me and look around the room to see if she materialized through the walls somehow. She didn't. Scooting forward, I hang halfway off the bed and locate my fallen phone on the floor. Sure enough, the call is connected.

Two minutes in already.

I pass away, and my soul levitates to the ceiling.

My eyes pan to Cal, and he just blinks at me. "Good morning, Mrs. Hope," he unhelpfully mutters toward the receiver with an "I didn't know what else to say" shrug.

I fumble with the phone and put it to my ear upside down, trying to think of what was voiced aloud, aside from my banshee-yelling. All I can recall is "tight and sweet" and "cock," so I panic-blurt, "Hi! We're baking a cake!" Turning to Cal, I add loudly, with bugged-out eyes, "I do love your *cake*, Cal.



You did great!”

He cups a hand over his jaw and closes his eyes, shaking his head back and forth.

Awful, nails-on-a-chalkboard silence meets my ears until my mother finally croaks out a timid, “Pardon?”

“B-baking, Mom. Cake. Two cakes. Cal’s is perfect...light and sweet,” I ramble helplessly. “Mine is burning, though. A terrible disaster. Lots of yelling.”

“Lucy, are you—”

“The connection is compromised, sorry! Must be the smoke detectors. Gotta go. Bye!” I end the call and chuck the phone across the room as if that might turn back time.

I flop backward onto the bed, face flaming. That’s when the bedroom door plows open, and all three animals come exploding into the room.

*Awesome.*

Now there’s viewing party following the live-stream audio performance.

“Kiki, go!” My dog leaps onto the bed and licks my ear. Lemon follows, chasing Kiki, and they both start play-fighting, trampling over my face and blocking my airways while I tap out like an MMA fighter.

“Christ.” Cal picks the dogs up under both arms and ushers them out of the bedroom while Cricket prances behind, then locks the door, leaning back with both hands scrubbing down his face. He’s still partially erect, his jeans now pooled at his feet. Pulling them all the way up, he yanks the zipper with a grunt of frustration.

I can’t help but crumble into laughter, covering my face with my hands.

“Hilarious, Lucy,” Cal grouses, prowling back toward me. “Your mother now knows how the word ‘cock’ sounds coming out of my mouth in direct correlation to plowing her daughter.”

I laugh harder.

“A cake? Really?”

Wiping the tears away, I sit up on my elbows. “I got flustered. Cake, cock...”

“Jesus. I need coffee.”

I shoot upright. “But...you didn’t...you know,” I pout, glancing pointedly at his groin.

“I have dog drool dribbling down my torso. The mood has flatlined.”

Grumbling, he pulls open the door as the animals corral at his feet, and

disappears down the hallway.

Filling my cheeks with air, I blow out a breath and throw a shirtdress over my head before following Cal into the kitchen where he's pouring himself a cup of coffee.

He glances at me with the hint of a smile, adorned in newly buckled blue jeans and his Cal's Corner t-shirt. The one without the typo. "Coffee?"

"I'm okay," I say, leaning back against the counter as he takes a seat at the table. "Maybe I should invite Alyssa to the fall festival with us tonight."

"She won't want to go."

My lips pucker. "How do you know?"

He takes a sip out of the new mug I bought him that reads, "*No point in being pessimistic. It wouldn't work out anyway.*" "She has a date."

"No way. She'd tell me."

"Not likely." He takes another sip, eyeing me over the rim.

I squint at him, processing. "Who's the date?"

"No one."

"Cal," I gripe.

"Fine. Dante."

"*What?* Absolutely not possible."

"Fine. No one."

Gaping at him, my brain refuses to make sense of the words "date, Alyssa, and Dante" all strung together in the same thought. I sensed a spark of chemistry between them the night I lost my virginity in a bar bathroom, but Alyssa was adamant about her disinterest.

*Why didn't she tell me?*

"Why didn't she tell me?"

"Don't know. Shame is probable." Cal sets the mug down and leans back in his chair. "Dante didn't say much—just that they ran into each other at a mutual friend's party, and it didn't go terribly. They set up a dinner thing."

A dinner thing.

*A dinner thing!*

Immediately, I text her.

ME:

Dinner?!

The little dots start to move and dance.

ALYSSA:

I do like dinner.

ME:

Why didn't you tell me about your date with Dante?

ALYSSA:

Ugh. I was going to tell you after our mutual consumption of food tonight at a very subpar restaurant where we hardly say a word to each other and make little eye contact. Meaning, it's not a date.

ME:

Sounds like a date. Sounds like betrayal.

ALYSSA:

No betrayal, only indignity. I promise to fill you in on all the lack of details later. Have fun tonight at the fall fest!! I love yooooou :)

Sighing, I send her a few heart emojis before Cal curls his hand around my hips and tugs me into his lap. He presses a kiss to the center of my throat, peppering more and more as he works his way up to my jaw and lands on my lips.

"Mmm. Will you kiss me atop the Ferris wheel like this tonight?" I smile, displaying more of my neck for him to adore. "That first kiss was rather tame."

"Tame, huh?" He growls a little, nicking just below my ear with his teeth. "I was trying to be a gentleman. It was your first kiss." A nibble to my lobe. "It was my first kiss, too."

My breath catches. "It was?"

"Yes. You were the only girl I ever saw, Lucy."

I melt in his lap, my arms enveloping his neck as he continues to make love to my skin with his tongue and teeth.

Bringing his mouth back to mine, he whispers against my lips, "Then I didn't see you for nine years, and every aspect of my world became so unclear."

My smile crests as our tongues meet with a sensual stroke. I hum into his mouth, planting my palms along his cheeks, murmuring back, "Can you see more clearly now?"

"Crystal."

A minute later, his jeans are tugged down mid-thigh, my panties shoved to the side. I move up and down in his lap, his face smashed against my chest

as he fists my hair with both hands and groans. It doesn't take long before his warm release spills inside of me.

Hopefully, all he sees right now is stars.

Cal saunters out the front door a half an hour later to put in a few hours at work, and I send him off with his coffee thermos and a drawn-out kiss while Cricket climbs my calf, itching to be held.

As Cal peels out of the driveway on his bike, I reach for my phone and peek at the new text message that just came through.

From my mother.

Oy.

Swiping it open, I turn crimson.

MOM:

I hope you enjoyed your "cake." Let it be known that I would not be opposed to any byproducts of your "baking session" roughly nine months from now. – Mom



The air carries over the scent of taffy apples and warm cider as we jump off of Cal's bike and wind through the parking lot, dodging preschoolers with ghost-shaped lollipops. I'm brought back to one long year ago when Cal and I visited this exact festival, a heady connection blooming between us.

A friendship.

More than a friendship.

He offered to take me back to his place that night for sex, and I thought he wanted to play board games with a spot of tea while we snuggled up in onesies together and sang *Kumbaya*.

I rub my forehead, banishing the embarrassment from my mind as we stroll toward the ticket booth. "Ferris wheel?" I grin, twisting my hair over one shoulder and adjusting my rust-brown sweater. I glance up at the giant wheel glowing violet and indigo.

Cal pulls off his beanie and scratches his nape, following my gaze. He looks mildly agitated. I wonder if work was stressful, considering Kenny has been gone on his honeymoon for the last week. "Cider?" he pivots, blinking

back to me.

“Sure.”

I stand in line for one of the games while Cal orders a single cup of spiked cider and brings it over to me. He fishes through his pockets for a piece of nicotine gum and plucks one from the grid.

Definitely agitated.

“What’s wrong?” I cup the cider between my palms, searching his taut expression. A muscle in his jaw flexes at my inquiry and he shakes his head. “You look nervous or something.”

“I’m not.”

A thought worms its way through me. “The basketball game. You don’t think you can defeat it twice, huh?” I wiggle my eyebrows and sip the cider.

He relaxes a fraction, stuffing his hands into his pockets, gaze twinkling anew. “Got me.”

“My panda bear needs a companion. No pressure.”

“You just like watching me sweat.”

I grin. “I do. In various ways.”

Starlight gleams down on us as we move from game to game, dampening our clothes in water gun fights, tossing plastic balls into buckets, and laughing until the cider buzz has me dragging Cal over to the basketball game for a rematch. It’s the shortest line in the row, intimidation glowing from the spotlighted hoop. “Please do not spend your entire paycheck this time.”

“Don’t pretend my steadfast devotion didn’t turn you on,” he says. When Cal is tossed an orange ball, he smiles, wavers, then hands it to me, instead. “You’re up.”

I gawk at him. “I have the coordination of a potato.”

“I like potatoes.”

Like them or not, potatoes can’t shoot hoops. Predictably, I don’t make a single shot. Cal pays for three rounds, and not one ball comes close to swishing through the net.

My cheeks puff with defeat. “Ferris wheel?” I try again, glancing over his shoulder at the big wheel.

His eyes cloud over for a split second before he consents. “Yeah, okay.” Tousling his hair, he reaches for my hand. “Ferris wheel it is.”

Cal totes me on his back, wrists linked beneath the underside of my knees as we move through the crowd. Couples swerve around us, hand-in-hand, eating spools of pink and blue cotton candy. I tighten my hold around his

neck, propping my chin to his shoulder as I bounce along his back.

Life is so different now.

I officially put my house up on the market last month after long, agonizing months of presale prep, painting, and meticulous landscaping. A lot needed to be done, considering I'd purchased it at a low price, knowing it was a fixer-upper. It's what I wanted at the time. Something to fix.

Or maybe I just wanted something to fix me.

Either way, it's been a grueling process that has kept me, Cal, and my Uncle Dan busy for the majority of summer while we gave it the finishing touches needed to get it market-ready. We have an open house tomorrow, and I'm anxious to see what comes of it.

The transition of moving into Cal's house was decidedly effortless. Little by little, day by day, I'd bring over new boxes of belongings, sprinkling my personality amid his rooms and furnishings. The dogs love it there, spending most of their time chasing squirrels up tree trunks in the back yard and sunbathing on the deck with Cricket curled between them.

It feels like home.

It feels like the home I missed; the home I never thought I'd find again.

Cal slides me down his back as we enter the line for the Ferris wheel. My feet hit the ground, and I glance around, realizing we're the only ones waiting. The attendant at the gate waves us onto the ride, his silver, bushy eyebrows wagging with enthusiasm.

I reach for Cal's hand. "We're the only ones here," I note, looking up at the wheel, eyeing the slew of empty buckets.

"Lucky us." He gives my hand a squeeze and tugs me forward. "Come on."

My hair bounces over both shoulders as I skip forward to keep up with him, catching the wink the attendant sends me before we slide into one of the buckets. The safety bar comes down while I scoot closer to Cal, our thighs smashing together as I curl my hand around his knee. "This is pretty special...the whole wheel to ourselves." Warmth trickles through me. I twist my head toward Cal, finding his hazel eyes glimmering with moonlight. "It feels sort of magical, you know?"

"Yeah." A soft smile stretches. "I know."

He slings an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close as we begin to rise. My eyes close, belly flipping when the wheel draws us up to the sky and the autumn breeze steals my breath.

“The last time we were up here, I never wanted to leave,” Cal murmurs as we crest over the top.

I nuzzle into him, tightening my grip on his knee. A nostalgic sigh kisses the crisp air, and I open my eyes, watching the stars become streaks of light as they appear to fall back down with us. “I remember how I felt that night as we spun around and around. It was a sad, hopeful feeling. Sad for everything lost, hopeful for everything yet to come. A little bit of confusion... uncertainty.” I look over at him. His expression is masked in half shadow, half starlight. “I was falling for you, and I didn’t know what to do.”

As I say the words, we fall.

We dip low, and then we whirl back up.

Cal takes my hand in his, massaging my ring finger. “I was falling, too. Fast and reckless. Headfirst, no anchor, no soft landing in sight.” He swallows. “I’d never fallen before without a devastating impact. It was terrifying.”

I nod, understanding.

Our fingers entwine.

“Not every fall hurts,” he says. “Not every fall ends in a fiery crash. Sometimes we never hit the ground at all.” Cal rubs his lips together, his eyes glazing over as he exhales the final words, “We learn to fly.”

The wheel drops.

My heart soars.

“Lucy...” Clearing his throat, he shifts in his seat, hand releasing mine to dig through his coat pocket.

I blink through a curious smile, watching as he inhales a nervous breath.

That’s when the wheel comes to a grinding halt.

It stops.

Creaking gears, squeaky hinges.

It stalls at the top, right among the stars.

For a blinding second, fear blankets me. And then it dissolves into... disbelief. There’s no way. There’s no way we could manage to get stuck on a Ferris wheel *again*.

Both of us, together.

*Twice.*

My head whips left, and I stare down at the sea of people, some of them pointing, gazing up at us, waving and whistling. I dig my fingers into Cal’s knee, shaking my head back and forth. “What...”

I look back over at him, and the words fade on the tip of my tongue.

Water fills my eyes.

A squeaky sob falls out.

A diamond ring shines back at me, twinkling with moonglow.

I gasp, cupping a hand over my mouth. “Cal....”

“Lucille Anne Hope.”

“Oh my God.”

“Sunshine,” he whispers, staring at the ring before pulling his eyes up to mine. It’s in the shape of a heart, rose gold diamonds rimming the jewel. “I saw you playing in your front yard when you were just a little girl. You were sitting there, cross-legged, plucking blades of grass out of the ground, sending me curious glances as I dribbled a basketball in my driveway. I was too nervous to talk to you, so Emma skipped across the yard and dragged you over, telling me you were going to be our new best friend. You smiled. You smiled like you hit the jackpot, and I thought about that smile every single day for years to come. I craved it. I still crave it.” He holds the ring up in front of me, fingers trembling. “You became that breath of fresh air when I was lost in the smoke, the warmth on my skin when I hadn’t seen the sun for weeks.” He stares at me, aching. Longingly. “You’re my adventure in every disaster.”

Tears streak down my cheeks as I nod my head, sniffing, my heart racing.

“Be my wife,” he says on a raspy breath. “Marry me.”

I burst into tears.

I fall against him, wrapping my arms around his neck and sobbing into his collar.

Cal strokes my hair with one hand, the other still holding the little black box with a diamond ring. He presses kisses to my skin as he says, “Breathe, Lucy.”

Gulping down breath after breath, I croak out, “Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” I partly laugh, mostly cry, pulling back and clasping his face between my palms. I nod slowly, with every ounce of conviction. “Yes, I’ll marry you. Of course I’ll marry you.”

His whole body relaxes, face stretching into a smile as he closes his eyes for a beat, like he’s soaking up my answer and carving it into his bones. “Fuck,” he mutters. “I was really hoping you’d say that.”



I kiss him, then I kiss him again. “There was nothing else to say.”

After he slides the diamond along my finger, Cal glances down at the ride attendant, giving him a nod, and the wheel comes careening back to life. We make two more spins amid the starry sky, holding onto each other as my tears subside and my heart beats with completion.

We step off the wheel, his ring on my finger, and his hand in mine.

We step off the wheel, but I think, in a way...

We never leave the sky at all.

## CHAPTER 26

CAL

I toss her the ball.

Lucy fumbles, her hands flailing, almost dropping it twice.  
*So damn cute.*

Once she maintains a solid grip, she does a little knee bob, crouches low to the driveway, then springs back up like a slinky and lets the basketball fly from her hands.

*Miss.*

An epic miss.

The ball dodges the entire backboard by at least three feet and rolls into a ditch, landing near the sewer drain a few houses down.

She cringes, folding her arms. “I make a mean banana bread. I like to clean. I’m never late to anything, and I enjoy giving you blowjobs.”

“Why are you listing off your qualities? You already have a ring.”

Said diamond reflects off the sunlight and shimmers like a tiny prism. Lucy spins the ring around her finger, releasing an awkward chuckle as she shrugs. “Just in case my basketball inabilities have you second guessing things.”

I squint at her. “Totally. I was just thinking that. The blowjobs are fantastic, and the love is an all-consuming fairytale, but the fact that we can never play a competitive game of H-O-R-S-E has me reconsidering everything.”

“I get it,” she sighs.

Chuckling under my breath, I flip my baseball cap around and shake my head before turning toward the street to fetch the ball.

Roy Allanson strolls by, arm linked with his wife, and sends me a wave

as he passes. “Puttin’ the old house up for sale, eh?” he inquires, gesturing at the “For Sale” sign sticking out of Lucy’s front lawn. “Can’t say I won’t miss that girl’s cheery smiles every morning when she’s walkin’ her pups.”

“Come see her at the shop. She’s in charge now.”

*Actually, don’t do that.*

*Please never have car trouble again.*

“Oh, yeah?” He tilts his head with approval. “Best decision you ever made, Bishop. She’s goin’ places.”

I bend over to scoop up the ball, tucking it underneath my arm.

It was an easy decision to put Lucy in charge. She’s made a world of difference in the few short months she’s been back, keeping me organized, spoiling the clientele with homemade treats and mega-watt smiles, sprucing up the overall ambiance with color pops and her girly candle shit, coordinating marketing events, and bringing in a much-needed morale boost.

I look forward to those jingle bells chiming every morning.

My guys love her.

*I love her.*

So goddamn much.

A smile lifts as I nod at Roy. “As of last night, the best decision I ever made was asking her to be my wife.”

“No shit?” he guffaws as Joan lights up beside him with a gasp of joy. “Congratulations are in order, then. Your old man would be real damn proud of you, son.”

My smile doesn’t fade as it normally would at the mention of my father. In fact, it even brightens a bit. “Yeah,” I say softly. “I think he would be.”

They see me off with respective waves and a request for a wedding invitation before curving around the corner, arms linked tight.

I hesitate for a moment, feet glued to the curb. The same curb I’d ride along on my bicycle with Emma, and fetch runaway basketballs at sunset, and make snow angels in the dead of winter. Our initials are still carved into the sidewalk after we found two sticks and dragged them through the wet cement as leaves fluttered from the maple trees and left intricate little foliage designs behind.

Memories ignite, dousing me in warmth instead of heartache. I inhale a deep breath and let it out. Let it go. I don’t let *her* go, but I let the pain go.

There’s no room for it any longer.

Tossing the basketball into the air a few times, I dribble it down the street

as I make my way back to Lucy, who's bent over trimming a rose bush.

"The open house went well," I say, setting the ball down in the grass. "Your agent thinks we'll have a few offers coming in by tonight."

She pops up, garden shears in hand. Long, brown hair catches on a breeze, and she smooths it back from her face, tucking it behind both ears. A smile blooms, her dress tickling her ankle boots. "I'm ready," she breathes out, shoulders straight. "I'm ready to say goodbye." Lucy spins around to drink in the little ranch house made of honey bricks and timeless memories, then turns back to me with misty eyes. "I'm finally ready to—"

"Did I miss it? Am I late?"

An unfamiliar voice rings out from behind me, and I twist in place, watching as a young woman races down the sidewalk, out of breath. Her dark brown ponytail swings from side to side as she slows to a stop at the edge of the driveway.

And I lose a breath.

I lose all my breath.

I can't breathe.

"Did I miss the open house?" she wonders, worried gaze panning from me, to Lucy, to the house. Then back to me.

I blink at her, speechless.

Freckles on her nose. Crooked grin. Jade green eyes that remind me of orchid stems and endless summers.

The woman catches her breath, clears her throat. "Um, sorry," she laughs with a touch of nerves. "This is weird. I live with my parents a few streets down." She pops a thumb over her shoulder. "This house...it's always called to me. Something about it, you know? When I saw it come on the market at the same time I was looking to buy my first place..." She trails off, shifting her attention over my shoulder.

I turn slowly and look behind me, discovering Lucy with tears in her eyes, lips parted as she sees the same thing I see.

She looks like Emma.

She looks exactly how I imagined Emma would look all these years later.

"Uh..." I find my voice, facing forward. "Yeah. Right. We, uh, had the open house, but..."

Her face falls, shoulders deflating with disappointment.

"But there's no contract," Lucy's words crack. She moves in beside me and reaches for my hand, squeezing. "We'd love to consider your offer."

The woman bites her lip, eyes flaring with a glimmer of hope. “Gosh. Okay, wow. I’ll text my agent.” Smiling wide, she extends a hand toward us. “I’m Brianna.”

We each take her hand, a slow-motion shake.

“Cal.”

“Lucy.”

Her grin brightens. “It’s so nice to meet you. Sorry if I’m being creepy, I just...” Green eyes settle on the house as she lets out an enchanted sigh. “This feels like the perfect starter home.”

“It’s a great house,” Lucy nods, doing a remarkable job of keeping it together. The tears don’t fall, the smile doesn’t wane. “Cal grew up here, and I lived in the raised ranch next door. We were childhood friends until we both moved away,” she explains. “I actually bought it last year...right before Cal and I reconnected. Now it’s time to let it go again.”

“Oh, wow. That sounds like quite the story.”

Lucy laughs a little. “It is. One for the books.”

“Cool beans,” Brianna chirps, nodding with enthusiasm. Her eyes pan over to the little ranch, round and glowing. Twinkling like fireflies. “Anyway...I didn’t mean to freak you out. I should get going. I have an offer to put together.”

We both nod simultaneously, wordless, hands holding tight.

Brianna sighs again, a buoyant exhale, and gives her ponytail a tug. “This feels right,” she nods, inching backward down the sidewalk. Then she lifts her hand with a quick wave and adds, “This feels like a new beginning.”

We watch her jog away, disappearing around the corner.

Our fingers lace together.

Lucy looks up at me, and I look at her.

And we say nothing. Not a word, not a single reference. I let go of her hand and palm the back of my neck, eyes trailing to the sidewalk for a beat before glancing down at the idle basketball in the grass. Moving toward it, I lean over and scoop it back up.

Lucy stares at me, her expression whimsical.

A smile tips my lips. “Make the shot and I’ll take you inside, strip you bare, and worship the hell out of you.”

Grin stretched wide and wicked, I throw her the ball.

She hesitates, slides her teeth along her bottom lip, and sends me a glittering smile before saying, “Deal.”

She tosses it toward the hoop, sneakers lifting off the ground.

*Miss.*

Another epic miss.

And then I charge at her, pick her up by the thighs and sling her over my shoulder as she laughs, squealing with chaotic joy that shoots straight to my heart.

I worship her anyway.

## EPILOGUE

12/25/28

"New Beginnings"

Hi! Sorry I haven't written in a while, but life has been so busy lately.

Cadence turned four last month...FOUR! She's the spitting image of her father, looking more like him every day. She even has the same scowl when she's crabby. She asked for a basketball for her birthday, so that's what she got—neon pink. Then Santa brought her a miniature basketball hoop that we set up in the basement, and she burst into happy little tears.

I guess she takes after me in some ways.

Both of our mothers stayed late, helping us clean up the living room while munching on banana bread and leftover cookies by the fireplace. This Christmas felt extra magical somehow. I played a few holiday songs on my guitar, while Cal sat behind Emma's old piano, and Cadence sang adorably off-key while the dogs howled their harmonies.

Perfection.

Mr. Perkins has settled right into the family. The sweet old

cat is staying young thanks to Cricket and her endless energy. Lemon and Kiki are slowing down a bit, but age has not stolen an ounce of their playfulness. We're thinking about bringing another dog into the family soon, because why not? There is always room for more :)

Cal has been helping out at the sanctuary a lot lately in between his shifts at the shop, getting us ready for our grand reopening. Did I tell you we've added a little coffee nook and a stage for live music events? I can't believe my vision is being brought to life. Vera loved the idea, and we've spent the last six months building on a new addition and getting the word out there.

Oh! Alyssa and Dante came by for a surprise holiday visit today, announcing their engagement. Shock was my reaction. Shock and awe, followed by tears of joy. I hugged her so hard, we both almost toppled over the Christmas tree. I never saw Alyssa settling down, but I suppose love has a way of sneaking up on us and disrupting all of our carefully laid plans.

I can't think of a better kind of disruption.

Anyway, I'll wrap this up now. Cadence is waving me over to the kitchen table as Pinky the panda bear sits beside her. She's inhaling spoonfuls of cereal with chocolate milk as a late night snack with her daddy. Two peas in a pod. Cal is giving me eyes, too. I know that look all too well. I'm pretty sure my birthday is about to end on a very good note ;-)

I promise to write again soon.

For now...

There are adventures to be had.



*Toodles,  
Lucy*



**THE END**

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading Lucy and Cal's story!

I wanted to take a moment to share the *real* senior pet sanctuary that inspired Forever Young. It's called [Young At Heart Senior Pet Adoptions](https://www.adoptaseniorpet.com/). In 2007, I was fortunate enough to cross paths with a handful of wonderful individuals who volunteered their time to finding foster homes for senior dogs and cats. My job in pet care, at the time, worked closely with Young At Heart, and I eventually became a foster mom myself, bringing a few elderly pups into our home. Walden—depicted in my novel called *The Wrong Heart*—was one of many very special animals we were blessed to know and love.

I believe in this cause so much, and I hope my animal-loving heart shined through Lucy and her passion for rescuing senior animals.

Feel free to take a moment to read up on this amazing organization!

*From their website: In September 2019, Young at Heart opened Chicagoland's first adoption center and sanctuary for senior dogs and cats. This safe haven is our homestead; a place where more dogs and cats get a second chance at a loving home, a place where age is just a number, and a place where the care and comfort of those with greyer muzzles and stiffer joints than their younger counterparts come first and foremost. A place where all senior pets can find their happily ever after.*

Website: <https://www.adoptaseniorpet.com/>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Jake Hartmann, I love you. Thank you for these gorgeous covers, which may just be my favorite ones yet. Thank you for formatting this two-book beast (more than once), for giving me hours and hours to write, for keeping me focused and productive, and for always telling me to breathe in those moments when I never thought I'd finish this thing. You're my everything.

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Thank you, readers, bloggers, friends, and peers. This community has changed my life. Thank you for reading my words, sharing my work, and loving my characters and the crazy worlds I create. You make me want to keep creating. All the hugs, all the love.

Thank you, Mama, for being my light in the dark, even though you're no longer here. I see you in fireflies, I feel you in songs.

You are never far.

# PLAYLIST

*Listen to the playlist [HERE](#)*

- “A Lot of Things” — Rosi Golan
- “Don’t Swallow the Cap” — The National
- “Time Ago” — Black Lab
- “In This Life” — Delta Goodrem
- “Inside These Lines” — Trent Dabbs
- “Heart on Fire” — Scars On 45
- “Breathe (2AM)” — Anna Nalick
- “I Get My Beat” — Richard Ashcroft
- “Thunder Clatter” — Wild Cub
- “Can’t Go Back” — Rosi Golan
- “Desert Days” — Elenowen
- “If I Die Young” — The Band Perry
- “Ready to Start” — Arcade Fire
- “Give Me Something” — Scars On 45
- “You’re My Home” — Joshua Radin
- “Mine Again” — Black Lab
- “Run Away to Mars” — TALK
- “Over My Head (Cable Car)” — The Fray
- “Break” — Gin Blossoms
- “Can’t Get It Right” — Matthew Perryman Jones
- “Something in the Orange” — Zach Bryan
- “I Need My Girl” — The National
- “Apocalypse” — Cigarettes After Sex
- “Eleanor Rigby” — The Beatles
- “Here With Me” — d4vd
- “I Will Follow You into the Dark” — Daniela Andrade

## CONNECT

Feel free to join my reader's group:

[Queen of Harts: Jennifer Hartmann's Reader Group](#)

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[www.jenniferhartmannauthor.com](http://www.jenniferhartmannauthor.com)

## MORE FROM JENNIFER

### THE DUET SERIES — ARIA & CODA

When the lead singer of his rock band starts falling for a pretty waitress, Noah will do whatever it takes to make sure she doesn't get in the way of their dreams.

But it would be easier if that waitress didn't accidentally spill her darkest secrets to him one night, triggering a profound connection neither of them saw coming.



### CLAWS AND FEATHERS

Small town cop, Cooper, is intrigued by the mysterious new girl who walks into his father's bar, but the last thing he expects is for her to go missing that same night.

Finding Abby is just the beginning. The only way to truly save her is to unravel her secrets—a task that proves to be more challenging than he could ever anticipate.



## STILL BEATING

***#1 Amazon Bestseller in three categories!***

When Cora leaves her sister's birthday party, she doesn't expect to wake up in shackles in a madman's basement.

To make matters worse, her arch nemesis and ultimate thorn in her side, Dean, shares the space in his own set of chains. The two people who always thought they'd end up killing each other must now work together if they want to survive.



## LOTUS

To the rest of the world, he was the little boy who went missing on the Fourth of July.

To Sydney, he was everything.  
Twenty-two years later, he's back.  
This is Oliver Lynch's story...  
*This is their story.*



## THE WRONG HEART

***\*\*Audie Awards Romance Finalist 2021!\*\****

When my husband died, he left my broken heart behind.

He left another heart behind, too—his.

I know it's wrong. I shouldn't be contacting the recipient of my husband's heart. I don't even expect him to reply...

But there's a desperate, twisted part of me that hopes he will.

No names.

No personal details.

Just a conversation.

The only thing I have left of my husband is inside him.



### THE THORNS REMAIN

*Vengeance.*

Hiding deep within the shadows of human nature, it smolders... simmers...

Waits.

The day I discovered the wrongs committed against me, vengeance clawed its way right through me.

In the end, I never expected things to be worse than when it all began.

I never expected the wreckage left in my wake.

I never expected *her*.



### ENTROPY

*Surviving Monday might be the biggest accomplishment of their lives.*

By 9:03 A.M. Monday, bank manager Indie Chase thinks her day can't get worse.

She's wrong.

In a matter of moments, that day becomes the stuff of nightmares when she's caught in a robbery with retired hockey player, Dax Reed.

It's going to take trust.

It's going to take strength.

It might even take ... *each other*.



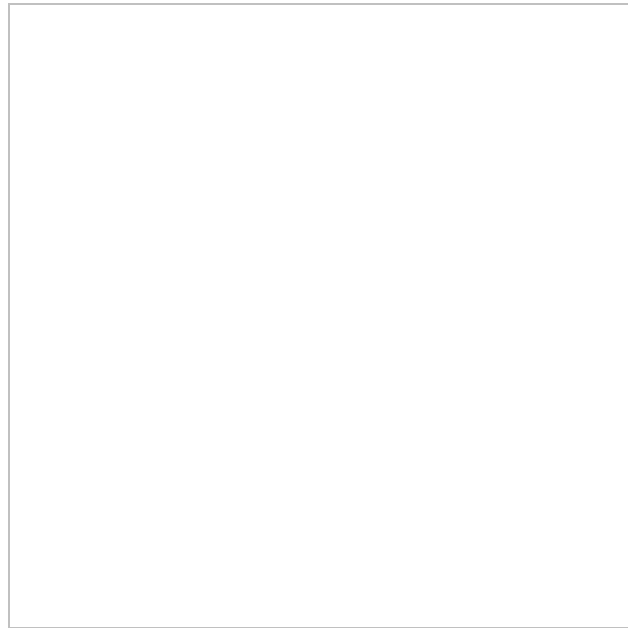


## JUNE FIRST

Want to know what happens to a man who barely claws his way out of a tragedy, only to fall right into the arms of the one girl in the world he can never have?

Another tragedy, that's what.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennifer Hartmann resides in northern Illinois with her devoted husband and three children. When she is not writing angsty love stories, she is likely thinking about writing them. She enjoys sunsets (because mornings are hard), bike riding, traveling to eternally warm places, bingeing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reruns, and that time of day when coffee gets replaced by wine. She is excellent at making puns and finding inappropriate humor in mundane situations. She loves tacos. She also really, really wants to pet your dog. *Xoxo.*