

A SWEET ROM-COM CINDERELLA RETELLING

Cinder LUNA



MARIE SOLEIL

Cinder LUNA

MARIE SOLEIL

1

ONCE
UPON A
ROMCOM
BOOK 1

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*To Chickaletta,
You truly were the best chicken.*

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chapter one

LUNA



Be brave, *Luna*.

This is it. I can't believe I'm actually on the train, waiting for it to start moving so I can head to my new home. I hide my anxiety behind a smile, taking in all the passengers who are filing in and finding their seats on the train. But on the inside? I'm shaking like a leaf that knows autumn is coming.

This might not be a big deal for other twenty-five-year-old women, but I've lived in my hometown of Canyon Cove, California my entire life, and moving a hundred and fifty miles away to the tiny town of Brookhaven is monumental.

I keep repeating my older sister's words in my mind to calm me down. She just dropped me off at the train station an hour ago, squeezing me into a big hug—well, as big as her pregnant belly would allow—and saying she was proud of me for taking this leap since I'm typically a big chicken.

Her words, not mine.

Then she pulled back, held my shoulders in her hands, and said, "You have a heart of gold. Don't be afraid to take some chances and really live." She held my chin in her hand, looked me square in the eyes, and said, "Be brave, Luna."

I take a deep breath and try to relax into my seat where I'll be perched for the next three hours, but the poor baby next to me won't stop crying and his mom looks like she's about to shed a few tears herself. I turn to smile at her, hoping she knows that his crying doesn't bother me.

“I’m so sorry,” the mother says in a shaky voice. “He’s refusing his naps, and it’s been really difficult lately.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I reply, touching her arm gently. Something about comforting others always has a calming effect on me. “I have two younger sisters, and one of them was extremely fussy as a baby. I completely understand.”

“My husband is up in first class,” she continues, like she can’t stop now that she’s started talking. “There weren’t enough seats left in business class for both of us, but we need to get up to Silver Lake City for his aunt’s funeral.” She bounces the baby in her lap, temporarily giving us a break from his cries. “I know it looks bad, him being up in first class while I’m stuck here with the baby, but I figured the people in first class would get even *more* annoyed by his crying, you know? And my husband offered to take Finn and sit back here, but he’s so clingy right now, he won’t go with anyone besides me.” She inhales a shaky breath, and tears form in her eyes. “Sorry for all the backstory. I’m so exhausted. I don’t normally ramble like this to strangers.”

Poor thing. My heart goes out to her. “It’s completely fine. I’m so sorry you’re dealing with this right now.” She might think this is a weird offer, but it’s the only way I know I can help. I hold out my hands. “Would you like me to try to hold him? Even just to give you a break? My little sisters gave me a lot of experience.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen. “I don’t know if it will work. Like I said, he’s super clingy.” She looks down at him, assessing her options. “I guess it’s worth a try.” She hands him over, and he’s a hefty little boy of about five months.

He sobs in my arms, but I’m not deterred. My youngest sister was a terror as a baby, born when I was fourteen years old, and I learned a lot about soothing fussy babies. “Hey there, Finn,” I say softly. His weight is a lot for someone as small as me, only five-foot-three. But I stand from my seat, holding him on my hip, and start walking him down the aisle. Thankfully, the train hasn’t started moving yet, so I can walk without fear of falling over. He calms down, his breaths uneven, but at least he isn’t screaming anymore. “Do you see

that tree?" I ask, pointing out the window. He looks out the window, then grabs my finger and starts wiggling it around. I smile at the little adorable bundle. He has the longest eyelashes I've ever seen. Why do boys always get the good lashes?

He lets go of my finger and starts rubbing his eye. Bingo. "Your mama said you don't want to take a nap, but you look pretty sleepy to me." I adjust him so he's resting on my chest and start doing squats. My dad always claimed those were the secret to putting any baby to sleep. I might look crazy to the other passengers, but it's worth it if I can get Finn to rest for a few minutes.

Sure enough, two minutes later, his eyes flutter shut. His lashes fan across his cheeks; his breathing is slow and even. I absolutely love the feeling of putting a baby to sleep.

I stop my squats and slowly rock him back and forth, getting a few grateful smiles from the other passengers. As much as some people don't want to admit it, a crying baby puts even the most patient person on edge. I walk back to my seat and see that a man is sitting there, his arm around Finn's mother's shoulders and speaking to her in a soothing voice. I stop in the aisle and they both turn to look at me, their mouths dropping open when they realize Finn is asleep.

"What...how..." The woman can't even complete a sentence.

"Deep knee bends," I respond with a smile. "It was my dad's special trick."

She nods knowingly. "With three daughters, I'm sure he knows a lot."

"Four, actually. I have an older sister, too."

Her mouth opens into an O shape. "I can't even imagine more than one."

The man, who I assume is Finn's father, stands with his arms out, and we perform a very tricky transfer. But I got Finn into such a deep sleep, he doesn't even stir as his father bounces him a couple times.

“Thank you,” the mother says, shaking her head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you did that for us.”

I shrug. “It wasn’t a problem.”

Finn’s father looks down at the baby, then back at me. “Are you here with anyone?”

I shake my head.

“Go take my seat in first class.”

Is he joking? His face looks completely serious, but there’s no way he really means it. “Oh, no, I couldn’t. You must have paid a fortune for that.” Despite my protests, my heart flutters in my chest with the excitement of possibility.

“It’s fine,” the woman says, waving her hand at me. “You’ve done me a huge favor. And this way, we can sit together. Please.”

I open my mouth, then shut it again. I don’t even know what to say. Before I can accept or refuse again, Finn’s father waves at the attendant, a woman who’s walking toward us from the back of the train. “I’d like to trade seats with this young woman here,” he says.

“Oh, sure. If you’re both in agreement.” She looks at me to confirm, and all I can do is nod. Is this really happening? “Wonderful. Let me see both of your tickets and we’ll make the switch.”

I can’t believe it. This kind of stuff *never* happens to me. We show her our tickets, and she tells me to follow her to the first class area. I grab my heavy backpack from the floor in front of my original seat. “Thank you both so, so much!”

“No problem,” the father says. “Thank you for helping with Finn.”

I smile widely and follow the attendant down the aisle and through the curtain to first class. The carpets are lush and royal blue; the seats look velvety soft and incredibly comfortable, and I swear even the air smells fresher.

This. Is. Awesome.

“Here’s your seat. You’ll be sitting by the window. The aisle seat is taken by someone else.”

I shake my head. “Thank you so much.”

“I saw what you did for that family with the baby. You deserve it.” She pats me on the shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” I repeat. I scoot into my spot, dropping my backpack and settling into the luxurious seat. My family would love to hear about this. I pull out my phone to send them a message and notice a few missed notifications. Those must have come through while I was holding Finn.

The first is a text message from my best friend, Madeleine.

I’m so excited to see you! And I know this is a huge change for you. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to have your help to plan my wedding. My mom saw her doctor yesterday, and her arthritis is just getting worse and worse, so she won’t be able to come with me for a lot of appointments. You’re a lifesaver. Mason and I will be at the train station in three hours to pick you up.

My heart warms at her message, the reminder of why I’m doing this. Moving to the town of Brookhaven, which Madeleine describes as a fairy-tale land, is mostly for her. She moved up there a year ago and fell head over heels for her boss, bakery owner Mason Bond. Their wedding will be about five months from now, in January of next year, and she asked me to come to help plan the wedding. She made some compelling arguments. According to her, I wasn’t living my life to the fullest at home. I told myself that my family relied on me, but it was just an excuse. I moved in two years ago to help them after a terrible car accident left my dad paralyzed from the waist down, but now he can walk again. And my youngest sister is now eleven, able to help around the house and take some of the burden.

Madeleine then informed me that her mother, who had her later in life, was suffering from severe arthritis, and she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to help much with the appointments and

planning of her wedding. At that point, it became less about me and more about her. My friend needed me.

So I packed my things, including my giant laptop that I use to play video games—a gift from my older sister and her husband when I graduated college—and booked a train ticket up to Silver Lake City, the nearest train stop to Brookhaven.

I send Madeleine a few silly emojis, the ones with heart eyes and party streamers, and say:

Can't wait to see you!

I remember the other notification I had—an alert from Discord, the app I use to chat with my gaming buddies. It's MidKnight, my best friend of them all.

Game tonight?

I twist my lips in disappointment as I type out my response.

Can't. Today's kind of crazy. Rain check?

I avoid sharing too much personal information with my online friends, including the fact that I'm moving today. People can be pretty creepy. Because of that, I don't even let online friends know that I'm female. The stories I've heard from fellow girl gamers make my stomach turn in knots, and I'd rather avoid any of those disgusting situations.

MidKnight seems different, though, despite the fact that we've only ever typed messages to each other. I'm not sure how to explain it. But he's always respectful when he talks about women, especially his younger sister, and he never uses bad language or gets angry in the chats. He's by far my favorite friend to play with.

He sends back a bunch of angry faced emojis, then a laughing face so I know he isn't actually upset. Not that I would have expected him to really be angry.

I remember why I pulled out my phone in the first place and snap a quick selfie. Then I send a text to the Jones family chat, made up of my parents and three sisters.

I got upgraded to first class—for free! Things are looking good!

Hazel writes back immediately.

HAZEL

Get it, girl!

Katy, the eleven-year-old, writes from her iPad.

KATY

Do they have hot chocolate?

I write back:

Katy, it's August.

KATY

You're right. A milkshake, then.

Mom chimes in and says:

MOM

I'm so proud of you.

I'm grateful for her understanding that this is such a big deal for me. My family is the most loving support system I could have ever asked for. I'm focused on my phone when I feel my neighbor getting into the seat next to me. I turn my

head and glance at the man who will be sitting next to me for the journey.

And then I look again and stare.

Oh, my biscuits.

chapter two

LUNA



Am I dreaming? I must be dreaming.

Because sitting next to me is the most handsome man I've EVER seen in my entire life. His hair is so dark brown it nearly looks black, and it swoops over his forehead like Superman's. His eyes are deep ocean blue, and I get the feeling a girl could drown in them.

Yikes. This is bad.

And have I mentioned his physique? Holy smokes. Broad shoulders with a chest and arms that I want wrapped around me. He's wearing a light blue business shirt and navy slacks that bring out the blue in his eyes even more.

"Hello, there," he says.

Oh, lord. Does he have the slightest hint of a British accent?

I. Am. Melting.

I try to respond, but my tongue feels stuck in my throat, so I sound like a drowning duck instead.

Smooth, Luna. Real smooth.

"I thought I had a different neighbor for this ride," he continues, filling my awkward silence.

I swallow hard and find my voice. "He offered to switch seats with me so he could sit with his wife and baby."

He furrows his brow at me. "That wasn't your baby?"

Oh. He saw me back there? I shake my head. “No. I’ve actually never met them. I just offered to help with the baby, and thankfully, he fell asleep.”

The side of his mouth lifts in a grin. “That was very kind of you.”

I shrug a shoulder. “It wasn’t a big deal. I was happy to help.”

“So, you have experience with kids?”

I’m a little taken aback at all his interest in me. I don’t normally get this much attention. “Yeah, I helped a lot when my youngest sister was born. I spent a lot of time putting her to sleep.”

“That’s great.” He holds my gaze for another moment, and sparks seem to fly between us. Maybe it’s just me. I haven’t been dating much lately, since most guys put me in the friend zone and see me as “one of the guys.” Ah, the perils of being a female gamer.

The train pulls forward, forcing us to break eye contact. I glance out the window, inhaling a deep breath to calm my nerves. This is it. I’m officially on my way to my new life. There’s no turning back now.

He clears his throat. “So, are you going home or leaving it?”

“Both, I guess?” I reply, turning back to look at him. “I’m moving to Brookhaven. But my home is in Canyon Cove.”

“What brought on the move?” he asks.

“My best friend lives in Brookhaven, and she’s getting married in January. She asked me to move up there to help plan her wedding.”

He smiles. “That’s kind of you. Your job is remote, I’m assuming?”

Truthfully? I’m unemployed. I’ve done a few freelance animation jobs, but finding a full-time position has been really difficult. So I keep my answer vague. “Mm-hm. What about you?”

He tilts his head and furrows his brow.

“Going home or leaving it?” I clarify.

“Ah.” He nods. “Going home. I live in Silver Lake City, next to Brookhaven.” He bumps me with his shoulder. “We’re neighbors.”

I can’t help the flush that rises from my chest and into my cheeks. “Oh,” I manage to squeak out, turning my face to the window to hide my blush. My older, very pregnant sister Ivy would laugh at my voice right now. She always says I sound like a fairy princess with my high-pitched voice. Add in my nerves, and now I sound like a mouse.

He’s quiet for a minute, and I figure we’re done with our small talk. Which is fine with me. He’s already carried out more conversation than was necessary for a standard neighbor. Not that I’d *mind* talking to him more. But today is already a day I’ll never forget—moving out of my parent’s house, being upgraded to first-class, sitting next to the most gorgeous man I’ve ever beheld, who also happens to be considerate and kind.

The perfect man is literally sitting next to me. Any time I think of today, I know I’ll smile.

I settle into my seat, and I’m about to pull out my phone to pass the time when his voice sounds next to me. “Coffee or tea?”

I turn to face him. “Hmm?”

“Do you prefer coffee or tea?”

I blink at him a few times. Is he really just striking up random conversation? I gave him a way out. He could have pulled out his computer or phone or whatever he uses to pass the time.

But no. He’s asking another question.

Why?

Don’t question it, Luna. “Um, coffee,” I say, tucking my hair behind my ear. “But with a lot of creamer. You?”

“Tea.” He smiles and shrugs. “But that’s probably because of my British upbringing.”

“I noticed you have a bit of an accent,” I say.

“Yes. We moved here when I was about ten. I mostly pass for American, but sometimes the accent slips through.”

“I like it,” I say before I can catch myself. My eyes widen, and I press my lips together tightly.

A slow smile spreads across his face. “Thank you,” he says softly. “What about you? Where is your family from?”

“Oh, nowhere exciting. We’re just typical Americans, your average mix of European backgrounds. A little Irish, German, Scottish...” I shrug. “My dad is supposedly part Native American, though, so that’s pretty cool.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Does he look like you?”

I shake my head. “He has blond hair and blue eyes. I take after my mom—brown hair and eyes.” I shrug. “A little boring.”

“No,” he says under his breath. His eyes don’t leave mine, like he can’t look away. “Not boring at all.”

I inhale sharply and dart my eyes down to my hands. The intensity of his gaze is overwhelming, but at the same time, fills me with warmth I never knew possible.

“Did you grow up in Canyon Cove?” he asks.

I look back at him and nod. “Born and raised. I love it.”

“It was my first time visiting,” he says. “Although I was there more for business than pleasure. What’s your favorite part about it?”

I twist my lips to the side, trying to decide. “Probably the beach. I love being that close to the ocean. That’s the one thing I’m a little worried about missing when I live in Brookhaven.”

“It’s not too far from the ocean. Maybe forty-five minutes.”

I tilt my head from side to side. “True. Did you end up going to the beach when you were in Canyon Cove? I wonder if we were there at the same time.”

“No, unfortunately. I wish I could have. But I only arrived two days ago, and I’ve been in meetings this whole time. I’ll have to visit another time so I can try out the beach.” He pauses. “Maybe sometime you could show me around.”

Oh, my. My heart is racing in my chest. “That would be nice,” I say, proud of myself for how relatively normal my voice sounds.

“So, what do you do for fun?” he asks.

Shoot. Not my favorite question to answer when meeting someone new.

Here’s the thing. I love playing video games. And telling that to people can elicit all kinds of reactions. For a sophisticated man sitting in first-class on a train, I’m pretty sure he won’t think my video game hobby—which I’m hoping to turn into a career, if I can find the right job in gaming animation—is something to admire.

My stomach sinks as I think of how to answer. But I’m saved by a loud noise to our right. We turn to see an elderly woman across the aisle who was reaching for her bag and knocked its contents everywhere.

I start to stand, planning to help, but he beats me to it. “Here ma’am, let me help,” he says, gently guiding her back to her seat and kneeling on the ground, picking up all her belongings.

“Well, aren’t you a prince?” she says, looking adoringly down at him.

No kidding.

chapter three

HENRY



I resettle into my seat after helping the elderly woman with her bags. My neighbor is typing on her phone, a small smile on her face. I take a moment to observe her.

Earlier, I saw her rocking the baby to sleep in the back of the train. I noticed her striking beauty, but I assumed the baby was hers and didn't linger in my attention. Now that I know she was just helping out of the goodness of her heart, I'm attracted to more than just her looks. Her heart is pure, and her genuine kindness overflows in her speech and mannerisms. I can't believe the fortune that led to her sitting next to me. It may sound overeager and impulsive, but I feel a connection to her I haven't had with anyone in years. I want nothing more than to be next to her and learn more about her.

She must feel my attention on her, and she turns to face me. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude."

"You're not rude," I say. "You're not under any obligation to talk to me."

Still, she locks her phone and puts it away. "You seemed to have a pleasant conversation with that woman. Is she all right?"

I nod. "She just wanted to talk to someone. Her husband passed a year ago, and this is her first time traveling alone. But she seemed very grateful for my help."

She smiles gently at me. I'm struck again by this brunette beauty with rich, brown eyes and a heart-stopping smile. "I'm glad you helped her. Your mother must have taught you well."

I give her a half-smile, remembering my mother. “She did. But she passed a few years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She places a gentle hand on my forearm. I can tell she’s not trying to be forward. She just genuinely cares and sympathizes. “Would you like to tell me about her?”

I blink at her, overwhelmed by her compassion. I’m not sure when anyone has ever had this kind of response when I inform them of my mother’s passing.

Would I like to tell her about my mother? Something about her expression makes me say, “Yes. I would.”

And so, I tell her about my mother, about her enduring love for my father, and her unfailing devotion to her children. I tell her about her love for the ocean and piano and roses, which she passed on to each of us in different ways. And the woman hangs on my every word, smiling when appropriate, her eyes even tearing up when I tell her about her passing. At some point, her hand drifts from my forearm to my hand. And it just feels...right.

“She sounds like a lovely woman,” she says, gathering herself. “Thank you for telling me about her. Sorry for my reaction. I can get emotional talking about families.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I say, stroking the top of her hand with my thumb. Instead of being put off by her reaction, my heart warms even more toward her and her empathy. “What about you? What’s your family like?”

What is it about this woman that makes me want to share about myself and know everything about her? I feel like we’ve known each other for a lifetime when we’ve only been together for a little over an hour.

“My family is wonderful. My parents have a healthy, loving, incredible relationship. And my sisters are extremely supportive and kind, as well. But I tend to fade into the background. My older sister is...vivacious. She’s the life of the party. Bubbly, sarcastic, fun to be around. She’s extremely

caring, too. I love her so much. But no one notices me when she's around."

"I find that hard to believe," I say, giving her hand a squeeze.

She blushes, her cheeks turning bright red, and I think I want to make her blush forever.



WE TALK for another few minutes about her family, and then the attendant comes by to take our food and drink orders. She is so excited to be sitting in first-class and getting to enjoy a meal. These are the kinds of things I can take for granted, having grown up in such an affluent family. The sparkle in her eyes is contagious.

As we eat, the conversation slows to a stop, but it isn't awkward. If anything, it is unusually comfortable. Sitting in silence with someone has never felt so right.

After eating, I figure I should get some work done, since that was my original plan for this train ride and we only have half an hour left. I have a very important meeting to attend as soon as I get back to Silver Lake City, updating the board on my meeting with King Taylor Investments in Canyon Cove. I'm about to pull my laptop out of my bag when I feel a weight settle on my shoulder.

She's fallen asleep, resting her head on me.

Just shake her off. You're supposed to be working, I scold myself. I gently move my arm, but her lashes don't even flutter. So I let her rest for the last few minutes of the ride, soaking in the experience of having her this close to me.

All too soon, the train pulls into Silver Lake City station, and a voice announces our stop. For a split moment, I consider letting her sleep, just so I can have more time with her. But, of course, that's absurd. She and I both need to get off here, and I'm not about to inconvenience her day for my own selfish desires.

“Hey,” I whisper. But she doesn’t stir. I try wiggling my arm a bit, hoping the movement will alert her. Still nothing. I take my hand and gently run it down her arm, reveling for a moment in the softness of her skin.

Her eyes slowly blink open, the dreamy bliss fading into recognition. Once she realizes where she is and what she’s doing, she sits upright and runs her thumb across her bottom lip.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurts. “I can’t believe I just fell asleep on your shoulder.” Her cheeks are bright red, and any residual sleepiness has completely disappeared.

“It’s not a problem,” I say, hopefully reassuring her. Because it truly wasn’t a problem.

Well, maybe it was. Now that I know how perfectly she nestles against me, I don’t think I’ll be able to forget.

The voice on the speaker repeats the train has reached Silver Lake City station.

“Oh! This is our stop.” She looks at me, her big brown eyes blinking. Then she opens her mouth to say something, but shuts it. I want to know what she’s thinking, because I’m thinking that I don’t want this to be the end of our conversation.

Desperately.

But she doesn’t speak, just gathers her backpack into her lap. I realize she’s waiting for me to stand first, so I scramble out of my seat into the aisle, pulling my laptop bag with me.

I can feel her presence following me off the train. All the while, I’m wondering how I can ask for her number or somehow see her again. This can’t be just a onetime meeting. There’s no way.

As soon as we exit the train and stand in the summer sun, I stop abruptly and turn around. Apparently, it was a little too quick for her because she bumps into me. Hard.

“Whoa!” she exclaims and falls backward.

Instinctively, I grasp her waist, steadying her on her feet. Maybe I pull her close to me. Okay, fine. I do. Her face fills with surprise, her brown eyes wide open and her pink lips parted. Now that she's standing, I realize how petite she is, barely coming up to my shoulder, and I'm sure I could lift her with the least amount of effort. Her body molds right up against mine, and our heavy breaths mix with each other's—hers from nearly falling, mine from the sheer proximity of our faces.

But I don't back away, and neither does she. If anything, we seem drawn even closer to each other by some force we can't control.

Kiss her.

What? Where did that voice come from? It sounds an awful lot like my Aunt Agatha. And she's a little crazy, so I wouldn't be surprised that my insane inner voice is modeled after her.

But maybe it's not so crazy, after all. Because seconds have passed, and she's not pulling away. I search her eyes for permission, and as if she knows exactly what I'm thinking, she leans in a fraction of an inch toward me.

That's all the indication I need. I close the gap between us, pressing my lips softly against hers. It's a gentle kiss, but I soak in the moment, breathing her in and feeling her body relax into mine. She reciprocates, her hands moving from my chest to the back of my neck, and then—

“Mr. Stone?” A voice from my right interrupts my thoughts. My driver, Charles, is here.

What timing.

I break the kiss, looking down at her. Her eyes flutter open, as if emerging from a dream. That's how I feel, as well.

But every dream has to end. Keeping a loose hold on her waist, I turn to look at Charles. “Hello, Charles. Thank you for picking me up.”

He smirks playfully at me. “We need to leave if you're going to be punctual for your meeting.”

Normally, I'm thankful for his obsession with punctuality and timing, but right now, I'm annoyed. "Thank you. I'll be just another moment."

He hesitates, then takes a few steps away from me to give me some privacy. His eyes dart between me and her under his bushy gray eyebrows, and an amused smile fills his face. Charles has known me for years, and he must be shocked to see me in this position. I'm not known for kissing women I barely know after being on a train with them.

I look back down at her. "I...I have to leave. I wish I could stay longer."

A small smile plays on her lips. "Go," she says, but her voice is kind and her eyes are full of joy. "You're sweet to want to stay. Besides, my friends will be here soon to pick me up."

All I want is to stay here with her longer, kissing her and talking to her and just *being* with her. But the meeting I have is critical, and I need to focus.

"My aunt lives in Brookhaven. I'll come visit at some point soon and maybe we'll see each other." I lean down and kiss her cheek, lingering for a moment. "Thank you for the most memorable train ride I've ever had," I whisper in her ear.

I pull back, and she blinks up at me, smiling. "Thank you as well."

I finally release her and take a step away. With a wave, she turns and walks in the other direction. I hand my bags to Charles and take a moment to steal one last glance at her, but she's gone.

And I realize one important thing.

I never found out her name.

chapter four

LUNA



I gaze out the window from the backseat of Mason’s car, vaguely registering Madeleine’s voice chattering in the background. My mind isn’t here—it’s wondering if I’ll see *him* again. I touch the tips of my fingers to my mouth, remembering how it felt when his lips brushed mine. That kiss was straight out of a movie. Tingles down my spine, heart beating out of my chest, a moment I wanted to be lost in forever.

I kissed a stranger. I don’t even know his name. For all I know, he could be a serial killer.

I just kissed a serial killer!

I slow my breathing, forcing myself to calm down and stop panicking. He’s not a serial killer. Of course not. Otherwise, he would’ve tried to lure me to his lair. No, he just let me go and said goodbye. He even had a driver who was rushing him to a meeting.

So if he isn’t a serial killer, all I want is to see him again.

But how?

“Luna?” Madeleine snaps me from my stupor.

“Hmm?” I ask.

She turns around in her seat to get a good look at me. Her blonde hair is neatly curled over her shoulders, and her brows are furrowed over her bright blue eyes. She repeats herself. “I asked how the ride was.”

“Oh! It was...” I think for a moment to capture the right words. I feel a small smile spread across my lips. “It was great.”

“Let me guess. You played video games the whole time. No, wait! The person next to you was in dire straits, and you listened compassionately for three hours to their problems.”

I snort a laugh. “No, and no.”

“Really? If you weren’t gaming, what were you doing?”

Having the best conversation of my life. But to Madeleine, I say, “I actually got upgraded to first class.”

“Ooh!” she squeals. “How was that? I’ve always wanted to travel first class.” She nudges Mason with her arm. “Maybe if we travel with your parents, they’ll splurge for us, too.”

He glances over at her for a second, his floppy brown hair moving with the gesture. His parents are extremely well off, but they’re also extremely generous. In fact, they’re the financial backers for Mason’s bakery, but they’re not pushy or forceful about it. At least, that’s what Madeleine says.

Mason puts his attention back on the road. “I wasn’t going to tell you just yet, but...” He pauses.

Her jaw drops. “Well, now you HAVE to tell me. You can’t leave off on a cliffhanger like that.”

“My parents’ wedding gift to us is our honeymoon trip.”

Madeleine gasps and covers her mouth with her hands.

Mason continues. “And, yes, they’re including first class plane tickets.”

Madeleine’s screech could stop traffic. But as a hardworking baker who brought herself up from nothing, she deserves the world. I couldn’t be happier for her.

“That’s amazing, you guys! Congrats!” I say.

Madeleine sighs. “I can’t wait.” She turns to me. “But back to you. First class was exciting, I’m sure, but there’s more to the story you’re not telling me.”

I twist my lips to the side of my mouth, contemplating how much I want to share. But this is my best friend. What do I have to lose?

“So, in first class, I sat next to someone.”

Madeleine blinks at me, gesturing with her hand to go on.

“He was—”

“HE?!” Madeleine interrupts.

I sigh. “Yes, he. And HE was...pretty amazing.”

“Oh, girl,” she says, exchanging a glance with Mason. “You gotta spill.”

I try to analyze Mason’s expression in the rearview mirror. I don’t want to annoy him when he came all the way to drive me from the train station. “I’m sorry, Mason. Is this annoying to you?”

He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Not at all. She gets to unleash all her girliness on you instead of me. Let it all out.”

I chuckle. “Sounds good.” Now that I have his permission, I sigh dreamily. “I don’t know. He’s gorgeous, for starters. He could be a movie star. But it wasn’t just that. He was kind and considerate; he asked my thoughts on things and really listened. And then I fell asleep on his shoulder. And when we had to leave...” My cheeks flush as I remember this. “He kissed me.”

“What?!” Madeleine’s mouth forms an O shape. “Oh, my. Luna. This is huge. When’s the last time you even dated someone?”

“It’s...been a while,” I admit.

Madeleine tilts her head, her eyes sympathetic. She knows all about my breakup with Chad, the trust-fund-baby-jerk who dumped me two years ago when I moved back home to help my parents because I wasn’t “ambitious” enough. I won’t lie—his betrayal left a mark.

But I still feel like I should've known better. I've never met a Chad who was a decent person.

"Did he get your number?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I don't even know his name. He said his aunt lives in Brookhaven and we might run into each other again."

Mason hums. Apparently he wasn't just zoning out on our conversation. "What does he look like? Brookhaven is tiny. I bet I know who his aunt is."

How do I describe him? Superman incarnate? "He's tall, and he has dark, wavy hair and blue eyes. And he kind of has a British accent? He was on his way to a business meeting. Oh, and I think his driver called him Mr. Stone."

Mason huffs a laugh. "Why am I not surprised? You *would* fall in love with Henry Stone."

I gasp. "I'm not in *love* with him!"

He looks back at me in the rearview mirror, a glint in his eyes. "I'm just teasing. But I'm not surprised, that's all."

"Who is this?" Madeleine asks. "I'm still a newbie around here."

"He's Agatha Stone's nephew," he replies. "His family owns Stone Technologies. He has an older brother, but he's off being a famous movie star, so I don't think that's who you met. They have another younger brother, Peter, who's traveling the world. And then there's their youngest sister, Lily. She's barely eighteen. I think Henry is next in line to own the company. It was supposed to be his older brother, but he bailed a few years ago for Hollywood."

It figures. Of course he's some super successful, rich guy. My heart sinks a little, putting together exactly how far off our life situations are. Here I am, mostly unemployed with random side gigs, when he's about to inherit the world's largest tech company. I mean, I knew he must be well off since he was in first class without being offered a free ticket, but this is light-years away from me.

Mason's mention of Hollywood strikes up another image, an actor with dark blond hair and the same striking blue eyes who must be his older brother. "*Adam Stone?*" I ask, realizing why Henry's features seemed so familiar. My dad and I went to see his latest movie, a superhero action flick, last weekend.

"Yep." Mason looks over his shoulder to change lanes. "He left here about five years ago to pursue his acting career, and you see how well he's done. But there was a lot of drama with the family when that happened. His dad had been planning on passing the company to him, prepping him his whole life, and then he up and left."

Goodness. A wealthy businessman with a movie star brother. Yeah, there's no chance any kind of love connection would happen between us.

"How do you know all of this?" I ask.

"Agatha loves my macarons," he says, winking at Madeleine.

She rolls her eyes. "Not true. She likes mine better." She turns to face me, her voice dropping to a faux whisper. "And Mason loves his reality TV. This is basically the Trophy Wives in real life."

"Hey!" he exclaims.

I smirk at their banter. I've only met Mason once in person, and seeing the love behind their teasing warms my heart.

When Madeleine moved to Brookhaven last year to help her elderly parents, she called me complaining about her overbearing boss (aka Mason), who was obsessed with the reality show, the True Trophy Wives of Orange County, set in my hometown of Canyon Cove. We both thought it was hilarious, especially because we knew those Trophy Wives personally. In fact, while Madeleine lived in Canyon Cove, she worked at the bakery that made Ethan and Thea Taylor's wedding cake, and he is the son of one of the "True Trophy Wives." And my older sister, Ivy, was a bridesmaid in their wedding. She said it was one of the most lavish events she'd

ever attended. Not only are Ivy and Thea close friends, Ivy's husband, Scott King, co-founded King Taylor Investments with Ethan. So even though Mason acted like Madeleine annoyed him, he loved peppering her with questions about what the Trophy Wives were *really* like.

It didn't take long, though, for Madeleine and Mason to fall head over heels in love. When they got engaged, she called and asked me to come help plan her wedding, convincing me I was due for an adventure.

I think she was right.

I take in our surroundings, the busy freeway transitioning into quiet roads lined with small, cottage-like houses. Each home has bright flowers decorating the front yard, and some have picket fences, while others have stone paths leading to the front door. It is, in a word, quaint.

"You weren't kidding about fairy-tale land," I murmur.

"Right?" Madeleine spins again in her seat and sighs. "I absolutely love it here."

I can see why. It feels picture-perfect and serene. I half-expect Little Red Riding Hood to come skipping out of one of these charming houses with a basket full of goodies for her grandmother.

She points off to the right. "My parents don't live too far from here. So we'll get you all settled in before Mason and I head out."

"Head out?" I repeat.

Madeleine smacks her forehead. "Did I forget to tell you? Mason's parents are back from their vacation in the Maldives, and they're taking us and my parents out for dinner tonight. And my mom says she feels well enough to go." She reaches out and grabs my hand. "Unless you need me tonight. We can tell them no. Or I can ask if you can come, too."

"No, no, I'll be fine." I don't want to say this out loud, but I'm actually looking forward to a quiet night in. Maybe I can message MidKnight and see if he can still play tonight. It

would be a welcome distraction from the excitement of the day.

“As long as you’re okay with it,” Madeleine says.

I smile. “I promise. Not a problem.” I pull out my phone and send a Discord message to MidKnight.

Change of plans. You still up to play tonight?

chapter five

HENRY



Change of plans. You still up to play tonight?

I smile at the Discord message from my buddy, ClockStriker. I was disappointed when he originally said he couldn't play tonight, especially because I knew I'd need to blow off some steam after this meeting. Whether it's a success or a flat-out failure, an evening of gaming will be exactly what I need.

Sounds like a plan

I lock my phone and walk into the conference room of Stone Technologies, where my father and his executive board are waiting for my presentation. Thankfully, I finalized the presentation while Charles drove from the train station to the company offices. While I was in a bit of a rush, I know it's well done. It still took a few minutes for me to shake off the daze from kissing the woman on the train. I feel like there's going to be two portions of my life, separated by that train ride. I won't be able to get her out of my head.

"Henry, my boy!" When he sees me, my father stands and walks across the room from his position at the head of the conference table to shake my hand and give me a fatherly hug.

I may not have always been the obvious choice for taking over the company, being the second-born and all. Still, my father was never lacking in affection for his four children. If anything, Adam received the harshest critiques and criticism, all in the name of grooming him for the position of CEO of

Stone Technologies. After that fell apart, timed impeccably with the loss of my mother, my father turned all of his attention to me, with a little less of a critical eye.

“We’re looking forward to your presentation,” he says, looking up at me. I’m still not sure where my brothers and I inherited our height, since my father stands at a mere five-foot-eight and my mother was a petite five-foot-four. My sister, Lily, is the only one who’s short, like our mother.

Like the woman from the train.

But despite my father’s height (or lack thereof), his demeanor has always engendered respect from his peers.

“Thank you, Father,” I reply. I glance around the room at his fellow executives, eight other men who have watched me grow up from a young age to the man I am now. Will they respect me the way they respect my father? I can only hope.

I set my laptop down on the table and hook it up to the cable, projecting my presentation on the screen. I’ve known for the last few days that this was going to be a hard sell. But in order to become the CEO of Stone Technologies, I need to take us into the future—whether they like it or not.

Taking in a deep breath, I begin. “Good afternoon, everyone. I’d like to introduce you to my concept for the future of Stone Technologies—Stone Gaming.”

I’m met with blinks and blank stares. Regardless, I continue.

“For decades, Stone Technologies has been leading the way in cutting-edge gadgets and hardware. But we’re losing our younger generations.” I put up a chart showing our average customer age for the last thirty years. “As we can see, the average age of customers has risen along with the age of the company, from twenty-five to forty-five. I propose we begin a new division, intending to draw in the younger age group.”

I see the skepticism in their eyes, but I prepared for this. “I know what you’re thinking. ‘Video games are a waste of time. They encourage lethargic behavior.’ But that’s not the popular

perception of video games today. They are part of mainstream culture for our younger generations. Whether they're playing games on their phones while waiting for an appointment or blowing off steam after work on their PC, gaming is part of the lives of most people under the age of thirty." I put up a different slide. "According to Newzoo, there are currently 3.22 billion gamers worldwide, and the market is continuing to increase. A study from 2008 found that gamers earn, on average, \$25,000 per year more than non-gamer households." I put up another graphic. "And, as discussed in a 2013 article by the American Psychological Association, there are many benefits to gaming: the ability to work through negative emotions in a safe context; satisfaction and pride in achieving goals; and with the increasing social aspect of online gaming, a sense of community and the ability to socialize with others outside of one's gender, race, and social standing." I look at the board members sitting around the table. "Most likely you know and love someone who is a gamer, as well."

A throat clears in the back of the room. Stephen, our Chief Financial Officer, who is in his mid-fifties, raises his hand. "I actually play StarCraft. It's a great way to blow off some steam."

Perfect. Another point in my favor. "Thanks for sharing, Stephen. StarCraft has always been one of my favorite games."

The mood around the table seems to shift. Some members of the board nod, others seem to be more contemplative but less openly antagonistic.

"However," I continue, "even though I personally believe in the benefit of Stone Gaming, I do not want to make this fall upon the financial responsibility of Stone Technologies. For this reason, I am seeking personal investments to fund my initial foray into gaming. And this was the purpose of my recent travel. While in Canyon Cove, I met with Ethan Taylor and Scott King from King Taylor Investments, who found the concept promising enough to sign a contract for an initial investment." I put up a slide with the amount invested, letting myself grin when I hear the gasps from the board. "Yes, it is a

generous investment. As it turns out, Ethan is a gamer himself, and Scott's wife's family is, as well. But I realize this investment presents a weighty responsibility on my shoulders. So I pledge to do my part to ensure the success of Stone Gaming."

The board members applaud politely, and I see my father smiling proudly from his seat at the head of the table. He's been unsure about the concept of Stone Gaming, which is why I initially suggested finding my own investments. But with the support of the board, he doesn't have any other reasons to worry.

Besides my potential failure.

But that won't happen.

"Are there any questions?" I ask.

Richard, the Chief Operating Officer, raises his hand. "What will the initial project be?"

"That, uh, is undecided at this time," I stammer. Truthfully, I have high hopes for one particular project, but I'm not sure if it will be ready in time. And I'm not in a position to show my hand quite yet. "But I intend to make sure the image of Stone Technologies maintains a family-friendly atmosphere. So that means no gore, shooting, violence, or sexual content. It will be a game that the entire family can play. And once the project is finalized, we'll kick off the celebrations with a grand opening ball for Stone Gaming, which will include a preview of a demo version of that game."

A few heads nod around the room.

"Anything else?" I ask.

No one raises their hand, but the general mood in the room is pleasant and optimistic. My father beams in his seat.

"Thank you all so much for your time and attention. I look forward to working with you all on this new division of Stone Technologies." I pack up my laptop and exit the room, an enormous weight lifted off my shoulders.

But another weight settles in my chest, as I realize how much is now riding on this project. And I hold all the cards in my hand.

After work, I arrive home at my apartment in Silver Lake City. The floor-to-ceiling windows have an incredible view of Silver Lake, down in the valley below the mountain of my residence. The sun is setting behind the mountains opposite my home, streaking the sky in shades of pink and orange.

I stand in front of the windows enjoying the view, and for some reason, I think of my neighbor earlier today. I wish she were here to enjoy this with me. Something tells me she would love this view as well. I can already imagine her body leaning into mine, my arm around her waist, leaning down to kiss her lips again...

Get a grip, Henry. I'm being ridiculous. We shared three hours and a single kiss, and I'm acting like she's my soulmate.

Who knows? She might be.

I need to quiet this ridiculous voice that sounds like Aunt Agatha in my head. Living alone must be getting to me. I'll admit, I'm a bit...lonely.

After my mother passed, my siblings all took it in different ways. Adam left us all for Hollywood. Peter rejected any adult responsibilities and has been traveling the world. Lily threw herself into her piano studies, one thing that always brought my mother comfort and solace, especially in her pain-filled last days.

And I filled the roles that were left empty. Oldest brother, heir to the company, responsible, mature...the list goes on and on.

But one thing helps combat that loneliness—gaming. Especially with ClockStriker.

After neatly hanging my suit jacket and removing my tie, I undo the top button of my shirt and head into my office, then settle into my gaming chair with a large exhale. This room and this chair feel like home.

ClockStriker and I are supposed to play later tonight, but I still have time to work on my private project. Something no one knows about.

My own video game.

It's fairly simple, an underwater race between two teams of three. Both are attempting to make it to the center of the arena first, where a gem awaits the winner. Typically, the games I play with ClockStriker are for the computer; my game, though, is made for consoles, like Xbox. As much as I enjoy playing with a keyboard, there's something more satisfying about using a gaming controller.

I have a small team of freelancers that I've hired, but it's my brainchild, and at the end of the day, I have overall control. The coding happens on my computer, which is where I get caught up for the next couple of hours, even forgetting to eat. I'm so lost in my programming that I don't notice the time until I get a notification on my phone. It's ClockStriker messaging me on Discord.

Ready to play?

It's already seven thirty, and I realize now that my stomach is grumbling.

Give me ten minutes to grab some food.

I heat a meal from my fridge and settle in front of the computer, turning on Heroes of the Kingdom. As soon as I'm logged on, ClockStriker invites me to a game.

The chat box opens.

I thought you'd be playing before me. Got caught up coding again?

Fine, I've told one person about my game. ClockStriker.

Yep. I think I'm almost done.

I hesitate before typing the next part. I want him to try it out with me, but I'm extremely self-conscious about my creation. But as my mother used to say, nothing good happens from staying in your corner.

Do you want to test it out sometime?

Sure, sounds fun.

It's a console game though. Do you have an Xbox?
And a headset? This way we can do voice chat.

The chat box stays empty for a long time.

I wonder what was wrong with those questions.

chapter six

LUNA



Oh no.

Until now, it's been no problem keeping my female identity a secret from MidKnight. We've been fine communicating through chat boxes while playing Heroes of the Kingdom, and he never asked to voice chat before.

But now that he wants to play on something other than a PC, text chat won't be an option.

And there's no hiding the fact that I'm female from my voice. Hazel, one of my younger sisters, loves to compare my voice to Snow White in the classic cartoon.

Well, there's one easy solution to this problem, and it's not a lie. I finally type out my response.

I actually don't have an Xbox, just my laptop.

Bummer. Well, if you get a hold of one, I'd love to try it out together so you can tell me your thoughts.

Phew. Just dodged that bullet. And right on time since we get added into a game together.

Madeleine had warned me that her parents' place was tiny. I guess I didn't realize exactly HOW tiny until I got here. There's a room for her parents, a room for her, and...a little corner with a curtain for me. All four of us will share one bathroom.

It's even more crowded than growing up in a house with my parents and three sisters.

But it's free. And temporary. I'm grateful that they're giving me a place to stay until I find an actual job and make enough money to get a place on my own. Maybe I should be scouring the internet for remote jobs that will utilize my degree in animation, but playing for an hour or two with MidKnight sounds way more fun. Besides, I get free Wi-Fi, too. Can't complain about that.

A few hours later, Madeleine's voice rings through the apartment. "Luna, we're back!"

I check my watch—ten thirty. But I'm in the middle of a game, so I just call back, "Hey!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Madeleine peek around my curtain. "Oh, she's gaming," she announces to her parents.

It shouldn't bother me, but I'm always a little embarrassed when people know that I've been playing games for hours. Maybe they think it's a waste of time. But those same people who look down on my gaming will binge watch an entire series on Netflix, right? So I know I shouldn't feel ashamed, but it's hard when there's still such a stigma around gaming. MidKnight and I have discussed how annoying it is. He says he's some accomplished businessman in real life...although you can never be sure with people you've never met in person.

After all, I'm not one to speak. He thinks I'm a guy.

I quickly type a private chat to MK, trying to not lose too many seconds in the game.

Hey, this will be my last game. My roommate just came home.

Roommate? I thought you lived at home with your parents?

Yeah, I just moved out. New situation.

Gotcha. Well, let's win this one, so we end on a good note.

I smile and keep playing. Madeleine stands and watches, like she would a few years ago when she lived in Canyon Cove. This game is pretty easy to understand, even if you don't know all the intricacies of power-ups and bonuses. It's kind of like capture the flag with forest creatures, and two teams of five characters trying to make it across the map before the other team does the same.

Five minutes later, the game is over, and we won. I type GG into the all chat, which means "Good Game" and is the polite thing to do, whether you win or lose. Sometimes people on the losing team will type things like BG, meaning "Bad Game." I'm never sure if that refers to their team or frustration with the way the winning team played. And the exceptionally frustrated players will type "Report xxx," throwing one of their teammates under the bus. They hope everyone will report that user to the game developers, who manage banning or muting unruly players.

It's all so complicated. I try to err on the side of compassion and understanding. Everyone has bad nights. I know I have.

I type a quick goodbye to MidKnight, then turn and find that Madeleine and her parents are all watching me. Talk about embarrassment.

"Hey, everyone," I say slowly.

"You click the mouse so fast," Mrs. Sweet says, leaning on her cane.

"And your typing is fast too," Mr. Sweet adds.

I press my lips together and nod. Seeing them right in front of me, their graying hair and hunched stances, reminds me they're a generation older than my parents since they had Madeleine in their later years of marriage. It's hard for me to defend my gaming to them.

I can't tell if the comment on my fast typing is a compliment, but I take it that way. "I learned to type really young. The first computer game my dad bought me was Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing."

"I remember that game," Madeleine says. "But I don't type that fast."

I shrug. "It's come in handy." I'm not sure if I should be a little offended that they were reading my chat, but there wasn't anything too incriminating there.

I shut my laptop. "So, how was dinner?"

"Oh, it was so nice," Mrs. Sweet says. "Mason's parents are so generous. They showed us pictures from their latest trip, which was beautiful." She rubs Madeleine's arm, her fingers curled in from her arthritis. "You're going to have the best time on your honeymoon."

Madeleine beams. "I can't wait."

"That's great," I say. "I'm so glad you had a good time."

Madeleine squeezes my shoulder. "And tomorrow we're going wedding dress shopping! I'm so glad you'll be here for that."

"Me, too!" I can't wait to see my best friend trying on wedding dresses. She's going to look perfect.



WE SPEND my first morning in Brookhaven exploring the town. I've never seen anything like it. Mason handled the cookie shop while Madeleine and I strolled through the cobblestone plaza, perusing the bookstore and antique shop. No cars are allowed in the central area, so everyone walks from store to store, carrying baskets for their baked goods, flowers, and produce. In the center of the plaza is a huge fountain.

"Let's grab sandwiches at the bread shop and eat at the fountain," Madeleine says, tugging me by the arm.

We walk into the bread shop, the smell of yeast and cinnamon wafting through the air. A curvaceous woman with

blonde curls smiles at us from behind the counter. “Hello, Madeleine! Who’s this with you?”

“This is my friend, Luna,” Madeleine says. “Luna, this is Suzette. She and her husband own the bread shop.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, holding out my hand.

“Oh, my dear, we don’t shake hands here.” Suzette gets out from behind the counter and wraps me in a big, bosomy hug. *Oh, my.* “Welcome to our town!”

“Thanks,” I say, my voice muffled.

She releases me and takes an assessing look at my face. “You’re a pretty little thing. Are you single?”

“Um, yes?” I’m not sure why I say it like a question, but I don’t understand where this is heading. I guess I did kiss Henry Stone yesterday, but that doesn’t count.

“Suzette...” Madeleine warns.

Suzette waves her hand at Madeleine. “Mind if I take a picture of you for the website?” she asks me.

“What website?” I ask.

“Suzette! Leave her alone!” Madeleine playfully pushes her back to the counter. “We just wanted to order a couple of sandwiches for lunch.”

“Fine, fine.” She winks at me and takes our order, then disappears to the kitchen to make the sandwiches.

“What was that all about?” I ask.

Madeleine rolls her eyes. “Suzette runs the gossip section of the Brookhaven Buzz. It’s our community website. She takes her job *very* seriously.”

“Ah.” I don’t really want to be part of any gossip, which tells me to keep Suzette at a distance, even though she seems like a fun time.

“Here you are!” Suzette says proudly, emerging with our sandwiches on a tray.

“Thanks, Suzette,” Madeleine says. “We’ll see you around!”

We eat our sandwiches at the fountain, taking in the families whose kids play in the center and observing the shops. If I’m being completely honest, I keep an eye out for Henry Stone’s aunt Agatha. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since our kiss, and it’s consuming all of my spare thoughts. Hopefully, seeing my best friend trying on wedding gowns will be enough of a distraction.



“UGH, THIS ONE IS TERRIBLE, TOO!” Madeleine sighs at her reflection in the mirror.

Unfortunately, she’s not wrong.

She’s been trying on dresses for over an hour, and for some reason, each dress is just awful. It’s not the fit; Madeleine has an adorable figure, great curves, and she’s much taller than me (although that’s not saying much). But there’s something off about each dress, and none of us can put our finger on it exactly. She’s sophisticated, but she needs a bit of glitz and glamor, and these dresses are not working at all.

Her mom, future mother-in-law, and I sit on chairs behind her, and she stands on a pedestal, analyzing her image in the mirror. The dress is beautiful, but just a simple sheath of white satin.

“I think this one is a bit too...subdued for you,” her mom says.

“Yes. Too understated,” Mason’s mom agrees. “You have a lot of personality, and this doesn’t match you.”

Madeleine meets my eyes in the mirror. “Luna?”

I shrug, hoping she can read the sympathy in my eyes. “I have to agree.”

She groans and runs her hands through her blonde hair. “What am I going to do?”

The wedding consultant who has been helping us, a woman about my mom’s age with her black hair up in a

French twist, clears her throat. “There are plenty of other dresses here to try on—”

Madeleine lifts her hand to cut her off. “I don’t think they’re going to work.”

“Or how about a dress that’s close to what you’re hoping for, and perhaps we can customize it to make it exactly what you want?”

Madeleine shakes her head, and I see tears filling her eyes. She’s not a Bridezilla, and being particular is difficult for her.

An idea pops into my mind. It could work, but I just hope everyone will be on board.

“What about one of Thea’s designs?” I ask.

Madeleine’s wide eyes find mine in the mirror. The consultant gasps out loud. “Thea Taylor? Her dresses run for five times the cost of the one Madeleine is wearing.”

“Luna’s sister, Ivy, is best friends with Thea,” Madeleine explains. “But even so, I can’t afford one of her dresses.”

“Maybe not,” I say, “but would you be open to a sample from last season? I remember one dress she designed that might be perfect, and I can find out if she has an extra somewhere—”

Madeleine’s squeal cuts me off. She rushes off the pedestal and wraps me in a hug. “You’re the best for even thinking about it.” She pulls back and looks me in the eye. “Are you sure? Can you just call her and ask?”

“Of course,” I say. “After all, you helped make her wedding cake.”

“True. And that was an ordeal.”

I snort a laugh. I only saw pictures of the cake, but apparently Thea’s husband, Ethan, had quite a few opinions about the appearance and flavor of the cake. Madeleine complained about him often, but the cake was a huge hit.

“I’ll call her now.” I stand and pull out my phone, dialing Thea’s number. I step away from our little group, finding a

corner of dresses that can be a sound buffer in case the conversation goes south.

“Hey, Luna,” Thea says, her familiar voice instantly making me grin.

“Hey, Thea. Sorry to bother you.”

“Not at all. I’m just sketching. What’s up?”

I fill her in on Madeleine’s situation. “So I was wondering if you have any sample dresses from last season that we could somehow get altered for her.”

Thea hesitates long enough that I worry I’ve overstepped a boundary. I quickly start speaking again. “But if that’s totally out of line, I’m sorry for even asking—”

“Luna, no,” Thea says. “I’m more than happy to help her out. She put up with Ethan’s crazy requests for our cake. But I wouldn’t feel comfortable letting her wear a sample.”

“Oh.” My excitement deflates.

“I’d actually like to make her a custom dress.”

My eyes widen, and I glance over at Madeleine, who’s watching me have this conversation. So much for a sound buffer of wedding dresses. “That’s really sweet of you, but I don’t think Madeleine could afford it.”

“I’ll cover it.”

Now my mouth drops open. “Thea, that’s super generous of you, but—”

“I know how important the right dress is. Plus, she’s an important person to you, and that makes her important to me. I want to do this.” She pauses. “Let me give. It makes me happy.”

“If you insist,” I reply.

“Ethan and Scott are supposed to be in Silver Lake City in a month for some investing event. I’ll come with them and schedule a fitting with Madeleine. In the meantime, give her my number, so we can schedule a Zoom meeting to talk about designs.”

“You’re the best.”

She laughs. “I don’t know about that. But thank you for thinking of me.”

“Always.” I hang up the phone and walk over to Madeleine and the moms, a huge smile on my face. “You will *never* believe what she said.”

chapter seven

HENRY



It's been a week since ClockStriker shot me down and said he can't play my game. Now I'm heading back to the drawing board.

I've considered a few other options. I have some other online friends I game with, but none of them are as skilled as ClockStriker. He's also got a way of framing everything in a positive way, so his feedback on my game probably wouldn't hurt my feelings nearly as much as someone else.

There's also the option to hire someone from a freelance website. But again, I wouldn't trust their opinion.

Who's left? If only my older brother, Adam, were still around or less busy filming movies. He enjoyed gaming, and he'd be honest. Maybe...a little *too* honest. He never shied away from criticism.

Never mind. I'm better off without him.

Peter, my younger brother, is off traveling the world, so he's no help. The last I heard, he was somewhere in Africa with limited internet.

I wonder if the woman from the train plays video games, my inner Aunt Agatha voice says.

Doubtful, I reply to her.

Oh, no. I'm going bonkers.

Not only is it impossible to stop thinking about the woman on the train, remembering our conversations and the way she

felt in my arms and how her lips pressed gently against mine, but now I'm having internal arguments with Aunt Agatha.

And while it would be incredible if the woman from the train were a gamer, it's unlikely. Even though more and more women these days enjoy video games, the chances of my mystery girl being a gamer are pretty slim.

But speaking of female gamers, maybe I'll ask Lily.

I type up a text to her.

Hey baby sis, any chance you have some spare time to help me with a project?

She probably won't respond right away. It's a Wednesday evening, meaning she's probably practicing the piano or doing homework. She really crammed her schedule with her first semester at Silver Lake University, and this is only week two. She's taking some general education classes this semester and perfecting her pieces for her upcoming auditions. Her classical piano training is paying off in a big way.

I don't have many friends outside of my family, aside from people I've met online, like ClockStriker. So yes. I'm lonely. But it's given me the ability to focus on the family business, which has been a welcome distraction.

Lily writes back.

I can help if it's a onetime thing, but I don't have a lot of spare time to dedicate during the semester.

I guess a onetime trial would be better than nothing.

Do you have time tonight?

Sure. I can put my homework off for later. What are we doing?

Playing my video game.

Immediately, my phone rings. "Hey, Lily."

“Hey, Henry,” she says, a teasing tone in her voice. “*Your* video game?”

“Yes. *My* video game.”

“You created it? All on your own?”

“Kind of? I hired a few people to help with technical pieces, like the animation. But otherwise, yes, it’s mine.”

“Awesome. Okay, PC or console?”

“Xbox.”

“Yay! Send me the info and I’ll hop on.” She hangs up, and I send her the private link to the game. A few minutes later, I see her logged into her account, so I make a party and invite her to chat.

“Okay, I can already tell you that you need to change the name,” she says. Her voice is slightly distorted through the headset, as usual, but I can still read her teasing tone. “Underwater Adventure is one of the dumbest things I’ve heard.”

“It’s just a placeholder.” It wasn’t really, but now it is.

“Fill me in on the basics.”

So I do, explaining how to swim, throw bubbles at fish and sharks that get in your way, and the general premise is to reach the center with all three members of your team before the other team gets there first.

“Sounds simple,” Lily says after I’m done with my explanation.

“There are other pieces, too, like power ups and bonuses. But I’ll explain those to you as we play more.”

“All right, enough chitchat. Let’s go!”

I love her enthusiasm, but I have to admit that I’m anxious to hear her opinion. *Anyone’s* opinion. No one has seen this game besides my tiny team of four, and my heart is hammering in my chest like a twelve-year-old boy talking to his crush.

We start the game. Lily and I are on a team with a computer-operated character, and the opposing team of three is all AI. It's pretty amazing that computers are smart enough to act almost as well as actual people. But not completely, which is why I'll need to find at least six people to play together before launch. Where am I going to find them?

Another problem for another day.

Lily and I start our game, and I hear her squeals throughout, which usually means she's having fun. I try to explain power ups and bonuses, helping her time them out and choose the best ones for her character at that point in the game.

We end the game with a loss, but I'm okay with that, because this was her first time and I was busy explaining the mechanics of the game. But now that it's over, and the adrenaline is wearing off, I remember I need her opinion.

"So? What did you think?" I ask.

She hesitates, just long enough that I start to worry.

"That bad, huh?"

"No, no," she says. "I'm trying to figure out how to word it. The gameplay is super fun and satisfying. You're right, it's simple but still has enough added elements to make it exciting. I think it's a perfect family game. But something seems...off. I can't put my finger on it."

"Not just the name?"

"No," she laughs. "Although the name definitely needs work. Something about the graphics? But I can't figure out exactly what it is. I'm sorry I'm not able to help more."

"That's okay." I sigh. "To be honest, that's better feedback than I expected. I was worried the game itself was a dud. But I'll need to find someone who can help me figure out what exactly is wrong."

"What about ClockStriker?"

"Tried that. He doesn't have an Xbox."

“So? You can send him one. It’s not like it would be too expensive for you.”

She has a point. “That’s a great idea. Why didn’t I think of that?” Probably because I’ve been so distracted thinking about the woman from the train, to be honest.

“I’m surprised you didn’t. You’re one of the most generous people I know.”

My heart warms at that. “Thanks, Lily. I’ll message him now.”

“Perfect. I gotta practice. That run in my Chopin ballade is giving me trouble.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out in no time. Thanks for playing tonight.”

She logs off, and I pull off my headset, trying to figure out the best way to approach ClockStriker to offer to pay for a console and headset. I can easily get one shipped to his house, but he seems to value his privacy. Maybe if I just send him a gift code, he’ll have no more excuses.

I quickly pull up the Xbox website on my phone, find the price of a new console and headset, and purchase a gift card for that amount. Then I open the Discord app and send a message to ClockStriker.

I’m desperate for your help with my game. This is a code to buy your own Xbox and headset.

A message comes back a minute later.

You’re kidding. I can’t accept this.

I’m not kidding. And I insist. I need your help.

It’s too much money.

I promise you, it's not. I can afford it. Your help will be well worth the amount of the card.

I see the words "ClockStriker is typing" for far too long. I'm starting to lose hope.

chapter eight

LUNA



This is insane.

I can't accept a gift card for an Xbox and a headset.

Thank goodness he doesn't know I'm a woman. If he did, I'm sure there'd be some unsavory, ulterior motives at play here. At least I know he genuinely just wants my help with his game.

But I can't accept.

Right?

If I take it, I'm going to have this gift hanging over my head. I'll always know there was something I owed him.

But then again, he said I'd be helping *him* with his game. Which is true. I'd be acting like a consultant, which is typically a paid position.

But I'm ignoring the biggest problem of them all.

If I accept a headset and play this game with him over voice chat...

He'll find out that I'm a woman.

And that would change EVERYTHING.

"Who are you messaging?" Madeleine asks, taking my attention from my phone. After a long day of appointments with florists, we're sitting on Mason's couch to unwind. On the TV is an episode of True Trophy Wives of Orange County, featuring the women from my hometown of Canyon Cove, including Thea's mother-in-law, Rhonda Taylor. But it's not

really holding my attention. To be honest, I don't love reality TV, especially when it features people I know in real life. But Mason has a weird obsession with the show, and Madeleine likes to do anything he does.

"It's just MidKnight," I reply.

"Oooh, the mysterious gamer. I wonder if he's hot."

"Ahem," Mason says loudly, pausing the show. "If you'd like to have a conversation, can you at least do it in the kitchen? Gabriella is about to confront Connie about flirting with her husband."

"Sorry, sorry," Madeleine says, ruffling his hair. She stands, and I follow her into the kitchen. Mason's apartment has an open floor plan, so we'll still have to keep our voices down. We sit at the table, and as soon as we see Mason click the show back on, she asks, "So, what's going on with MidKnight? Why are you so pale?"

"I'm always pale."

"Not this bad. You're pasty."

"Thanks." I sigh. "He's working on creating his own video game, and he asked me to help test it out with him. But it's on Xbox."

She quirks a brow. "So?"

"Well, I told him I don't have an Xbox, which is true. So I thought the conversation was closed. But now he bought a gift card and sent me the code so I can get one for free."

"Okay, a little weird. But that's still pretty awesome." She pauses. "Why aren't you happy about that?"

"When we play on the computer, we only communicate through text. But when you're playing on the Xbox, the only way to communicate is through voice. And..." I hesitate for a moment. "He doesn't know I'm a woman."

"Oh, what?!" She sits back, eyes wide. "You haven't told him?"

“No, of course not! Do you know how slimy guys online can be? They write the nastiest things. Sometimes they’re savvy enough to find you in real life and literally harass you from every angle. It’s awful. The few female gamers I know all keep their gender a secret.”

“Huh. I never thought about that.”

I shrug. “So if I play with him on the Xbox, there are two issues. First, I’m accepting a very expensive gift. That seems pretty weird. And second, he’ll find out that I’ve been lying to him this whole time.”

“Back up. *Have* you been lying?”

I bite my lip, trying to think back. “I guess not. I’ve just never *explicitly* said that I’m a girl.”

“Does MidKnight seem like one of the slimy guys?”

I shake my head automatically. “Not at all. He’s super polite and well-mannered. He doesn’t even curse. I think he mentioned something about a younger sister one time, and he seems to really care about her.”

Madeleine nods thoughtfully. “And he’s already bought the gift card?”

Mason suddenly turns to face us. “I think you should go for it.”

“I thought you were watching your show,” Madeleine says with a smirk.

“This conversation is actually interesting.” He pauses the show and joins us at the kitchen table. “Rhonda Taylor has gotten boring ever since she got divorced and Ethan married Thea.”

I smirk. I know Thea had a positive influence on Rhonda in real life, but that doesn’t make for much drama on the show.

“But I do think you should go for it,” he repeats. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll make a love connection.”

I snort. “Doubtful.”

“If he can afford to send you an Xbox with no strings attached, I’m guessing he’s well off.”

I shrug. “He claims he’s some successful businessman. But you never know with people online.”

Madeleine smirks. “I think you’re just holding out for Henry Stone.”

“No way!”

“Oh, good call, Mads,” Mason says, lifting a hand for a high five.

She stands and slaps his hand. “Thank you, thank you.”

I’m insulted by their assumptions about me. “Excuse me, I’m right here.”

“Come on, Luna. You can’t tell me you haven’t been looking for him since you came here.”

“What? No!” I’m not about to admit that she’s right. Yesterday, Madeleine and Mason took their lunch break with me at the Brookhaven Fountain, and again I couldn’t stop looking around for Henry. He claimed his aunt lived here, so he should come by at some point, right? And this town is TINY. If someone was visiting, it would be the talk of all the gossipers, especially Suzette, the bread maker’s wife.

Madeleine waves a hand at me. “You can deny it all you want. But don’t let your feelings for Henry keep you from future happiness.”

“I’m not—” I huff, frustrated. “This situation has nothing to do with Henry. I just don’t want to lose my best gaming friend, especially not after I take a gift from him.”

Mason’s expression softens. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry for teasing you. I actually think there could be something between you and Henry. Agatha raves about him as the sweetest man she’s ever known, and I feel like the two of you would be a good fit.” He runs a hand through his hair. “But you’re right. This is a separate situation. And considering the whole picture, I think you should take this online guy’s offer.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I look down at my phone, take in a deep breath, ready to write a response, and then Madeleine’s watch starts buzzing.

“It’s my mom,” she says, furrowing her brow. She grabs her phone off the couch and picks up the call. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?” She pauses a moment, then clasps her hand over her mouth. “You’re kidding.” She listens again, then asks, “Do you have somewhere to go tonight?”

What in the world is happening?

After a few more exchanges like that, Madeleine hangs up and looks at us. “I have some bad news.”

Mason stands and walks over to Madeleine, wrapping an arm around her waist. “What happened?”

“My parents’ apartment flooded. My dad was grabbing dinner and my mom called him in a panic. He just got home and...it’s really bad.”

I swallow hard. “How bad?”

She presses her lips together. “We can’t stay there. Definitely not tonight, and probably not for a few weeks.”

“Oh, no.” I press my hand on my cheek. “I’m so sorry. Are your parents going to be okay?”

She nods. “They’re fine. They just need to find a place to stay.”

Mason squeezes Madeleine’s waist. “Let me call my parents. They have a spare room, so I’m sure your parents could stay there.”

“Oh, that would be great,” she says, visibly relieved. A moment later, she furrows her brows. “What about us?”

“You and Luna can stay here tonight,” he says. “I’ve just got the one extra room, though.”

Madeleine looks at me. “Are you okay sharing a bed tonight? I have a rule that I won’t stay here overnight alone until we’re married.”

“Of course.” I won’t complain when Mason is offering us a bed. What other choice do I have right now?

We’re all silent for a moment, and my focus shifts from a place to stay...to all my things that are in the apartment. I hate to ask this next question, but I have to know. “My computer?”

Madeleine’s lips twist into a small smile. “Your computer was on the kitchen table. It’s fine.”

I exhale. “I know that seems lame to you, but—”

“No, no,” she says. “I get it. It’s expensive, and it’s your hobby and potential work.”

I nod. At least that’s okay. But piece by piece, the rest of the information sinks in. “My clothes?”

She shakes her head. “Soaked. But I think they can be washed and dried. Just...at a laundromat.”

“Okay.” I guess that’s the bulk of my concerns. But this isn’t a permanent fix—Madeleine and I will both need places to stay from here, and I don’t even have a job to pay for my own place.

“I’m so sorry,” Madeleine says, interrupting my thoughts. “You’ve given up everything to be here with me, and now you don’t have anywhere to live, and—”

“It’s not your fault,” I cut her off. “It’s no one’s fault. I feel awful for your parents. I’m sure they’ve lost things in their home, and moving out will be an enormous burden for them, too.”

“Oh, Luna.” Madeleine lets out a breath. “I still feel terrible. I dragged you out here and now you’re basically homeless.”

“No, no. Don’t feel terrible. It’ll all work out. I know it.” I can’t let her know exactly how awful I feel right now, because I really am feeling physically sick.

Be brave, Luna, I say in my head. My inner voice sounds a lot like my sister Ivy.

“I promise, I’m going to find a place for you,” Madeleine says.



IT’S BEEN three days of living with Mason and Madeleine.

I’m going nuts.

Mason’s parents have taken in Madeleine’s parents, and they said they have room for one more of us, but not both. Madeleine won’t go without me, so we’re both stuck sleeping in a double bed together in Mason’s spare bedroom until I find my own place to stay. Sometimes I’ll sleep on the couch, but both Mason and Madeleine wake up ridiculously early to go to the bakery, so I’m awake at four in the morning with them.

Oh, and did I mention the repairs are going to take at least two *months*? They thought they’d be done in a couple of weeks, but typical of construction and repairs, it’s taking *way* longer than expected.

In a nutshell, life has been...rough.

I spend my days at the coffee shop across the cobblestone road from Cookies & Kisses, trying to find a job in animation. But, as usual, most jobs want someone who already has experience.

“How can I get experience until I have a job?” I mutter to myself.

I alternate the job search with searching for a place to stay. I browse the Brookhaven Buzz, the community webpage, hoping a new apartment will show up every time I refresh. It turns out Suzette somehow snapped a picture of me when I wasn’t looking and posted me to the gossip page, but that’s not my primary concern right now. And, right below that, she added a post about Henry Stone and some big announcement with Stone Technologies that is coming soon.

I spent *way* too long staring at his picture. And then reminiscing about what it was like sitting next to him, waking up on his arm, being held against his firm chest, his lips on mine...

Whew. I need to fan myself.

Focus, Luna. There are bigger issues at hand.

I shake off the dream and switch back to the real estate section of the Brookhaven Buzz website. Not only does my living situation affect me, it affects Madeleine, too. Being the amazing friend she is, she's staying at Mason's with me until I find my own place. Once I'm settled on my own, she can move into Mason's parents' home with her parents. If only I could find *somewhere* to stay, I'd solve everyone's problems. But of course, I can't afford a place to stay until I have a job.

So, needless to say, I'm stuck. I can't keep doing this for much longer. Beyond the tiny bed and lack of sleep, I haven't been able to game at all. I haven't even messaged MidKnight back about the Xbox, because it seems completely pointless right now. He's written to me a few times about playing our usual games, but I don't have a physical space to play in at Mason's apartment.

I lean back in my seat, rubbing my forehead in frustration.

"Hey there," a voice says from behind me. I turn around to find identical faces looking down at me in my seat. Tall, gorgeous, model-looking women around my age—twins, I'm sure. One has deep red hair, the other is a brunette like me, but with matching bob haircuts, ice-blue eyes, dainty noses, and heart-shaped red lips.

"Hi," I say cautiously. I haven't met them yet; I'm sure I'd remember these twins.

"I'm Ana, and this is Drea," says the redhead. She peers at my computer screen. A little intrusive, but I expected people to look over my shoulder at a coffee shop. In fact, there's even an elderly woman wearing a fedora and trench coat openly watching our conversation. Does she think she's a small-town detective? I guess you can't keep any secrets in a small town like this.

Hopefully, she wasn't watching too closely when I was stuck on Henry's picture and daydreaming about him.

“You seem a little frustrated,” Ana continues. “Are you... looking for somewhere to stay?”

“Uh, yes.” I wave a hand, dismissing their concern. “But I’m sure I’ll find a place soon.”

“You’re Madeleine’s friend, right?” Drea asks.

I nod. This town really *is* tiny.

“We’re bakers, like her and Mason,” Ana explains. “But we run the cake shop across the street.” She points out the window at an adorable little store. Frosted cakes line the windows, and a sign at the top reads in sprawling cursive, “Twin Cakes.”

Ah. The elusive twin bakers. Madeleine mentioned something about them on our tour of the town. And I remember when she first moved up to Brookhaven last year, she talked about how Mason’s bakery was her only chance because the twins who owned the cake shop didn’t let anyone on their team.

“That’s adorable,” I comment, deciding to go with the ignorance route. “I noticed some of your creations on the way in. I’ll have to stop by sometime and buy something.”

“Wouldn’t that be great!” Ana beams. “But I’ll do you one better. We actually have a spare room above the bakery that we were hoping to rent out.”

“Really?” This seems a little unexpected, considering what Madeleine has said about them. Still, I can’t help the hope that starts fluttering in my chest. Then reality strikes. “I don’t have a job yet, though. I’m looking, and I have a degree in animation, so I’m not a slacker. But I don’t have money to pay rent.” I glance over at the elderly woman in her detective getup, who still hasn’t looked away. I smile gently at her, hoping to give her a polite hint to mind her own business, but she keeps watching. Oh well.

Drea waves a hand at me, just like I did a minute ago. “That’s not a problem. See, we used to have a cleaner and an assistant, but, uh—”

“We had to let them go,” Ana supplies quickly. “Business has been a little slow, so we weren’t able to pay them both.”

“Right.” Drea nods enthusiastically. “So we were hoping to have someone move in who can help with some of the day-to-day things in the bakery. And in exchange for the work, you could stay in the room for free.”

“No way!” This has got to be the perfect solution. It’s basically a job, PLUS, a place to stay.

“Are you busy right now?” Ana asks. “Do you want to come check it out?”

Suspicion nags at the back of my mind. It seems too good to be true. But I can’t help the excitement I feel, especially after searching for days and finding no leads. “Sure, let’s go!”

“Great!” They wait as I pack up my giant laptop into my backpack, and we leave the coffee shop. I wave at the elderly detective woman on the way out, but her tight lips make me wonder if she knows something I don’t.

chapter nine

LUNA



“Here we go! Home, sweet home.” Ana’s voice echoes through the room.

“Home” is a generous term for this apartment. It’s a dusty, dirty attic with a tiny window. Spiderwebs line every corner of the wooden floors, and a rickety-looking bed with a bare mattress sits against one wall, taking up most of the space of the room. We had to climb the narrowest set of stairs I’ve ever seen to get up here, and the air feels stale.

But I’m desperate. I’ve been searching for days, and nothing has popped up. This is actually a private room... Isn’t that an upgrade from living in the Sweets’ living room, with only a curtain for privacy? It’s *definitely* an upgrade from sharing a double bed with Madeleine and having no space of my own.

“Is there any Wi-Fi?” I ask.

“Yep. We have it for our customers downstairs,” Drea answers brightly.

Okay. That’s another bonus point. It’s probably not high-speed, like I had at home with my parents, but it’s better than nothing.

I walk around the room, slowly taking it in. It’s really not TERRIBLE. It could be worse. If I spent my evenings and weekends deep cleaning, I think I could actually make it... cute.

“How about a washer and dryer?” I ask.

“You can use the one for the bakery,” Ana replies. “You’ll have to carry your laundry up and down the stairs, but it’s a good machine.” Drea nudges her side, but Ana just smiles.

I notice a hole in the corner of the wood floor and feel my heart rise into my throat. “Are there...mice up here?” I squeak out. That would be a deal breaker, no question. I am TERRIFIED of mice.

“No way!” Ana exclaims. “We’re running a bakery downstairs. We’d get shut down immediately if we had any rodents.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. The only friends up here are the spiders, and I can handle that.

“Do you have any sheets or bedding or anything I can use?” I ask.

“Sure. We can get that for you,” Drea says.

I nod again.

“So? Will you take it?” Ana presses. The twins cross their arms over their chests, standing in identical intimidating poses.

Will I? I wish I had more of a choice. But at this point in the search, I think...this has to be it.

“Yes. I’ll take it.”

“Yay!” They uncross their arms and rush toward me, squeezing me in a hug. “This is going to be great! You’ll love it here.”

Ana pulls back first, then Drea follows her lead. “We’ll let you get settled in through the weekend, and Monday you’ll start work in the bakery.”

“If that’s okay with you,” Drea adds, giving Ana a look.

“Sure. Yes. That will be fine. I’ll grab my things and get settled tonight. Thank you so much.”

They beam and turn to leave, saying they’ll be right back with the keys. I take my phone out of my pocket and shoot a text to Madeleine.

I found a place! And I don't have to pay rent! I'll fill you in at lunch.



“YOU’RE MOVING IN WITH WHO?” Madeleine can’t even hide her shock. Mason just unwraps his sandwich, pretending he’s not paying attention, but I now know he loves gossip. I shouldn’t have been so worried about annoying him on the ride home from the train station.

“Ana and Drea,” I repeat, knowing full well she heard me the first time.

“But they never talk to anyone. I can’t believe they approached you at all.”

It *is* a little strange that they came to me out of nowhere with this offer. “Well, I’m not under any obligation to stay. If it turns out to be a real mess, I’ll leave. But for now, it seems like the perfect solution.”

“Oh, Luna. I sure hope so.” She sighs. “Do you need help moving everything in tonight?”

I shake my head. “You’ll be busy moving into Mason’s parents’ place! This solves all our problems. Now you can be with your parents and help them, too. I’ll be fine. All I have is my computer and my clothes.”

She pauses. “I mean...yes, I guess it solves our living problem. But I worry about you, too.”

“I’m fine. Your parents need your help way more than I do. I have some cleaning to do around the apartment, but that shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours. I got this.”

She sighs, resigned. “Okay.”

“Tell me how Cookies & Kisses is doing today.”

And with that, Madeleine and Mason tell me about their upcoming plans for their booth at the Pumpkin Patch festival, happening next weekend. Mason is thrilled to be part of it, especially because he missed a few festivals last year when he

didn't have any help. Madeleine has been so good for him, in more ways than one.

As we're packing up our lunches, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and see a message from MidKnight.

Hey. Game tonight? Sorry if I annoyed you with my friendship.

I laugh at his reference to *The Office*. I feel guilty that I haven't responded to him in nearly a week, but everything has been hectic.

It's all good. Things have been crazy lately, but a game would be great.

Everything okay?

Ya, I just had to find a new living arrangement at the last minute. It worked out, though.

I'm still happy to send you a housewarming gift.

I hesitate. I never gave him a definitive answer; after all, I was a little distracted by becoming homeless. I was leaning toward saying yes, and now that I have my own place with Wi-Fi, maybe it's reasonable to think that this could work. I feel like I know him already, and I'm ALMOST positive he's not a creeper. Just a genuinely good person.

Kind of like Henry Stone.

Ugh, why do I keep thinking about him? I only spent a few hours with him, but the impact he had on me feels like it will last forever.

With shaky fingers, I type out a message.

Is the offer still on the table? I might take you up on it. Now that I have my own place, it could work.

He sends back five smiling emojis.

Here's the code again in case you didn't copy it down. Let me know when it arrives so we can play the game.

My heart races in my chest. Everything is going to change once he hears my voice and knows I'm a girl. But I think I'm ready for it.

Another message comes through.

Thank you. I know you didn't want to accept this gift, but I promise you're doing me a favor by helping me out. I'll explain more when we play, but this is kind of critical for my career.

Well, color me intrigued. And yes, that helps ease my conscience a bit.

But for now, I have work to do if I want to get settled in my new place. I can't play tonight unless I can clear out some of this dust and dirt.

chapter ten

HENRY



“So your revenue is your price times number of items sold, and profit is revenue minus cost.”

Lily sighs at my phrase. “I know, I know.”

“Then why didn’t you write that down?”

She rubs her head in frustration, then blows a long blonde strand of hair out of her face. I’m sure this isn’t how she wants to spend her Sunday afternoon, hanging out at her big brother’s apartment and studying for her test tomorrow, but that’s life. “It’s just a lot of terms to remember.”

“Welcome to the world of business math.” I rub her shoulder in consolation. “But you’re doing great. Business calculus in your first semester of college is pretty impressive.”

“Passing it will be another story,” she mutters.

“You got this. I’ve got all the practical business knowledge, and you’ve already got the math skills. You’ll be fine.”

“And after my final is over, I’ll be able to help you more with your game.”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” I stammer. I haven’t told her yet that ClockStriker finally agreed to use the gift code and buy the equipment needed to try out my game. Not to mention that the timeline is pretty tight, and I need this to be done way before Lily’s finals are over.

“Oh, I see how it is,” she says with a smirk. “You don’t need me anymore, huh? Did ClockStriker finally agree to let you buy him a console?”

“Maybe.”

She sighs. “I guess I can’t complain, since it was my idea, after all. But I can never compete with him. I know you have fun playing with me, but you guys make a better team. I don’t blame you for asking him.”

“I still want you to play it,” I insist. “But no pressure. And by the time your finals are over...it might be too late.”

“Too late for what?”

I swallow hard. I haven’t told anyone this detail yet. “I’m planning on using my game as the launch for Stone Gaming.”

Her mouth drops open.

“Not a full launch,” I say quickly. “Just a soft launch. And if everything goes well, then we’ll move on to alpha and beta testing, and all the PR and live server and—”

“Henry, that’s perfect!” she exclaims, cutting me off. “You should definitely do that!”

I exhale, relieved at her enthusiasm. “You thought the game needed work.”

“Nothing monumental. You’ve got this.”

My chest warms at her confidence in me. There’s nothing like the admiration of my little sister. Even though she’s looking more and more like a woman every day, I still see my baby sister peeking through, with her waist-length blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

“Honestly,” she continues. “You’re brilliant *and* accomplished. I wonder how you’ll ever find a woman who will be good enough for you.”

I nearly choke. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” she says, a gleam in her eyes. “I’m sure that’s why you refuse to date.”

“I don’t refuse to date.” But I can’t help the sweat beading on my forehead at the mention of my love life.

And at the same moment, the image of the woman on the train flashes before my eyes. I still remember the feel of her body pressed up against mine. I can’t count the number of times I’ve woken up with the memory of our kiss. And I can’t begin to express how much I regret not asking for her name.

Lily gasps out loud. “Who is it?”

“Who’s who?” I ask.

“You can’t hide anything from me, big brother. You’ve got this crazy, faraway look in your eyes. I’ve read enough romance novels to know that look when I see it. There’s someone you’re thinking of.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, hoping to hedge her off.

“Uh-uh. Spill.” She puts her elbows on the table, then plops her chin in her hands, looking just like the little five-year-old who would listen intently to my stories about fairy princesses and the princes who would save the day.

“She’s just someone I met on the train back home last week.”

She blinks twice, waiting for me to continue.

“I don’t even know her name. But we spent the entire ride talking...and then she fell asleep on my shoulder...and when we got off the train, someone bumped into her and I caught her and—”

Lily squeals and claps her hands, interrupting my story. Maybe it’s better that she stopped me before I told her about the kiss. “This is straight out of a rom-com! You had a meet-cute!”

“A what cute?”

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t you remember *The Holiday*? That movie with Jude Law, Cameron Diaz, and Kate Winslet?”

“Uh, maybe?”

“You’re impossible.” Lily’s attempts to educate me in the world of romance novels and movies have not gone the way she hoped. I’m more interested in living stories through gaming, while she’d rather get lost in a book or a movie. To each their own. “It’s the first time the main characters meet each other in the story. And that’s EXACTLY what happened to you! Tell me everything. We’re going to find her.”

So I tell her everything I know about her, which isn’t much. “And then she said she was moving to Brookhaven, so ___”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?!” she exclaims. “Did you call Aunt Agatha yet?”

I clear my throat. “No. It feels creepy. And like I’m digging for something that maybe I imagined.”

She fishes in her purse. “If you connected like you say, then she’s thinking about you, too.” She triumphantly produces her cell phone. “I’m calling Aunt Agatha right now. You need to go visit her ASAP.” She pushes a few buttons and holds the phone up to her ear.

“I don’t know, Lily. It seems so—”

“Romantic? Yes, I agree. Hello Aunt Agatha! How are you?” She stands from the table, pushing her chair away with a loud scratching sound, and takes her phone conversation to the other room. And now I’m left wondering when on earth my eighteen-year-old sister took control of my love life.

chapter eleven

LUNA



Three words glow on my phone screen. *Out for delivery.* The Xbox and headset will arrive at Twin Cakes bakery later today.

I've messaged MidKnight, and we have a date set for tonight at eight.

Ack. Not a date. Gotta work on that phrasing. Especially since I don't want him to think I'm some creepy woman who's been catfishing him this whole time.

I REALLY hope he won't think that.

But for now, I have to get down to work. My room is... well, it's clean. It took two full days to clear out the cobwebs and dust, and sleeping was a nightmare with my allergies, but I'm finally in a position where I can at least relax in my room, knowing there aren't a million spiders laying eggs in every corner. And, bonus, Ana and Drea were telling the truth—no mice.

They asked me to come down to the bakery for my first official day of work this Monday morning, and I'm curious about what they have in store. The stairs creak with each step I take until I emerge from the door at the bottom and enter the pink and purple wonderland of Twin Cakes.

"Hey Luna!" Ana greets me brightly. "Thanks for coming down so early."

"No problem," I reply. "I'm an early riser, so seven a.m. isn't too bad."

“Good to know.” She carefully sets some cupcakes in the display case—vanilla cake with perfect white-frosting swirls with hints of blue that make them look like clouds. “Drea is in the back. I think she’s getting the laundry room all ready for you.”

“Great, thanks.” I wave goodbye and head into the kitchen. I haven’t seen the laundry room yet, but I can hear banging through one door and follow the sound.

“Hello?” I slowly open the door and see...

Mountains.

White mountains.

I blink slowly as I try to comprehend my surroundings. “What in the world...”

“Luna! Hey!” Drea emerges from behind one of the mountains, which I’ve finally realized are gigantic piles of towels and rags. “I was just clearing a path for you.”

“What...what is this?”

“It’s our laundry.” Drea’s face reddens. “We’re not very good at keeping up with the dirty laundry at the end of the day. It’s so exhausting, you know? We’re baking and selling, and it gets a little out of control, and by the time we need to do our laundry, we just...throw it in the room.”

“But surely you need clean rags every few days.”

“Yes, well...we’ve just been buying new rags instead of washing the old ones.”

I press my lips together. I can’t decide if I want to laugh or cry. It’s almost comical, these mounds of towels and the task I’m assigned, but this is going to take at LEAST the entire day.

I gather myself and inhale deeply. “So...I guess I’ll get started?” I wade my way through the towels that line the floor, squeezing past Drea to reach the washing machine.

She smiles at me as she leaves the room, and I survey my prison for the next few hours. This is absolutely insane, but I have no choice other than to get started.



“WOW, LUNA, THIS LOOKS AMAZING!” Ana pokes her head in the laundry room around seven that evening.

“Thanks,” I reply. Even *I* can hear how tired my voice sounds. Laundry isn’t usually an all-encompassing task. You can put the clothes in the washer, and you have an hour until they dry, and then you need to fold them, right? But this has taken ALL DAY. The towels are all different colors—some white, some bright red. So before I could really get into a groove, I had to separate them. And that was *after* I had to wade through the ocean of towels to find the laundry detergent and bleach.

And then...the stains. Oh, goodness, the stains. Maybe they weren’t expecting me to do this thorough of a job, but I wanted to do my absolute best. After all, Ana and Drea really saved me when I was stuck in a hard place. So the stains, which have been set in place for weeks—maybe months—took a ton of muscle to clean. I stopped for about thirty minutes at two to eat a quick snack, but other than that, it’s been nonstop work.

At least Ana acknowledges it.

I’m almost done folding a load for tonight. There’s about two more loads left to go, but I figure those can wait until tomorrow.

“Looks like you’re almost done! Can’t wait to have *all* the towels clean tomorrow!” And she leaves the room, closing the door with a bang.

Well, crap. I guess that means I need to stay for another couple of hours.

I know I don’t HAVE to, but...I can manage it. My only plans tonight were gaming with MidKnight. I’m sure he’ll be okay if I’m a little late.

I shoot off a message to him.

Sorry, I’m a little delayed at work. I should be able to play in about two hours.

I feel a tiny sigh of relief, knowing I'm delaying the inevitable. I have no idea what his reaction will be when he finds out that I'm a girl. Maybe I should've said something in our chats before surprising him with my voice. I tried typing a message a few times but couldn't find the words. How exactly do you say, *Hey, FYI, I'm not a guy like you thought!* So instead, I'm being the chicken I always am and waiting until the last possible moment.

I can only hope it's not the end of our friendship.



AFTER FINALLY FINISHING my seemingly endless task of washing, scrubbing, folding, and putting away, I felt a sense of accomplishment. I've always enjoyed cleaning. Living at home with my parents and younger sister, Katy, I took pride in my ability to help keep things clean and tidy. So if these are the kinds of tasks that Ana and Drea want me to do, I guess it'll be okay in the end.

As long as they don't make me work until nine every night.

I took a quick shower, unboxed my Xbox and headset, got hooked up to the Wi-Fi, and used the game code MidKnight sent me to download his game, called Underwater Adventure. I send him a quick Discord message on my phone. *Hey. I'm in.*

Almost immediately, I get a request to join a party from MidKnight.

This is it.

The moment he finds out who I really am.

I considered using a voice modulator to make me sound like a man. It's a method used by a lot of female gamers to completely hide who they are and keep themselves from the disgusting comments and proposals from scumbags. But at this point in our relationship, MidKnight is not just some random player. He's a friend. And hiding my gender from him, now that we've been friends for so long, just feels wrong.

I hit the button to accept the party request.

“ClockStriker? Are you there?”

Holy smokes. His voice is SO sexy. Deep and melodic, it’s like the best podcast I could listen to forever. Just those four words make me want to fall in love.

“Hello?” he repeats.

Shoot. I got a little too mesmerized by his voice and forgot to respond.

“Hey, I’m here.”

A pause. “ClockStriker?”

“Yep. That’s me.” My voice comes out like a squeak. If there was any doubt that my voice was female, I just cast them all aside with this high-pitched princess nonsense.

“You’re...” His voice drifts off, but I know exactly what he’s thinking.

“I’m a woman.”

“Huh.”

“Yep.”

Awkward silence follows. Am I supposed to say something?

I’m not good with long pauses, so I just start talking. “I’m sorry if you were caught off guard. I don’t know if you’re aware how hard it is to be a girl gamer, but it’s safer to just let everyone assume you’re a guy. And I know we’ve gotten pretty close, but there wasn’t really an opportunity for me to be like, ‘Hey, I’m a girl!’ you know? So I just—”

“It’s okay,” he cuts me off.

I breathe a sigh of relief. He’s not upset. It’s going to be all right.

“But...uh...it’s a little late now,” he continues. “And I think it would be better if we put this off until tomorrow evening. I know you had to work late—it’s not your fault—but I have to get up early for work in the morning, and it would be better if we did this when we had more time, you know?”

“Uh huh, sure,” I squeak again (darn you, high-pitched voice!).

But I know what’s really happening.

I’m losing MidKnight. My best gaming buddy.

“I’ll...message you in the morning,” he says quickly. “Good night.”

“Night.”

He signs off immediately afterward, and my heart sinks down into my stomach. It was exactly my worst fear come to life.

And now that I’m sitting and thinking about the conversation, I can’t help but notice one tiny detail.

His voice sounded like it had the tiniest hint of a British accent.

chapter twelve

HENRY



I pull off my headset, dropping it on the ground with a thud. I pinch my eyes shut, rubbing my forehead with my hand.

ClockStriker...is a girl?

Or...woman?

Maybe I should've asked how old she was. Oh, my goodness. Maybe she's underage, and I just paid for her to have a free Xbox.

Now I'm panicking.

Out of desperation, I dial the number of the only female I can trust—Lily. I hope I'm not waking her up.

"Henry?" Lily's voice answers after the second ring.

"Hey, I didn't wake you, did I? I know it's a school night."

"No, no. I'm awake. I was..." She hesitates. "I'm awake."

That was strange phrasing. What is she hiding? Never mind, no time for that. "I'm kind of having a crisis. I need your advice."

"I'm all ears." I can imagine her settling into her canopy bed in our family home, only ten minutes from here.

"You know my gaming buddy, ClockStriker?"

"The one you say is the 'perfect complement to your gaming style'? Yeah, I know him."

"Well, HE is a SHE."

There's a moment's pause, and then I hear her giggle. "Seriously? Your best gaming buddy is female? Oh, this is too good!"

"Lily! Focus! She's been lying to me this whole time. I only found out that she's a woman because I finally voice chatted with her tonight, and there was no denying her femininity. I mean, not that she tried to deny it either."

"What did she say when you asked her about it?"

"She gave some excuse about being a female gamer and how it's safer to protect herself from creepy guys."

"She's one hundred percent correct."

"What?" I can't believe Lily is taking her side.

"I don't tell anyone I'm female, either. You know my gamer tag is FireStarter. I kept it generic, just like hers, for that exact reason. Guys online are DISGUSTING." She pauses. "Not you, of course. But most guys. It's so much safer to let them think you're a guy."

"I didn't realize you had to deal with that," I say.

"You know there was a study in 2015 about this?" she says.

I snort a laugh. "No, I did not. But I'm surprised you even remember the year."

"It just showed up on Instagram this week. According to the study, lower-skilled male players were more hostile toward teammates with a female voice but were more submissive to players with a male voice. That only applied to the lower-skilled players, though. If they were actually good at the game, they were really kind to the female players." She pauses. "Maybe that's why you didn't even process it. You're actually a skilled player, so you respect anyone you play with."

"I guess." I pause, my voice softer. "I'm sorry you've had to experience that."

"I can handle it. You've helped me be tough and not take those gross comments seriously. But I really don't blame ClockStriker for keeping her gender a secret."

“Even in our private chat conversations?” I press.

“Even then. Did she ever blatantly lie to you and say she was male?”

“I...I’m not sure.” I’d probably have to go check our Discord chat history, but most likely not. “Fine, but now I’m paranoid about her age. I just bought her that Xbox and headset.”

“Oooh, romantic,” she murmurs.

“Cut it out. What if she’s underage?” *Or even just eighteen like you*, I think, but don’t say out loud.

“Didn’t you say that he—she, I mean—was in college? Or just graduated? And moved away to live in her own place? That doesn’t sound like someone who’s underage.”

“As long as she wasn’t lying about all of that,” I mutter.

“I know you’re caught off guard,” Lily says gently. “This is a lot to take in, especially when you were expecting a buddy to help with your game. But you might be blowing it out of proportion.” She pauses, and I wait for what’s sure to be a zinger. “Besides, if this romance with the girl on the train doesn’t work out, maybe—”

“I’m gonna stop you there,” I say. “There is no way I’m falling in love with some girl online.” I heave a sigh. “But maybe she can still help me with the game.”

“There’s the spirit,” Lily says. “What could it hurt?”

“Uh, I can think of a million different ways that this could go wrong. But I appreciate your enthusiasm.”

“Well, even if this doesn’t work out for a love connection, I finally got confirmation from Aunt Agatha that we can go visit her at Brookhaven this weekend. They’re having the Fall Pumpkin Patch Festival, and she said everyone in the town should be there. So hopefully your mystery train girl shows up, too.” She snorts a laugh. “I wonder what Agatha will be wearing. She said she’s been reading a lot of mystery novels lately.”

I chuckle, thinking about how my aunt goes through phases in her wardrobe based on her current genre of reads. And I won't deny that my already thumping heart, fueled by the discovery that ClockStriker is female, starts beating even faster at the knowledge that I'll possibly see the mystery girl again. I think about her every night, wishing I had finished that conversation in a more hopeful manner.

But I don't want to seem like a love-struck teenager to my sister, so all I say is, "Cool."

She snorts a laugh. I think she knows me too well. "You can pick me up at ten on Saturday. We'll make a day of it."

"You're not too busy?" When I asked her to help with my game, she said she wouldn't have time until the semester was over.

"I had some plans fall through. My day is clear."

Hmm. "Okay. Sounds like a plan."

"So...are you going to message ClockStriker?"

I pause. Lily made some good points, but I still hesitate. "I'm not sure. I'm going to sleep on it and decide in the morning."

Lily sighs. "I just hope you're not counting her out because she's a girl."

"It's not that," I insist. "She's more skilled than ninety percent of the players I encounter online. But I'm not sure I can get over the deception."

"Well, I hope you can. Because I completely understand why she did it, and I actually admire her for being smart. If you won't play with her, I'm going to send her a friend request myself."

"Be my guest." But the thought of having to share ClockStriker with my sister sends a pang of jealousy through me.

Maybe I'm not ready to give up on her, after all.



“HENRY, how is the game development going?” My father says, addressing me two mornings later in yet another board meeting.

“Uh, pretty well. I’m working on ironing out the last kinks before it’s ready for a soft launch.”

“You only have four weeks until the ball. Are you sure you’ll be ready?”

I swallow hard. When I thought I had ClockStriker’s assistance, I was confident I’d finish in time. But now...I’m not so sure.

My entire reputation is riding on this. The board members have been encouraging and kind overall, but there’s hesitation in their expressions. As the next in line for the company, I have so much to prove. If the game is a flop, setting up Stone Gaming for failure, my future could be in shambles.

I think I do need ClockStriker.

Even if he—she—didn’t disclose her identity.

She messaged me yesterday, asking what time we should play. I feel guilty for ignoring her for over twenty-four hours. She’s been a steady friend for the last few years. I’m sure she knows that I’m not completely sold on playing with her. But I finally realize that I need her. At the very least, I need to make a decent attempt before completely writing her off.

“I’m sure.” I infuse as much enthusiasm and confidence into my voice as possible. Apparently it works, because my father simply nods and moves on to the next topic of conversation.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, hiding it under the table like a teenager in high school, and send a Discord message to ClockStriker.

Sorry for the delay. Things have been crazy. Are you free tonight at eight?

chapter thirteen

LUNA



By some miracle, I finished working by seven-thirty last night. For my second day of work, my assignment was to wash the dishes.

Not just a normal amount of dishes.

No, Ana and Drea have been rinsing dishes and putting them under the sink. They're not DIRTY, per se, but they definitely weren't clean. So I spent the entire day scrubbing the old bowls and pans, then keeping up with the current incoming dishes.

I'm not sure how they functioned without me.

Today, Wednesday, is all about getting their paperwork in order. They showed me into their tiny office in the back of the kitchen and mounds of paperwork littering the desk and floors.

But I'm trying not to complain. They offered me a home when I had none, and a way to pay for it until I find a job of my own. Not that I really have time to job hunt while I'm busy from seven in the morning until eight at night. I'm almost too tired to be sad about what happened with MidKnight.

Almost.

Okay, fine. I've been heartbroken since Monday night. I knew he was blowing me off, but I still messaged him Tuesday morning, hoping that he had thought about it and changed his mind.

But today is Wednesday, and it's been radio silence. So now I've got a weird job that takes up every hour of daylight,

a weird home I can barely walk in, and no friends to game with.

I've wondered if I should have used a voice modulator after all. I thought our relationship was solid enough that my gender wouldn't make a difference to him. And, to be honest, if he had found out that I was a girl after using a voice modulator, he probably would have been even MORE upset.

I spent some time after our call thinking about his slight accent, too. Of course, the first person who comes to mind with that same accent is Henry Stone. But I think I'm just imagining connections that aren't there. How ridiculous would that be? Besides, you can't trust anything online. I've mixed up my sisters on the phone so many times. And Henry's not the *only* person in the world with that accent.

I keep trying to convince myself I made the right decision, but...it's hard. I haven't even had time to see Madeleine since I moved in, so life in Brookhaven this week is a little less than idyllic.

Okay, maybe a lot less.

With a sigh, I shuffle the papers on the desk again, assessing if my organization system is working. I guess anything is better than the nothing they were doing before, but I still want to do a good job.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I could use a distraction. Pulling it out, a Discord message shows across the screen.

From MidKnight.

Sorry for the delay. Things have been crazy. Are you free tonight at eight?

A smile slowly spreads across my face.

Yes! Sounds great!

He sends back a thumbs up. I'm so relieved. My friend is back.

A second later, he sends one more message.

Just to check, any other secrets you need to disclose?

He sends an emoji of a face with its tongue sticking out, so I know he's just teasing. I smirk.

Not unless you want to know about my complicated living and financial situation.

He sends back a sad face.

Sorry to hear that. You can vent tonight if you need to. I'm in a meeting now, but we'll chat at eight.

A weight is lifted off my chest, and with renewed enthusiasm, I return to my task. I just need to finish this job so I can be ready to play tonight.



I PULL ON MY HEADSET, my heart racing with excitement. It's eight-fifteen, which isn't too bad for how arduous paper filing turned out. I just finished at seven-thirty, grabbed a quick sandwich from the coffee shop across the way, ate it as fast as I could in my apartment (because no one wants to hear someone eating on the other end of a chat), and logged into the game.

He's already there. Is it my responsibility to say hi first? I haven't played games on a console in so long, just on my computer, and typing "hello" isn't as scary as saying "hello" out loud.

I'm definitely overthinking this.

"Hey, ClockStriker." MidKnight saves me.

"Hey, MidKnight. Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"It's all good. I'm glad you're available now."

"Me, too."

He clears his throat. "You said, uh, that you had a rough day?"

“Yeah.” I pause. “You know I lived at home with my parents, and I just moved. My living situation here got... compromised. So I had to find somewhere new at the last minute. And along with that comes a job where I’m...kind of like a maid?” I laugh sarcastically. “Not exactly the same as video game animation. But it’s all I can manage right now. I’m still trying to figure things out.” I realize I’m rambling out of nervousness and cut myself off.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His voice is kind, a reassurance that he’s still the same friend I’ve had for the last few years.

“Thanks.”

An awkward silence follows.

“So! Ready to play?” he asks.

“Yep!” I squeak. This is SO uncomfortable. But I’m here to play and help him work on this game. So he creates a match for us and gives me some background information.

“It’s an underwater world. Which was a ton of work for my animator, but I feel like it makes such a unique experience.”

“Totally.” It’s something I would have loved to design myself. After all, it’s what I went to school for. Maybe I’ll have some tips for him there.

“So it’s basically like Heroes of the Kingdom, but underwater. And we’re only in groups of three instead of five.”

“You sure you won’t get in trouble for that?” I joke.

He pauses. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

“I’m joking! Heroes is just a knockoff of League, which is a knockoff of DOTA. I’m sure you’re fine.”

He sighs. “I’m a little sensitive about the game. And paranoid. There’s...a lot riding on this.”

I wish I could ask more. He hasn’t really explained why he’s feeling so much pressure about this game, but I’m not asking either. We keep things very surface about our personal

lives. After all, he didn't even know I was a girl until two days ago.

"Besides," I add, "this is on the console and not PC. It's not as popular on this platform yet."

"True." He puts us on the same team with an AI teammate and an AI opposing team of three.

It takes me a few minutes to get used to the commands. After all, I've been playing exclusively on a laptop for quite a while. My family owns an Xbox, but only for some dance game that Ivy was obsessed with ten years ago. Most of the popular games for Xbox are first-person shooters, and my parents were not fans of those. So the fact that this isn't a shooting game, but still in first person, makes it unique and exciting.

MidKnight tries to explain bonuses and power ups to me while we play, so I'm a little distracted the first time. Even though we lost the first round (totally my fault), I actually had a ton of fun. The word "Defeat" shows up on my screen, and, as usual, I have to remind my heart to slow down from the adrenaline of playing a game. I'm not super frustrated, since it was my first time playing. Besides, I'm good at looking on the bright side.

MidKnight's voice is a little quiet. "So...what did you think?"

I take a moment to respond. This is important to him, and my opinion will carry weight. I know he respects me as a talented player, so I stick to the positives. "The game is amazing. The concept is incredible. I think with a few tweaks, you would be good to go."

He lets out a breath. "Like what?"

I remind myself that this is the reason he asked me to play with him. He trusts my opinions and my instincts. But I hate giving any kind of negative feedback, worrying that I'm going to hurt the other person's feelings. So I pause, considering the words I want to use.

Be brave, Luna.

“Well,” I begin, “the underwater graphics aren’t completely realistic. I mean, it’s a video game. Of course, it’s not supposed to be completely realistic. But even things like seaweed waving in the background, or the way the characters’ arms move through the water, is a little...stiff.”

“Hmm.”

I can’t tell if that’s a good “hmm,” or a bad “hmm,” but I keep going. “And while the game itself is super fun, there isn’t much...story to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I want to know WHY we’re all swimming toward the middle. Why are we all so interested in the center of the map? I feel like there needs to be a little more backstory.” I pause, coming up with a scenario that sounds intriguing. “Maybe there’s a precious stone in the center. And whoever gets the precious stone first gets to spend a day above water.”

He doesn’t say anything. *Stupid, Luna, stupid! You should’ve just stopped with the graphics.*

“Or not,” I say quickly. “If you’re just trying to make it a fun game, that’s cool, too. I just thought a little story would—”

“That’s brilliant,” he says, cutting me off. “I can’t believe I didn’t think about making a compelling story. All I cared about was making it a unique experience, but I didn’t consider WHY we were playing. That’s genius.”

My cheeks fill with warmth, and I’m glad he can’t see me right now, because I’m sure I look like a tomato. “Thanks.”

“I get what you’re saying about the graphics. I don’t want to agree, since I’ve already gone through multiple rounds with my animator, but I’ll see what he can do.”

An idea pops in my mind, and before I can convince myself that it’s terrible, I blurt out, “I can do it!”

“What?”

“I can fix the graphics. You know I went to school for animation. And I’ve been DYING to get my hands on a

project. I haven't been able to find a job that fits yet, and this would be so perfect to put on my resume."

He says nothing. Maybe he thinks I don't have the skill to accomplish the task, but I KNOW I do.

"Why don't you let me work on it over the weekend, and on Monday I'll show you what I've got. If it's not good enough, then you can go back to your original guy."

"Hmm." My heart thumps in my chest as I wait for his answer. "All right. I'll send you the files tonight."

"Yes!" I squeal. "Thank you!"

He chuckles, a deep sound. "You're welcome."

"Wanna play again?" I ask. "I'm totally going to kick your butt this time."

Now he laughs out loud. "I'd like to see you try."

chapter fourteen

HENRY



Playing with ClockStriker last night was actually...fun.

Even though Lily is a gamer, she doesn't get into the games the way I do. But ClockStriker takes her games SERIOUSLY. She's still pretty level-headed, which is refreshing after growing up with an older brother who raged every time he lost a game. Adam has a bit of a temper. Not that I really ever see him anymore, since he's a big Hollywood actor and everything, but I see the occasional report that he can be "difficult to work with." Not really a surprise to me.

But ClockStriker was a complete breath of fresh air.

And while I was slightly disappointed she didn't rave about every aspect of the game, she was right about the necessary changes. All of her suggestions will make the game better. We'll see if she ends up being as talented at animation as she claims, but I figure a few days of a trial won't hurt too much in the long run. And if she does a good job, maybe I can help her out with her job search by compensating her.

While I await her attempted improvements on the game, however, I have something else to distract me: The Pumpkin Patch Festival at Brookhaven.

And my hope to run into the woman from the train.

I'm driving Lily from Silver Lake City to Brookhaven, and she's chattering on and on about her classes.

"By the way, I never thanked you for helping me with business calculus. I got the highest score on the test in my

class.”

“Really?” I glance over at her briefly. She’s unusually brilliant, but she can get distracted and doesn’t always reach her full potential. When she was a little girl, she never finished her chores and would instead climb on top of her dresser, pretending to be a princess in a tower waiting for her prince to come rescue her.

“Yep. But I might need your help with the next chapter again. Something about doing derivatives backwards.”

“Integration.” I nod. “I’m always happy to help you.”

“Just like I’m helping you.” She squeezes my arm, an easy reach because my hand is resting on the shifter. “Are you nervous about seeing your mystery girl again?”

“No. Of course not.” I turn my gaze to Lily, who’s giving me a no-nonsense glare. A sigh escapes my lips. “Fine. A little.”

“Good. Be vulnerable. Girls like that.”

“Oh, do they? Is someone being vulnerable with you?”

“No. Of course not,” she says quickly.

A little TOO quickly.

“Hmph.” I won’t push the issue. Not today, when she set up this entire afternoon for me.

I’m about to ask more when Lily’s phone buzzes, drawing her attention away from me.

“Sorry, I have to respond to this,” she says.

I wave her off, knowing this is standard for girls her age. I’m impressed she even bothers spending time with her big brother on the weekends. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her bite her bottom lip and smile. Again, I wonder who this mysterious person is. I can almost guarantee she’s got a suitor.

Am I living in the 1800s? I could just say she’s got a boyfriend. But that feels...wrong.

The rest of the drive is quiet on her end, so I turn on some music. It's not a long drive, only about twenty minutes, but I want to listen to the soundtrack Lucas Carter created for my game. He's historically been a songwriter, but as a close friend of my investors at King Taylor Investment, they recommended I try him for writing the score. I must admit, the music is captivating.

"What is this?" Lily asks. "I've never heard this music before."

"It's the soundtrack for my game. Do you like it?"

"I love it. It feels a little eerie, but calming at the same time."

"Perfect. That's the vibe I was hoping for."

"He nailed it." She listens in silence for another minute or two. "How's the game coming? Did you end up giving ClockStriker a chance?"

"I did. And you were right. She just wanted to protect herself from creeps online and...I guess I understand. We played together a few nights ago, and she gave some great suggestions. She offered to help fix some of the graphics, too."

"Wow. You're letting her?"

"Yep. Maybe it was a bad decision, but she's working on them through the weekend, and then we'll go from there."

"So you just had a total one-eighty in the course of forty-eight hours."

"I guess so."

"I mean, you went from never wanting to talk to her again to handing over all the files to your game."

A sinking feeling settles in my stomach. She's right. Why did I go from discomfort to complete trust?

I rub my forehead with one hand, trying to ease the anxiety that is crowding every thought. What was I thinking?

"I'm not saying that was wrong," Lily says quickly, pulling my arm down and back onto the shifter. "You've known her

for years, right? Well enough to send her a free Xbox and headset.”

“Yeah, but this is my *game*. It’s different. If she does something with it, somehow publishes it on her own—”

“She won’t do that.” Lily’s voice is firm, and for a moment, I believe her.

“Okay.” I focus on the drive, then glance at the directions. “Did we miss the exit?”

“Huh?” Lily takes a moment to catch up with my shifting train of thought. She pulls out her phone and fiddles for a minute. “Shoot. Yes. Sunrise Farms is about two exits back.”

With a drawn-out sigh, I make my way over to exit the freeway and get back on track. I have a purpose today, and I need to remember that.

I’m going to find my mystery girl.



“WHERE SHOULD WE BEGIN?” Aunt Agatha asks as soon as we walk through the gates, her thick British accent a comfort in this new environment. Lily was right about her new outfits. She’s wearing a fedora and trench coat, fully embracing the detective persona from her mystery novels.

Lily looks around the festival with bright eyes and a huge smile. “You’re the expert. Lead the way!”

“Shall we bob for apples?” Agatha suggests.

I furrow my brow. “You’re kidding, right?”

She slaps me on the arm. “Of course I am, ridiculous boy. I would never put my mouth in a bucket full of saliva.”

Lily giggles, and a smile spreads across my face, loosening the tension in my chest. Ever since we arrived, I’ve kept my eyes open for the mystery girl. So far, no success. The town of Brookhaven is tiny, but there are still a few hundred people here. And, of course, there’s the chance that she isn’t here at all.

Regardless, I should enjoy this time with my aunt and sister. Family time is important.

So I spend the next couple of hours wandering through the festival, feeding animals in the petting zoo and trying several treats from vendors set up at various booths, including some delicious macarons from a store named Cookies & Kisses.

“These are incredible,” I comment to the woman working the booth.

“Thank you,” she says, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

“They’re even better than the ones I had in France last year.”

She beams. “I spent some time training in New York at Petit Fours. And then in Canyon Cove, as well.”

Her mention of Canyon Cove hits like lightning. That’s where my mystery girl lived. And then I notice an engagement ring on her finger.

“Are you...do you have a wedding planner here from Canyon Cove?” I ask, willing the hope to stay out of my eager voice.

“Uh...yes? Do you mean Luna?” She looks past me, where a faint clanging noise sounds from across the festival. Pointing at the source of the noise, she says, “There she is, right there.”

And stepping out of a pumpkin-shaped carriage about a hundred yards away is the mystery girl from the train.

Luna.

chapter fifteen

LUNA



“That was the strangest carriage ride I’ve ever taken,” I comment to the man escorting me out of the carriage.

Although now that I think about it, this might be the only carriage ride I’ve ever taken. But I don’t think most carriages look...or smell...like this. It was a globe-like structure pulled by a horse, but they covered the sides with orange-painted cardboard. Whoever created this ride missed the mark of an actual pumpkin by quite a bit. Combine the rickety experience with the smell of horses and canned pumpkin and...you get the picture.

“It’s a unique experience,” he says with a smile. His green costume reminds me a bit of a lizard. A friendly lizard, but still. A little strange. “The pumpkin scent is new this year to enhance the experience.”

Enhance isn’t exactly the word I’d use, but I smile and nod, stepping down onto solid ground again. I’m not sure where exactly I want to go next. The first few hours were spent with Madeleine at her stand for Cookies & Kisses, but she sent me off to go “have fun” and “experience Brookhaven” instead of being stuck behind a stand with her. I only have another half hour or so before I need to leave, though. I have so much work to do on MidKnight’s game, plus the twins asked me to mop the floors of the bakery tonight.

So I finally settled on an authentic pumpkin carriage ride at the front of the festival. Maybe authentic is too strong of a word, because who’s exactly riding in pumpkins? Regardless, it was definitely not the experience I was expecting.

I glance around the festival, trying to see if anything sounds fun for the remaining twenty minutes, when a man catches my eye.

A tall, dark, devastatingly handsome man.

The man who has been haunting my dreams for the last two and a half weeks.

Henry Stone.

And he's walking...

Right.

Toward.

Me.

I freeze. Do I run? Is he actually coming to talk to ME?

There's no way.

Right?

But as I stand there, frozen like a deer in headlights, a huge grin lights his gorgeous face. *I kissed those lips.* Man, he is tall. I didn't get to appreciate that fully while we were seated on the train.

And he finally stops, just one step away from me.

"Hello," he says, his deep voice rumbling. He runs his hand through his hair, and I notice a tiny shake to it. Is he... *nervous?*

"Hi," I squeak back. "It's good to see you again."

"You too...Luna?" He says my name like a question.

How does he know my name? All I can do is nod.

If it's possible for him to grin even wider, he does. "Luna," he whispers to himself.

I'm a puddle. Full-on melting.

"I'm Henry," he says, putting his hand out for a shake.

I'm not about to tell him I already knew his name. That would sound creepy. Although he knew mine, right? So I

smile and put my hand in his, and the heat from just our hands touching is enough to evaporate my liquified form. I'm floating up in the clouds.

“What are you doing here?” I blurt out.

Smooth, Luna. Smooth.

“My sister and I are visiting my Aunt Agatha. Do you know her? She lives in Brookhaven.” He looks over his shoulder, and back in the food area I see a young, gorgeous girl with extraordinarily long blonde hair dancing with delight, and an older woman in a fedora and trench coat, slow-clapping.

His face is flushed when he turns back to me. “I...may have told them about you.”

I blink a few times, something niggling at the back of my memory.

Oh, no.

His aunt—the woman with the fedora and trench coat—she's the woman from the coffee shop. She watched and heard my entire interaction with the twins...like the fact that I had no home and am unemployed.

Is she going to tell Henry?

He follows my gaze back to his family and chuckles. “My aunt is in her mystery novel era, so she thinks she's a detective.”

I nod, unsure of what I should say. It's definitely not, *Yeah, I remember seeing her last week at the coffee shop.*

“I'm glad I saw you,” Henry continues, unaware of my concerns. “I realized I never got your name or any way to contact you. And spending time with you on the train...it was...” He shoves his hands in his pockets, a surprisingly boyish gesture for this tall, strong (I'm assuming those muscles aren't for show) man.

“I enjoyed it, too,” I agree. *Enjoyed* is probably the least emphatic word I can use. I don't want to come off like a total weirdo. “I'm glad you're here.”

He doesn't say anything, just watches me for another moment, drinking me in. I'm reminded of having all of his attention on the train, the things he made me feel, and once again, it just seems...

Right.

"What have you already done today?" he finally asks.

"Well, I just finished the pumpkin carriage. Three out of ten, do not recommend."

He laughs out loud, the sound filling my heart. "And why is that?"

"They actually infuse a pumpkin smell into the carriage, so you feel like you're riding in a real pumpkin. The wheels are pretty rickety, too. I don't know, when I picture ideal modes of transportation, that's definitely not it."

"So, no repeats on the pumpkin carriage. Noted."

Noted? Is he making plans for our future? *Don't read into it, Luna.*

I refocus on the conversation. "Other than that, I've been with Madeleine at her stand for Cookies & Kisses."

"Yes, that's how I—" He cuts himself off.

"How you what?" I press.

His expression turns sheepish. He hesitates, and I see the moment he decides to just get the words out. "How I finally found you," he says.

Oh.

Oh.

This isn't just a chance meeting.

He's been *looking* for me.

The moment feels charged and heavy. It could be awkward, with both of us staring into each other's eyes, but I think we both know what this means.

We've *both* been looking for each other.

We've *both* been hoping for this moment.

He finally clears his throat and smiles. "So, no pumpkin carriage for Madeleine's wedding, I'm guessing?"

I turn and look over my shoulder at the carriage taking another unsuspecting couple away. "Definitely not."

Another silence.

"I haven't seen the petting zoo yet," I offer.

"Great! Let's go." He beams, then his expression softens. "That is, if you'd like me to join you."

I smile widely and nod. "I'd love that."

I fall into step beside him, and he leads me off to the petting zoo.

"How do you feel about farm animals?" he asks.

"Oh, I—" I cut myself off before I can say that I grew up on a suburban micro-farm. My parents live in a normal neighborhood, with the typical tiny Southern Californian backyard, but we turned it into our own little homestead, complete with a vegetable garden, chickens, and a mini goat named Alfred.

But I hesitate. Does that fit into the image I presented on the train? Or does that seem too Podunk hippie?

So I settle for the "less is more" type of answer. "They're fun. Just a little stinky."

He laughs. "That they are."

We arrive at the pens, with little vending machines for pellets of food. Henry immediately digs in his pocket for a few quarters and places them in the machine. "Put your hands underneath to catch the pellets," he instructs.

I have to hold back a laugh, having done this hundreds of times with my little sister, Katy, but I follow his instructions and a second later, have a handful of food. We wander into the pen with the goats and sheep, and I'm instantly surrounded by the animals.

“I’m surprised they’re so hungry!” I nearly fall over from a goat bumping the back of my legs, but Henry places a steady hand on the small of my back.

Now I’m weak in the knees for another reason.

“They weren’t this active earlier,” he confirms.

I rack my brain, using my experience with Alfred to try to figure out why they’re swarming me. A nuzzle on my rear end brings clarity to the situation.

Of course.

The cookies in my back pocket.

Madeleine gave me a couple of extra pumpkin macarons, and I put them in my back pocket (still in their plastic packaging) and completely forgot about them. Meaning they’re super smushed in my jeans.

Lovely.

And apparently the goats smell them, so they are all over my backside. I dump all the pellets out of my hands and try to back away from the goats, but they’re undeterred. They’re swarming around me, a crowd of horned attackers bleating for treats. I turn and look at Henry, desperation in my eyes. These aren’t mini-goats like Alfred; these are full sized goats that look like they’re going to eat the clothes off my butt to get that cookie.

“Help!” I squeal.

Henry doesn’t hesitate. With one firm arm around my waist, he scoops me up behind my knees with his other arm, holding me steady, cradled against his chest.

Oh, my.

This is nice.

But in the process, one of my shoes falls off, and the goats refocus their attention on it. Henry bends down to pick it up, but it’s not worth it.

“Leave it! Let them have the shoe! Get out while they’re distracted!”

With a chuckle, Henry listens to my plea and strides out of the pen, carrying me the entire way. When we're safely outside the gates, he looks down at me in his arms, a smile on his face. "Are you all right?"

I nod, unable to think clearly when our faces are only inches apart and my body is cradled up against his firm chest.

He still hasn't put me down, his ocean blue eyes gazing warmly into mine, and I could stay like this forever.

"Hello, there!" A girl's voice interrupts our moment.

Henry turns to face the young woman with long, blonde hair we had seen before. Next to her is their aunt, who observes us with narrowed eyes. "Lily! I didn't see you there."

"Clearly." His sister smirks, and I get the feeling she's enjoying the show. Agatha eyes me, her expression giving nothing away.

I push gently against Henry's chest, and he sets me down but doesn't remove his arm from around my waist. My feet touch the ground, reminding me I now have only one shoe, because this hay is not pleasant to stand on.

"I'm Lily," his sister says, extending a hand.

"Luna," I reply, putting my hand in hers for a shake.

"And I'm Agatha," his aunt says, her British accent much more pronounced than Henry's. "It's nice to finally meet you."

I swallow hard.

"So *you're* the girl from the train," Lily says. "I've been dying to meet you."

Now my cheeks are on fire again, warmth settling deep in my stomach at the thought that Henry has been talking about me.

He shrugs. "It was the best conversation I've had in a long time."

Oh, boy.

I'm in trouble.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull away from Henry and take it out, realizing it's the alarm I had set for seven p.m. Time to go work on MidKnight's game. And the perfect excuse to get away from Agatha before she incriminates me.

"I...I have to go," I say.

"What? It's only seven!" Henry seems panicked.

"I know. I...have somewhere to be." Should I tell him what I'm doing? I worry again that he'll think I'm a loser for working on a video game. I really wish I could put it off. But MidKnight's game needs a lot more work than I had expected, and I feel like this could be my way in to the game design industry. If I have my name on this game and it takes off, I could get a job anywhere.

"Let me give you a ride," he offers.

"Oh, no." I point toward the main road. "I live right over there. It's not a far walk."

"But you only have one shoe," he protests.

I laugh. "I'm fine." I take the other shoe off. "Now I'm just barefoot. I'll manage. It'll take me less than five minutes to get there."

"Where..." He hesitates a moment. "Where do you live?"

"Oh..." What do I tell him? *I live in the dusty, dirty attic above Twin Cakes bakery. There aren't any rats or mice, but the spiders and I are on a first name basis.* "Right by Twin Cakes bakery." There we go. Vague enough, but still true.

I look over at Agatha, who gives me a subtle wink.

Oh.

Is she on my side?

Maybe my secret is safe for now.

"Wait." Henry pulls his phone out of his pocket. "Can you...will you put your number in here?"

"Sure," I squeak. I haven't been asked for my number in years. Probably since Chad asked me out in college. I'm in

completely foreign territory here, so with shaky fingers, I type in my number. As I'm typing, I feel the steely gaze of Agatha Stone piercing my soul. I don't know what exactly is happening here, but I quickly finish entering my number and hand the phone back to Henry.

His beaming face fills me with joy. "Perfect. I'll text you later so you can have my number as well." He slips the phone in his pocket and twists his lips to the side. "So...maybe I'll see you around again. Luna." He says my name with an added emphasis, a warmth in his voice that melts me like chocolate.

"Maybe you will, Henry," I say, hoping to infuse the same enthusiasm in my tone.

He steps forward with his arms out, then freezes, like he's wondering if it's too forward to hug me goodbye. *Oh, Henry, wrap those arms around me again.* I close the gap between us and snuggle right up against his chest, giving him a hug. He exhales and gives the tiniest kiss to the top of my head. If this man wanted to pull me in for another *actual* kiss right now, I don't think I'd reject him.

But that's crazy. And his sister and aunt are right there watching us. So I pull away. Lily looks like she's going to burst from excitement.

"Bye, Lily," I say. "It was nice meeting you." I'm not sure if I should shake her hand again, but she answers my uncertainty by pulling me in for a hug, even tighter than the one Henry just gave.

"He's kind of obsessed with you," she whispers in my ear. "And he's amazing. You couldn't do any better than him. I'm so glad we found you."

I'm sure my face looks completely shocked when we pull back, but her smile is so genuine and joyful that her enthusiasm is contagious.

"And Agatha," I say. "It was nice to meet you, too."

Then *she* pulls me in for a hug. This must be a very touchy-feely family. "I won't tell him what I overheard at the coffee shop," she says quietly, her voice much warmer than

what I expected from her. Maybe it's just her thick British accent. "It's not my place. But don't be afraid to let him know the truth. I have a good feeling about you two."

I'm so shocked you could knock me over with a feather. But she pulls away and gives me one more wink.

"I'll see you around," I say to them all and turn to walk toward the exit, taking ginger steps until I'm off the hay and back onto the dirt road. I take one glance over my shoulder to look at Henry, Lily, and Agatha, who are still watching me leave. With a final wave, I begin the walk back home, where I'll be spending hours working on MidKnight's new game.

chapter sixteen

HENRY



“This is...incredible.” I can hardly believe my eyes. The graphics of my game are infinitely better than they were just a few days ago. “How did you do this?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” ClockStriker’s voice comes through my headset as shy and modest. I’m getting used to her voice, to where I think she seems familiar. But you can never know with all the distortion through voice comms. “It was actually a lot of fun.”

Her modesty is something I’m growing to admire. That and her honest disposition. She doesn’t seem to put on a pretense for me, which is more than I can say for many people in my everyday life. It’s nice that she doesn’t know who I actually am and who my family is. When we play together, we’re just two regular people who enjoy video games. It’s refreshing.

“I can’t believe you accomplished this in one weekend.” I keep pushing controls, since we’re in the middle of a match, but I’m distracted by the waves of the seaweed, the fish she added in the background, and the little bubbles flitting around us. “You’re beyond talented.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Thank you so much.”

I’m so relieved. These graphics are far beyond what I would have expected. And boy, did I need a win.

On Saturday, I was so thrilled to see Luna and reconnect. But she left in such a rush, I had wondered if I overstepped my

boundaries. Then my aunt, who tends to be cryptic, patted me on the cheek and simply said, “Be patient with her, love.”

But worse than that—as soon as we got to the car, I wrote a quick text to the number Luna entered in my phone.

Hey, Luna, this is Henry. It was really great seeing you again today. I'm sorry we didn't get to spend more time together. Are you busy next weekend?

I waited a few minutes, Lily sitting patiently next to me, for the response to come in.

Hey, dude. Sorry to say that Luna gave you a fake number. Hope you have better luck with the ladies in the future.

I stared at my phone, dumbfounded.

“What did she say?” Lily asked.

I showed her my phone. Lily's shoulders slumped. “I'm sorry. The area code looks correct for Canyon Cove. Maybe she just typed it wrong?”

“I appreciate your wishful thinking,” I said. And then I started the car and drove home.

So I have spent the last two days mulling over my actions, wondering if I came on too strong and whether Luna *meant* to type in the wrong number or not. At least I hadn't tried to kiss her again, even though I was tempted to. But with Lily and Aunt Agatha watching, I knew it wasn't the right time. And I want to make sure that if we *do* begin dating, we start on the right foot.

I change my focus from kissing Luna to these incredible new graphics on the screen in front of me. “How much do I owe you for this?”

“Owe me?” She laughs. “You bought me a console and a headset. I'd just like to think that we're even now.”

She has a point, but it still feels wrong. Especially after she mentioned last week that she had a difficult living situation and had to find a job. “Please let me pay you.”

“Absolutely not. Just put my name on the credits so I can use it as a reference for an animation job in the future.”

“Fine.” I concede. I’d still like to give her some kind of gift or token of appreciation, but it seems like I’ll have to go about it in a more covert way.

“Oh, shoot, I’m getting a phone call from my family. I can still play while I talk to them, though.”

“Sure. Pick it up.”

I hear some rustling, probably from her dropping her headset down to around her neck, and a slightly muffled, “Hey, Hazel.”

She must have forgotten to mute herself. Should I say something?

And Hazel? Is that her grandmother? We haven’t exchanged much personal information, but I’m curious about her family now.

“I’m in the middle of a game,” she continues. “No, it’s fine. I know you guys wanted an update... Yeah, I found a new place to stay... Kind of. I’m working for them in exchange for rent... Just general housekeeping kinds of things, like laundry and dishes... No, I’m not a maid... Yes, Dad, I’m still looking for a *real* job.” I can almost hear her eyes rolling. “Uh, it’s a game that hasn’t come out yet. My friend designed it and asked for some help... MidKnight... It’s actually really cool. You guys would love it... Okay, say hi to Ivy for me. Good night.” Some more rustling ensues, and then I hear her voice speaking to me. “Oh, goodness, did I forget to mute? I’m sorry about that.”

“No worries. I didn’t hear much.” Not true, but I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. And she didn’t say anything that seemed personal beyond her job situation, but I already knew that. “I have to ask, is Hazel your grandmother?”

She bursts out laughing. “No, that’s my sister. Her name does sound a little old, though.”

“Ah. And... Ivy?”

“Another sister.”

This is getting interesting. “So, you have two sisters?”

She pauses, as if debating whether she wants to share more personal information. “Three, actually. I’m the second oldest. It’s Ivy, then me, then Hazel, then Katy.”

“Oh, interesting. You’re just like me.”

“You have three sisters, too?”

I chuckle. “No, no. But I’m the second oldest of four. I have an older brother, younger brother, and younger sister.”

“Your poor sister,” she comments.

I smile, thinking of Lily. “We are very protective of her. But she holds her own.”

“I believe it. Katy is a little firecracker.”

“And your other sisters?”

She sighs. “Ivy is feisty and fun. Hazel is gorgeous and the life of the party. And I’m just...there.”

Something about her words is triggering a memory, but I can’t place it exactly.

“But I don’t mind,” she continues. “I don’t want all the attention. It makes me uncomfortable. I’d rather be in a small, intimate setting than in front of a crowd.”

My heart warms at that. She has a kind, gentle spirit, and I relate to her sentiments. “I know what you mean.”

“Really, Mr. Successful Businessman?”

“Really.” I hesitate to divulge too much, but figure it can’t hurt. “I’m in line to inherit my father’s company. And while I feel I can do the job well, I worry about all the public attention. It can be overwhelming.”

She’s quiet a moment, and I worry I’ve shared too much. Or that our...disparity in social status will scare her away.

“I think you’re going to do an amazing job,” she finally says. “You have a good heart.”

“How do you know that?”

“Uh, you sent me a free Xbox.”

“That was slightly selfish.”

“Maybe. But it was still generous. And I think when you lead with your heart, people will know and love that about you.”

My chest tightens a bit with her words, so genuine and heartfelt. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

She doesn’t say anything, but I imagine her smiling on the other end. “Watch out for that shark!”

And just then, I get eaten.



I WALK into work the next morning with an extra spring in my step. The game is well on its way, and although I only have a few weeks until the gala, I know it will be ready for launch. ClockStriker’s work made a HUGE improvement, and she says she still wants to do more tweaking to make it perfect.

I have to admit that Lily was right about her. She’s genuine, kind, and it seems that her deception was completely justified. After she mentioned the “slimy” guys online, I’ve noticed more and more comments that make me cringe. I can’t believe my sister and ClockStriker have to endure such disgusting commentary.

“Good morning, Sue,” I say to the front secretary.

“Hello, Mr. Stone,” she replies. She looks more frazzled than usual, her purple glasses slightly askew, and her graying bob sticks up in strange places.

“Everything okay?” I ask. “Is something wrong with Peanut?”

“What? Oh, no. Peanut is fine. Thank you for asking, though. After his last surgery at the vet, he’s back to chasing squirrels and peeing on fire hydrants.” She sighs dramatically. “It’s just some of the last arrangements for the gala that are causing trouble.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“The cake, for one. I’m having the hardest time finding a bakery close by that is willing to make a thematic cake for this event.”

“I know one!” I practically shout. *Tone it down, Henry.*

“Oh? Which one?”

“Twin Cakes in Brookhaven.”

Yes, yes. I’ve done some late-night stalking after realizing that Luna gave me the wrong phone number. She mentioned she lived near Twin Cakes bakery, and I may have spent some time online looking up her neighborhood and imagining where she might live. And I perused the Twin Cakes website...and then ordered some late-night cupcakes from the bakery near my apartment.

“I hadn’t tried them yet,” Sue says thoughtfully. “I was sticking to the bakeries in Silver Lake City. But if you think they might do it...” She turns to her computer and starts typing the name of the bakery into the search engine.

“You know what?” I say in a flash of brilliance. “Let me handle this. At least I can take something off your plate.”

She whips her head over to me, gratitude in her eyes. “Really? That would help more than you know.”

“I’m happy to. In fact, I think I’ll visit them in person and make sure they can accomplish everything we want.”

“Oh, thank you, Henry.” She places a soft hand on my forearm. “You’re a doll.”

I grin at her. “No problem.”

I stride to my office, heart thumping at the thought of seeing Luna again in person. I can finally get the answer I’ve been seeking—did she *mean* to type in the wrong number? At least this time, I’ll know if I should back off completely or continue with my feelings toward her.

But why do I feel a slight twinge of guilt when I think of ClockStriker?

chapter seventeen

LUNA



Luna

It's Tuesday evening, and I'm trying to scarf down some chicken nuggets and French fries before playing with MidKnight. Once again, I've had a super late evening, reorganizing all the ingredients in the kitchen. Which included buying a label maker from the general store on the corner. The label maker was right next to the screwdrivers, which doesn't make any sense to me, but apparently is part of the organization scheme that Tim, the store owner, has created.

The twins told me that tomorrow they want me to create new menus, and I'm excited about work for the first time in the last three weeks. I took some graphic design classes as part of my animation degree and have been itching to do *something* that uses my artistic skills.

I wish I could say I've had good distractions, but I haven't gotten a text or call from Henry. It's so strange. I thought everything went well during our meeting at the Pumpkin Patch, even though it was cut short, and he seemed so genuinely *happy* to see me. But...nothing. Did I do something wrong? Or did his aunt tell him about my secrets, after all?

My phone rings with a call from my dad, proving that it's not an issue with my phone. "Hewwo?" I say, my mouth full of food.

"Hey, Luna," Dad says. "Is this a bad time?"

I quickly swallow my bite. "No, it's fine. I'm just finishing dinner. What's up?"

He pauses. "I'm calling with some bad news."

"Is everyone okay? Mom and Katy?"

"Mom and Katy are fine. But a coyote got into the yard this morning and it got two of the chickens."

My heart sinks. This isn't the first time we've lost chickens to predators in our area. A few years ago, a raccoon got Lucy. A year later, a possum came and ate Superhero. It's part of the process of having a mini farm, but it stings every time.

But I have to know which one, and make sure it isn't my favorite chicken. "It wasn't Chickaletta, was it?"

My dad's silence is all the confirmation I need.

"Oh, no," I whisper, and the tears start to fall. Is it ridiculous to be this upset over a chicken? But she was truly the best of the flock.

"I know," my dad confirms. "We've all been heartbroken. The coyote got Ethel, too. It came in the middle of the day, which has never happened before. We've kept them in the coop for the rest of the afternoon, and we're going to build a little pen to keep them safe from now on."

I sniff and nod, even though he can't see me. "Okay."

"I'm so sorry, Luna."

"It's not your fault," I say. I know he's sad, too.

"It's not," he agrees. "But I'm still sorry this happened."

"Me, too."

"Are you going to be okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'll just distract myself with some games."

"That's what we're doing over here. Katy wants to play a game to cope."

I smile despite my sadness. "Have fun."

"Will do." I hear the smile in his voice. "Love you, MooMoo."

“Love you, too.”

We hang up, and I cry some more. Partly because Chickaletta died, and she was my favorite of the chickens, but also because I wish I were home with everyone. Life here is getting so lonely. I hardly spend time with Madeleine aside from the appointments we squeeze in on the weekends, but otherwise, I’m working all by myself and spending my nights playing with MidKnight.

Speaking of whom, my computer screen alerts me that MidKnight is online. I pull on my headset and join the party.

“Hey, ClockStriker,” he says.

“Hey.”

“Everything okay?” he asks.

I could say I’m fine, let’s play, but something in his voice invites me to answer him honestly. “Not really.”

“What’s wrong?”

I inhale deeply. “You’ll probably think it’s dumb.”

“Try me.”

“Remember how I’ve mentioned that my parents’ house is basically a little micro-farm? And that they have chickens and a mini goat?”

“Yes, I remember. I’ve always thought that sounded fun.”

“It usually is.” I take in a shaky breath. “But a coyote came today and killed two of the chickens.”

“I’m so sorry.” He sounds genuine, like he’s taking my pain seriously.

“And the worst part is that one of the chickens that died was my favorite of them all.” Another tear falls down my cheek and I swipe it away. “I don’t know why it hurts so much. It’s just a chicken!”

“But she was part of the family.”

I press my lips together. “Yes. She was.”

“Do you want to tell me about her?”

I get a strange sense of déjà vu, remembering when I spoke those words to Henry on the train to ask about his mother. It seemed to bring him some comfort, so maybe I'll give it a try. "Sure. Her name was Chickaletta."

"Why does that sound familiar?" he asks.

I smile through my tears. "It's a character on Paw Patrol. Mayor Goodway has a pet chicken. We thought it was appropriate, considering my youngest sister's obsession with the show."

"That rings a bell. I remember my younger sister watching that many years ago."

My heart warms at the common familiarity. "Anyway, she was the sweetest. She was so gentle and tame, and whenever Katy's friends came over, she'd be the first one to run up to the kids and let them hold her. She loved eating caterpillars and grubs, and she laid the most beautiful blue-green eggs." The tears pour down my cheeks as I describe her, but it feels good to share all her good points. "I just wish things hadn't ended this way."

"She sounds like she was a great chicken. And I can understand why you'd be so sad."

"Thank you." I exhale, feeling like some of the weight has been lifted.

"I didn't really grow up with many pets, but I did have one when I was about seven years old."

"Oh? Was it a dog or cat?"

"No." I can hear his smile. "It was a crayfish."

"A...crayfish? Don't people eat those?"

He snorts. "Don't people eat chicken?"

I eye my abandoned chicken nuggets. "Touché."

"I attended a science camp during the summer between first and second grades. At the end of the week, they gave us each a crayfish to take home. I wasn't sure what we would do with it, but my mother embraced our new family member. We

went to the pet store and bought him a little aquarium, stocked up on mealworms for him to eat—”

“Ew.”

“Yeah, they were pretty gross. And we stuck a piece of coral rock in there.” He laughs. “I remember the first time he shed his skin. I thought he duplicated himself, and my mother had to explain what was going on. It was a really great experience. We took care of him for a year until he died.”

“What was his name?” I ask.

“Krusty. Krusty the crustacean.”

I laugh out loud. “That’s pretty cute.”

“Thanks. He died on his own, no tragic accident like yours, but he just climbed on top of the coral and lifted his head out of the water and died.” He pauses. “But it still hurt. And I still remember him fondly.”

“I can tell.” I sniff and wipe my nose. “Thank you for sharing the memory with me.”

“The point is that it’s okay to feel sad. Even if it’s just a chicken. Or even if it’s...someone more important. Grief is difficult, and it ebbs and flows, but sometime soon you’ll be able to think about the good times with Chickaletta and smile instead of cry.”

I get the feeling he’s talking about something bigger than my pet chicken and his pet crayfish. I’m not sure if he’s ready to share that with me, though. This already feels like a big step for us, and I feel myself getting pulled toward him in an unexpected, emotional direction.

Why do I think of Henry again? And feel...almost guilty?

“Do you want to play?” he asks gently.

“Yes. I could use the distraction.”

“Let’s go.”

And with a smile, we set up a game.

chapter eighteen

LUNA



“Luna! Change of plans for today!” Drea’s voice calls up the stairs to my room.

“Okay! Be right down!” I type a couple more commands, the final few needed to perfect my waving seaweed. Yes, they’re mine now. The junk MidKnight had before were basically sticks of bamboo. *My* seaweed have motion and life.

We played better together last night than we ever have. The conversation about our pets led to a deeper emotional connection that I feel bonded us together, even in our games. But this morning, I’m focusing on fixing the terrible graphics in his game.

I sit back on my bed, sighing with relief. “Done,” I whisper to no one but myself. But there is someone I can share my excitement with. I grab my phone from my pillow and type a Discord message to MidKnight. *The seaweed is complete! Let’s test it out tonight.*

He replies with a thumbs up, which usually means he’s driving but acknowledging my response. I shut my laptop and rush down the stairs to the bakery.

“What’s the new plan?” I ask. Hopefully, they still let me create the menus that I was looking forward to.

“We have a very exciting customer coming in today,” Ana says dramatically. She pauses and looks at Drea, then back at me. “Henry. Stone.”

My heart drops to my stomach. *Oh, no.* He's going to find out that I'm a live-in servant, which will completely ruin the image I've made for him so far. I gulp. "What...why is he coming?"

"He called yesterday and asked to come in today to special order a cake for a huge event he's having in a few weeks. Some kind of gala for a video game? Anyway, we need to put our *best foot forward.*"

Video game?

"So here's the plan," Drea cuts in. "We want you to pretend to be a customer instead of our...well...whatever you are."

Ana snorts, but I don't blame Drea's indecision on my official title.

"You're already working on Madeleine's wedding, right?" Ana says. "I'm sure you were planning on ordering the cake with us."

"True," I admit.

"So when he comes, we want you to be here pretending to order the cake for the wedding. But you need to make it believable. And like you're ordering something super extravagant, so he knows we can accomplish anything he wants." She adds a little wink at the end, making me think she's not *just* talking about baking a cake.

I'm going to be sick.

"I don't know," I say. "Maybe it's better if I just hide out in my room. Or maybe I'll hang out with Madeleine until you're done here." As much as I'm dying to see Henry again, putting on a pretense will just make things weirder between us.

"No!" Drea insists. "Please? We could really use this. It would be *such* an amazing advertisement for our business. Baking the cake for a Stone Technologies event could really put us on the map."

"We'll give you the rest of the day off!" Ana adds. "As a thank you for helping."

I *could* use some time off. I've literally been working twelve-hour days, six days a week, for the last ten days since I moved in. Maybe it's been a little overkill, but I'm still so grateful they took me in. I don't want to rock the boat or complain and risk losing my free place to live.

"And," Ana continues, "*if* we get the job, maybe we'll be able to start paying you."

And that's the last piece of the puzzle I needed. "Fine. But nothing too outrageous."

They squeal and squeeze me into a big hug.

Ana pulls back and wrinkles her nose at my outfit. "But first, you need to change."



TWO HOURS LATER, I'm dressed in Ana's form-fitting, dark red dress with cap sleeves. It feels ridiculously expensive for two girls who can't afford to pay me to work. Not only did the twins make me change my clothes, they also fixed up my hair and makeup. Nothing outrageous, but enough to make me look like I'm doing something more interesting than just designing menus.

Which, I would like to reiterate, is what I was *supposed* to be doing today.

Now there's a pit in my stomach. Not only am I going to play out a silly ruse (although, to be honest, it's not too far from the truth), but I'm seeing HENRY STONE again. In person.

The man who haunts my dreams.

The man who came looking for *me* at the pumpkin patch.

And the man who didn't text me after I gave him my number.

Is it a coincidence that he's coming here today, right after I mentioned I live "near" Twin Cakes?

I have to convince my over-eager heart that it's not intentional. It can't be. There's nothing remarkable about me,

no reason he would come all the way out here just to see *me*.

It's just about the cake.

And I mean that in the literal sense, not...you know.

The twins are pretending to be busy behind the counter, arranging cupcakes and napkins. They're nervously fidgeting around, but I don't blame them. They have me perched on a stool at the counter, flipping through a photo album of their previous creations. I have to admit, they're extremely talented. The cakes they've made are pretty mind-blowing, and some of them look like they're defying gravity. That doesn't mean they're good business owners, though.

At ten-thirty on the dot, the bell on the door rings. It must be Henry. Am I supposed to turn to see who it is? I feel like that would make things even worse. Playing the part of the diligent wedding planner, I continue flipping through the album, absorbed in the many options for Mason and Madeleine's wedding cake.

"Hi, Mr. Stone!" the twins chime out in unison.

"Hello, ladies. How are you doing this morning?" His deep voice fills the room, and I smile to myself.

Stop it, Luna.

"We're doing well, thank you," Ana says. "I'm Ana, and this is my sister, Drea." I finally look up at her, a little jealous at the way she's batting her lashes and looking coy. The first time I met Henry, I fell asleep on his shoulder, and I'm pretty sure I drooled on him.

Drea continues. "And thank you again *so* much for coming all the way out here. We can't believe you're considering Twin Cakes for your event."

"I've heard great things about your bakery," he says. Taking a few steps forward, he finally stops at the counter, just a couple of feet away from me.

"Thank you so much," Ana says. "Luna is a little busy looking at our album. She's picking out a cake for—"

“Luna?” he interrupts. He takes a step toward me, and I finally have to look up at him.

“Hi, Henry,” I say brightly. “This is unexpected.”

“You...know each other?” Ana says. And I swear I see daggers coming from her eyeballs. Should I have mentioned this before? I didn’t think it was necessarily relevant to disclose that we’d had a life-changing conversation on the train, the best kiss of my life, and then a twenty-minute interaction at the pumpkin patch, where he cradled me against his chest and I walked home barefoot.

“We’ve met...Twice,” he says, his eyes exuding the exact opposite emotion from Ana. The warmth fills me to my toes, and I can’t care less that Ana seems livid. “What are you doing here? I mean, I know you said you lived nearby, but...” He trails off, almost ashamed that he mentioned remembering what I said right before I ran away from him.

“I’m...picking out a wedding cake. For Madeleine.”

“Ah.” He steps directly behind me now, his body heat radiating through my back. He leans over my shoulder, his head right next to mine. I could turn and kiss him on the cheek.

Not that I’m going to.

“Anything good?” he asks, his breath tickling my ear.

I can’t think. I can’t breathe.

Oh my goodness, Luna. Say something!

“Yep!”

Smooth.

He puts his left arm on the counter on my left side, then reaches around my right side with his right hand to point at the cake currently on the page. I’m literally surrounded by him, his citrus scent flooding my senses.

“So, you think Madeleine would like a Paw Patrol cake for her wedding?”

I look down at the page of children's cakes that I was apparently on. I wasn't paying close attention to the cakes, but apparently my subconscious was thinking about Chickaletta. How could I concentrate on cakes when the world's most perfect man is sharing my breathing space?

I turn to look at him, and his smile is just inches from my face.

I.

Can't.

Breathe.

chapter nineteen

HENRY



Maybe I'm coming on a little too strong.

But when it comes to Luna, I just can't help myself.

I straighten and give her a bit of space. Based on the alarm in her eyes, I may have gotten a little too close there. I watch her take in a deep, shuddering breath and smooth out her dress.

Or maybe I'm doing things just right.

Except I notice the twins again. I forgot they were here watching us, and now the jealousy in their expressions makes me want to run and hide. I clear my throat and speak to them. "So! How does this whole process work?"

"Let's discuss design first," says the redhead. I think that one is Ana. "We also have some cake samples that you can try. Would you like coffee to go with them?"

"Yes, please," I say.

Ana turns her attention to Luna. "Luna, can you..."

But Drea elbows her in the ribs. Ana starts again. "Just... keep looking through that album and let me know if you see anything." She turns to her sister. "Why don't you go make the coffee while I talk to Mr. Stone?"

Drea nods and exits into the kitchen. I furrow my brow at Luna, wondering what that interaction was all about, but Luna keeps her head down, focused on the cakes in the album. At least now she's analyzing the wedding cake pages.

Ana takes out a notebook and pencil. “Tell me about your event.”

“Well, it’s a gala to launch Stone Gaming, a new division of Stone Technologies.” I notice Luna sharply turn her head to face me, then back to the album. I’ve wondered what Luna will think of my interest in video games. Some women don’t look kindly upon men in their twenties spending their free time gaming. I seriously hope this doesn’t lower her opinion of me. “At the gala, we’ll have a demo version of the game available for attendees to try out, including investors and some gaming critics.”

I glance over at Luna, paying close attention to her reaction. While she doesn’t look up at me again, her eyes have stilled, focused in on a part of the page. I know she’s listening carefully to my words.

“That’s really interesting,” Ana says. “We’d love to help. You know, I think I have some albums in the back for video game themed cakes we’ve made before. Let me grab those, and I’ll be right back.”

Ana leaves into the kitchen as well, and I decide to seize the moment. It’s now or never.

“Luna,” I whisper to her.

She turns to face me, her brown eyes wide.

“I think...” I swallow hard. “At least I *hope*... you accidentally programmed the wrong number into my phone.”

She blinks a few times. “That’s why you never texted me?”

I laugh softly, relieved. It *was* an accident, after all. “Yes, see?” I pull out my phone and show her the message I sent after the Pumpkin Patch.

She chuckles. “I’m so sorry. I was flustered... My finger must have slipped.”

I hand her the phone. “Go ahead and correct it.”

She keeps her smile and takes the phone from me, our fingers brushing in the process. As she types in her number, Ana and Drea both emerge from the kitchen. Drea carries a

tray with two steaming mugs of coffee and two plates of cake samples, and Ana has another album of pictures.

“Here you go,” Drea says cheerfully, setting the tray down in front of us.

Luna finishes entering her number and puts it back on the counter next to her. The coffee mugs are very full, and when Drea sets them in front of us, a drop of liquid spills on the counter, causing Ana to hiss.

“It’s fine,” I say with a smile, cleaning it up with a napkin.

Drea smiles coyly at me and sets down the cake plates. I take a small bite of the chocolate one, and hum. “This is delicious.”

“Thank you!” the twins say in unison, beaming.

“So, tell me more about your game,” Ana says. “I’m sure that will influence the design of the cake.”

“Sure. It’s based on an underwater world. The goal is to reach the center of the map, where a stone allows the winning team to spend a day on land. It starts with two teams of—”

My description is cut short by Luna choking on her cake. She’s coughing, so I think she’s all right, but I still pat her firmly on the back a few times.

“I’m so sorry,” she finally manages to gasp out. “I...don’t know what came over me.” She picks up her coffee mug to take a sip, but her hands are shaking so badly, she completely turns the mug over.

Spilling coffee all over my phone.

And all down her dress.

“Oh, no!” she exclaims.

But it gets worse.

She stands abruptly, pushing back against the counter. Her plate of cake goes flying, lands on my phone, and, in a cruel twist of fate, my phone falls to the ground, along with all the cake.

The only sound we hear is the drip, drip, drip of the coffee falling off the counter and onto my phone.

I bend down to assess the damage. The screen is completely shattered. Not only that, it isn't responding to any tapping of my fingers or pressing of the buttons.

It's dead.

Luna watches me from above, her face completely pale. "Is it...broken?"

"I think so." I keep my voice soft, hoping to not alarm her.

But it's no use. Within seconds, she bursts into tears. "I'm so sorry. I don't know...I just..." She can't finish her sentence because she begins to sob.

"It's okay, Luna." I straighten and pull her into my arms for a hug. "I'll get a new phone. It's not a big deal."

But she won't stop shaking. And instead of leaning into my embrace, she pushes me away. She turns to Ana and Drea and says, "I'll clean it up right now."

"No!" they both shout, exchanging a quick glance.

Ana speaks. "You're a *customer*, so you shouldn't be cleaning anything up. But I'm sure you're uncomfortable in that dress. Why don't you go across the street to your friend Madeleine and see if she can help you out?"

"Don't you live around here?" I ask. "Why don't you—"

"Great idea," Luna says, cutting me off. "I'll be back soon to complete the cake order for the wedding. Thank you both so much for your generosity." She turns to me, pastes on a fake smile, and says, "I'll see you around, Henry."

And then she disappears out the door, taking my heart with her.

chapter twenty

LUNA



I can't breathe.

Not only am I covered in coffee and cake, wearing Ana's or Drea's dress, I am nearly positive that Henry Stone is MidKnight.

But there's no way.

They can't be the same person.

I rush across the cobblestone street to Cookies & Kisses, banging the door open. Madeleine is working the front and takes one look at me, then rushes around the counter and grabs my arms. "Are you okay? What is going on?"

"I...I can't..." I shake my head. "I just need to clean off. Can you help?"

"Why can't you do that at home?"

"Because *Henry Stone* is there, and Ana and Drea don't want him to know that I live in the nasty room above their bakery, and I don't want him to know either, but now I've spilled coffee and cake and I'm a mess and *I broke his phone* and—"

"Okay! Okay! Come on, let's get you cleaned off." She guides me to the bathroom in the back, which doesn't have a shower or tub, but at least has some clean towels to scrub myself down. "Clean off here, and I'll bring you a set of clothes. I always keep a spare outfit in the office." She leaves me alone, and I peel the sticky dress off of my body and start cleaning myself off.

Henry Stone is MidKnight.

Maybe.

There's a possibility that two people are developing an underwater game, right? Although the premise is *exactly* the same.

My mind is spinning around and around, and I can't see. I need to take some kind of action to prove to myself that they're not the same person.

Standing in just my underwear and bra, I pull out my phone and get on Discord. This will answer it. I can message MidKnight, and if he responds, I'll know that *his* phone isn't broken. Therefore, they're not the same person.

Hey, MK. How's your day going?

A little weird and generic, I'll admit. We don't normally have random small talk like this, but I can't come up with anything better right now.

I set the phone down on the sink, bracing my body with both hands, hovering over the screen and willing him to start typing. Goosebumps rise all over my body as I wait.

Seconds pass.

Nothing.

"Maybe he's in a board meeting," I say out loud to myself. He *is* a high-powered businessman, after all.

Because he's Henry Stone.

Or not.

"Ahh!" I yell, then cover my mouth with both hands.

"Luna? Are you okay?" Madeleine's voice comes through the door.

"Sorry about that. This coffee is just *everywhere*." I resume cleaning, keeping one eye on my phone.

Still nothing.

“I have the clothes,” Madeleine says.

“Thank you.” I crack the door open and take the shirt and jeans from her, pulling them on my body quickly.

Still nothing from MidKnight.

This. Cannot. Be. Happening.

I finally open the door to the bathroom, and Madeleine’s expression is full of concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” I huff a sigh. “I don’t even know where to begin.” I bend down and start rolling up the legs of the jeans, which are about six inches too long. Glancing out the window of Madeline’s bakery to Twin Cakes, I realize how livid the twins are going to be with me after today. Not only did I fail to mention that I already knew Henry, I made a *complete* disaster out of their bakery and the appointment.

“You don’t have to live there,” Madeleine says gently. That’s only part of the problem right now, but I let her keep going. “You act like they’ve been doing you this huge favor by letting you stay, but I’m sure there are other options.”

I shake my head. “You know there aren’t. Especially when I don’t have a paying job.” I sigh heavily. “This is all I have for now. And I want to keep them happy. I just completely screwed everything up, though. I hope they’ll forgive me for this.”

Madeleine furrows her brow and twists her lips in concern, but she says nothing else. “Come on. Let’s get you a cookie.”



IT’S EIGHT AT NIGHT. I’m waiting in front of my Xbox for MidKnight to show up.

He still hasn’t messaged me all day.

I was right about the twins. They were livid. But not in the sense that they yelled at me, more that I got the silent treatment. And when I came back, they had endless chores for me to do. So much for getting the afternoon off. I did them all without complaining, because they cleaned up the mess with the cake and the coffee.

They secured Henry's cake order, after all.

I wonder if he asked about me.

Finally, at eight fifteen, MidKnight pops up and invites me to a party.

"Hey, MidKnight," I say with a shaky voice.

"Hey, Striker. How's it going?"

"Good, good." I pause. "I sent you a Discord message, but you never responded."

He sighs heavily. "Today was nuts. You'll never believe what happened."

I stop breathing, my heart racing in my chest. "Oh, yeah?" I squeak out.

"Yeah, my phone is completely destroyed."

I swallow hard. Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe MidKnight's phone broke on the same day as Henry's. There's only one way to know for sure. "What...what happened?"

He laughs out loud. "I don't know if you'd believe it. I went cake tasting today, and...someone there spilled coffee on it, then knocked it onto the ground along with the cake."

My world has just stopped.

MidKnight *is* Henry Stone.

And *I'm* the "someone."

"Are you there?" he says.

"Yup," I say, but my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, and it comes out more like, "yuk."

"Anyway, it was a complete accident, and I feel so awful for the person who broke it. She ran out crying, but it wasn't her fault at all. I wish I could tell her again that it's not a big deal, and I can just get a new phone tomorrow, but she didn't give me the chance." He lets out a breath. "I just hope... Never mind."

"You hope what?"

“She...” He laughs. “I hope this isn’t weird. We don’t normally talk about relationships like this. But she gave me her number, and I’m not sure if it synced before the phone broke. I guess I’ll find out tomorrow when I get my new phone.”

A squeaking sound comes out of my throat. I sure hope it didn’t come across the headset.

“Is a mouse there?” he asks.

“Hah!” I exclaim. “No. No mice. I hate mice. They’re the worst, you know? Just squeaking and their little feet with claws. Can’t handle that.” *Oh, no, Luna. Stop rambling!* “Anyway, I think I’m actually too tired to play tonight. I’m so sorry. But maybe tomorrow?”

“It’s only 8:20,” he says.

“Well, that’s what time it is for you!”

“Aren’t we in the same time zone?”

Shoot. We *have* discussed this before. But now I’m *petrified* that he’s going to figure out I’m Luna. Or ClockStriker is Luna. Or *whatever*.

This is so complicated!

“Yes, but I had a really rough day today, and I need some beauty sleep. Not that I think I’m beautiful. Ha ha! I just... need to get some rest. I’ll talk to you tomorrow!”

“Uh...okay. Have a good night.”

“You, too.” I log off and pull my headset off, laying it on the ground.

Then I stand next to the bed and fall flat on my face, screaming into the mattress.

Yes, I’m being a little overdramatic. But MidKnight—Henry—*cannot* know who I really am.

As Luna, I’ve presented myself as a classy, sophisticated woman who’s planning her friend’s wedding. Granted, I spilled a bunch of coffee and cake today and broke his phone,

but that's not the same as basically being *homeless* and *unemployed*.

Henry knows all about my financial struggles as ClockStriker. He knows I have no job, that I couldn't find a place to live—heck, he even knows that I couldn't afford an Xbox and he *bought one for me!!*

I don't know much right now, but I do know one thing:

He can't know who I really am.

chapter twenty-one

HENRY



“Come on, come on,” I mutter to myself.

Why do phone installations take forever?

I swung by the store this morning and got a new phone for myself, brought it to the office, and immediately plugged it in and tried to download my data backup. I can only pray that Luna’s phone number got saved in the few minutes between her setting it down and knocking it off the counter.

Wishful thinking, I know.

A knock sounds on my office door. “Henry?” My father pokes his head in.

“Hello, Father.”

“How’s everything going with the game?” He walks into the office and sits in the seat across from my desk.

“It’s going well, actually.” I take my eyes off the phone and focus on my father. “The new animator has completely revamped the graphics, and it looks much more professional now. We’re nearly there.”

“What’s left?”

“Well, a name, for one. But I think it’ll come soon. And I need a team of people to actually try it out, not just the AI filling in for the missing four players.”

“Ah.” My father nods, settling back in his chair. “And do you have that team set up?”

“Not yet.” I glance down at my phone. Still updating. “But I have an idea of whom to ask.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. I’m glad to hear things are going so well.” He shuffles in his seat a bit. “The board hopes that you’re going to succeed, but I don’t think I need to remind you how much is riding on the success of this gala.”

“Yes, Father. I’m aware. But I appreciate having your support with the board.”

He nods, then stands and walks over to my seat. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he gives me a wistful smile. “Your mother would have been so proud of you.”

I smile back at him, knowing how much he misses her. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

He squeezes my shoulder once, then steps away. “Well, then, my boy, I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything else.”

And just as he leaves the room, I see my phone screen light up.

It’s done.

As fast as I can, I grab the phone and unlock it, then immediately open to the contacts. I scroll down to L... Lisa, Lloyd, Luke...

Luna.

There it is.

And—bonus—it’s not the original number from the Pumpkin Patch.

“Yes!” I pump my fist in the air, then look out my office and see Sue staring at me. I give her a simple nod and resume my business on my phone. Quickly, I type out a message to her.

Hey, Luna. This is Henry Stone. Good news, I got a new phone and still have your number. I want to say again that what happened was really no big deal, and I'm so sorry you felt responsible. I promise, there are no hard feelings at all.

I send the message, hoping and praying that she'll respond. To distract myself from watching the screen and waiting for her response, I open the Discord app to my conversation with ClockStriker. She's my key to finding a team to test the game.

I see the last message she sent me yesterday afternoon.

Hey, MK. How's your day going?

That's odd. We don't normally send messages like that.

Regardless, I type out a message to her.

Hey, hope you got a good night of sleep last night. Just double checking if we'll be able to play tonight. I have something I need to discuss with you about the game.

I set the phone down on my desk, staring at it until one of the two girls messages me back.

chapter twenty-two

LUNA



Goodness gracious. This is going to be complicated.

Within a two-minute period, I get a text message from Henry and a Discord message from MidKnight.

The text message is super sweet, exactly what I would have expected from Henry. But I don't have the head space to deal with that right now. Especially not when the twins have tripled my workload for the day.

They never addressed what happened yesterday, instead giving me the cold shoulder and assigning me tons of tasks. Like going to their house, feeding their cat (who is basically the devil), and then doing all the deep cleaning. As if I'm their maid.

Deep cleaning their place is going to take a full week, at the very least. There are dust bunnies and cobwebs everywhere, and they've left all their clothes in piles on the floor. In a way, I'm thankful for the bit of distance between us. But I'm also disappointed that I'm not getting the chance to work on the menus and do something artistic for once. Instead, I've transitioned from personal assistant to servant and maid.

I remind myself that my apartment is free. And at least the twins aren't being outwardly antagonistic. I can handle this. I just need to finish my work on MidKnight's—Henry's—game, and with that experience under my belt, I'll be able to find some kind of job in the gaming industry.

So instead of texting Henry back as Luna, I respond to the Discord message.

Hey, I should be able to play tonight. Probably not until nine, though. Lots of work today. Hope that's not too late.

He sends back a thumbs up.

Now I just have to remember how I acted before I knew they were the same person.



“HEY, STRIKER,” Henry’s voice greets me through my headset that evening.

Now that I know Henry is MidKnight, his voice sounds exactly the same. Didn’t I recognize the hint of a British accent before? Of course, there are tons of people with that same accent. And using only my sense of hearing could be deceiving. I’ve mixed up my sisters and mom on the phone so many times. It doesn’t seem like he’s made the connection to my true identity, and I think my voice is pretty distinct. But when you don’t even consider the possibility of knowing an online person in real life, those similarities fade. Besides, Henry never presented himself as a gamer in person. But now that I know...it makes so much sense.

“Hey, MidKnight,” I reply. My voice is a little wobbly from nerves, but hopefully he doesn’t notice. “How was your day?”

“Pretty good. Things are moving with the debut of the game, so I’m feeling confident. And with your improved graphics, I can tell we’ll be ready.”

I beam. “Thanks. I’m just glad I could help.”

“How was your day?”

I exhale. Henry, as MidKnight, has always known about my financial difficulties, so sharing this part of me isn’t a stretch. But he would never know that Luna was going through all these issues. So while in my ClockStriker identity, I can express exactly what’s going on and why I’m overwhelmed. It’s a relief, to be honest, and such a contrast from how hard

it's been to present a put-together facade for Henry when he sees me as Luna.

“It was rough. My...bosses are being extra demanding. I'm working twelve-hour days. So I'm exhausted, but I don't know what else to do.”

“That sounds illegal.”

“I'm not so sure. They're giving me a place to stay in exchange for the work, so can't they ask me to do whatever they want?”

He pauses. “I honestly don't know. But it really seems like they're taking advantage of you.”

“It's hard to know. They're not mean or demanding, more like...clueless? But I did something yesterday that upset them, and things have gotten a little worse.” I sigh. “I just need to find a job so I can afford my own place, then I won't be tied to them anymore.”

“Well, this game will be out soon. And I'll be happy to provide a reference when you're looking for a job.”

My chest warms. Even to me as ClockStriker, he's so kind and genuine. For the first time since finding out that Henry and MidKnight are the same person, I realize just how perfect he is.

At the same time, there's nothing romantic going on between us online. Would he still feel the same type of romantic attraction to me as Luna if he knew all of this? Chad didn't.

But regardless, I'm grateful for his friendship and kindness.

“Thank you,” I say softly. “That means a lot.”

He's quiet, letting the moment sink in. Then he clears his throat. “I do have a favor to ask of you, though.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Things are going well with our testing of the game, but it's only the two of us with four AI players. We need to test it

out with real people. I think I can ask my younger sister to help us...”

Lily, I realize. The younger sister that he’s so protective of is Lily, the blonde from the pumpkin patch.

“But I was hoping you might fill in the other three spots.” He pauses. “Didn’t you say your family all plays video games?”

I cough, a little surprised. “You want me to ask my family to play with us?”

“I mean... Yes?” His voice sounds sheepish.

I laugh out loud. “I’m sure they’d love to.”

And then I panic for a moment. If we all play together, will they let my identity slip? I’ll just have to tell them to be careful not to use my actual name. It’s the least I can do for him, after everything he’s done for me.

“That would be amazing,” Henry says. “Do you think you could get them online this weekend?”

“I’ll call them tomorrow and ask if they can.” I think through my family members and who would want to play. My mom tolerates gaming but doesn’t play herself, so I count her out. “So I know my dad and youngest sister could play, since they have an Xbox at home. I don’t know about my other two sisters, but I’m sure one of them can fill the last spot.”

“That’s amazing. Thank you so much, Striker. I actually think your youngest sister would be great, because I want to make sure it’s kid-friendly, too.”

“I’ll call them tomorrow,” I confirm. “Should we play now?”



THE NEXT MORNING, I’m back at the twins’ apartment, scrubbing their toilets and showers. Before I came here, I already washed a load of laundry and their dishes. It’s a trek to get to their apartment, but the beauty of being here is that I can make phone calls and text messages without anyone listening.

I send a message to the Jones family group chat.

Hey everyone. Anyone free tomorrow night? I have a friend who wants to test out a game he's making.

And then, I finally send a text to Henry. I didn't respond to his initial message yesterday, too flustered about the revelation that they were the same person and that he now had my *actual* phone number. But I finally feel ready to respond.

Hey, Henry. I'm glad to hear you were able to get a new phone and that it saved my real number! Again, I'm so sorry about how that all happened. I'm normally not such a klutz! But it was good to see you again.

Almost immediately, he writes back.

I'm so glad to hear from you! Please, don't apologize. I'm busy working right now, but I'd love to chat more later.

With a big smile, I tuck my phone back in my pocket and start wiping down the mirror in the bathroom. I let myself daydream about Henry, since cleaning doesn't take a lot of brain power. Now that the initial shock of Henry and MidKnight being the same person has worn off, I imagine the possibility of letting him know who I am, too. He'd be happy, right? We have this amazing friendship online, especially now that we talk over voice chat, and there's an insane physical connection between us in person, not to mention the connection we had during our conversation on the train.

But my heart sinks when I remember Chad, my ex-boyfriend. Blech. Yes, he was a terrible person, and I should have known that from the start. But the words he said to me, claiming that I was wasting my life and throwing away my future for the sake of my family, have been ingrained in my memory.

I always think about what I should have said to him. That I know my priorities. That there's nothing more important than family. That people are worth more than the clothes they wear

and how much money they make; what truly matters is what's in their heart.

But I was too chicken to say any of that to him. Instead, I internalized his last words.

My mom texts back first, shaking me from my thoughts.

MOM

Thanks, sweetie, but I think I should sit this one out.

I didn't expect her to actually participate, but it was sweet of her to write back.

HAZEL

I'm busy. Sorry, MooMoo!

DAD

Katy and I should be free. She's at school right now, but Mom says she doesn't have any plans.

He sends a picture of two baby chicks, one yellow and one gray with brown accents.

DAD

Meet Chickaletta Jr and Nugget. We got some new baby chicks to ease the loss.

I smile at the picture.

They're adorable. I hope I can meet them soon.

So far, so good. Dad and Katy make two players, so now I have to hope that Ivy will be free.

Just then, my phone rings with a call from her.

“Hey, Ivy!” I say.

“MooMoo!” she exclaims. “I haven’t heard from you in forever! How are you?”

“I’m good,” I say. “How are you and baby girl?”

“Ugh, she keeps me up all night with her kicking. I love it, but I’m so looking forward to her being out of my belly.”

“I believe it. I know how much you love your sleep.”

She snorts. “So, explain this game thing to me. And who this friend is.”

“It’s MidKnight. Haven’t I told you about him?”

“I think you have.”

“He created his own video game. I’ve been helping him with the animation, and we’ve been playing it together but using AI to fill in the missing players. He asked if I could get some people to play it Saturday night so we can test it out with real people.”

“That actually sounds fun, and I don’t have any plans. Scott and Ethan are prepping for their trip, so I’ll be home alone.”

“Trip? What trip?”

She sighs. “Can you believe Scott is leaving me for Silver Lake City in two weeks? He and Ethan backed some new video game company, and they’re going to be at the gala for its debut.” She pauses. “Oh, my goodness, you could probably see them! Baby brain is messing with me. I just realized they’ll be so close to you.”

How many times in one week can my heart stop without killing me?

Scott, my brother-in-law, and Ethan Taylor, Thea’s husband, are the investors Henry was meeting with in Canyon Cove. *That’s* why he was on the train back to Silver Lake City with me the first time we met. And *that’s* why Thea said she was coming up here in a few weeks with Ethan and could do a dress fitting for Madeleine.

My mind is officially blown.

The bathroom door creaks open behind me. Startled, I turn around, afraid that Ana or Drea have come home and are eavesdropping on my conversation.

Instead, Devil Cat waltzes in the door.

“Ugh, get out of here!” I stand and try to shoo the cat out of the way, but he won’t move. Lazily, he walks around me and jumps onto the bathroom counter.

“Please get down,” I plead.

“What’s going on?” Ivy asks.

“There’s a cat in here, and he’s giving me these evil eyes. I know he’s up to something.”

As I say that, he stares right into my soul, and with a flick of his tail, knocks down all the items on the counter. Hairspray, toothbrushes, and a soap dispenser all come crashing down.

“No!” I squeal.

But he doesn’t stop there. He walks along the counter, swishing his tail and knocking down the twins’ makeup bags. I try to reach for him, but he hisses at me. I’m not a cat person, so I’m not about to pick him up when he clearly wants to claw me to death.

After reaching the edge of the counter, he turns, peruses his empire of destruction, and must deem it complete, because he hops down to the ground and slinkily exits the bathroom.

Relieved, I slam the door shut and lock it for good measure.

“What in the world is going on?” Ivy asks.

“It’s a long story.” I kneel and start picking up the makeup, praying none of their expensive eye shadows or blushes have cracked. If they can’t afford to pay me, they probably won’t be able to replace these items, either.

I haven’t told my family the details of my current situation. They’re not aware of my attic apartment or the fact that I’m

not getting paid to be a servant. I don't want them to worry, and that's exactly what they'd do.

I change back to the original subject. "So. About gaming on Saturday. There are a couple of things I need to ask you."

"Sure."

"Do you have an Xbox?"

"No, but I can get one. I've been missing my dance game anyway, and I figure that'll be a fun way to get back in shape after Baby Girl is here."

"Okay, cool." I tamp down any jealousy that buying an Xbox won't be a huge investment for her, but she deserves to have nice things after all the sacrifices she made for our family. "So, the other thing is a little weird. See, the guy and I keep our personal identities private. He doesn't know my real name, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Okay," she says slowly. "Why exactly is that?"

"We just..." I hesitate. There's so much background now, especially because I know exactly who he is in real life. But I'm not about to explain all of that to her. "You know how guys online can be."

"Yeah, but this is a friend of yours. You worked on his game for him, and he doesn't know your name?"

"I..." She's right, of course, but I don't know how to respond.

She sighs. "Luna, you need to be brave. Take chances now and then. You're beautiful, kind, and talented. You don't need to be afraid to show who you really are."

I don't know what to say. While her words fill me with confidence, especially coming from my older sister, whom I admire so much, I'm still not ready to share everything with Henry.

She continues. "But if that's what you want, I'll respect your wishes. So what am I supposed to call you while we play?"

“My gamer tag is ClockStriker. You know that. But you can shorten it to Striker.”

“That’s still too long. I think I’ll stick to MooMoo.”

I groan. “Seriously?”

“You know you love it,” she teases in a sing-song voice. “Thanks, MooMoo, we’ll talk on Saturday!”

She hangs up, and I hear a crash in the twins’ bedroom.

“What now?” I say, opening the bathroom door and rushing over there.

Somehow, Devil Cat managed to unlock the twins’ closet and send shoe boxes crashing down all around him.

“Oh, no,” I murmur to myself, scrambling to match up shoes with their boxes.

These shoes are a lot nicer than I would expect for two struggling bakers. I hold up one shoe and admire it. They have pretty big feet, but that doesn’t mean they can’t wear beautiful shoes. I flip it over to look at the brand name on the sole—Manolo Blahnik. I don’t know much about fashion, but I know that’s a big deal.

I keep looking through the shoes and finding more designer brands—Prada, Jimmy Choo, and even the signature red sole of Christian Louboutin.

Maybe they bought these a long time ago? But the soles aren’t scuffed at all.

I straighten, putting the shoe boxes back in the closet. Hopefully, they won’t notice if they’re stacked in a different order. Next to the shoes are dresses in all colors and designs. Gucci, Chanel, Dior, Prada. *What in the world?* This doesn’t look like the closet for my bosses, who claim they can’t afford to hire a housecleaner or assistant. Sure, they’re giving me free rent, but I’m sure it’s nowhere near the amount of money these dresses are worth. And even at minimum wage, the cost of my rent would be probably half the salary I deserve for working these hours for them.

I'm about to close the closet and ignore the niggling thoughts in my mind when I hear Devil Cat knocking over something else on their desk.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I rush over to the desk, a mess as usual, and start picking up the papers that fluttered everywhere.

Including receipts.

From three days ago.

For dresses and shoes from Prada.

I look over at Devil Cat, who's sitting still and watching my every move.

"You're trying to tell me something, aren't you?" I ask him.

He stands and stretches, then saunters out of the room. He looks back at me, swishes his tail, and shuts the door to the bedroom.

I'm not sure whether that cat is my friend or enemy, but either way, this changes everything.

chapter twenty-three

HENRY



“Remember, don’t call me Henry,” I warn Lily.

“Yes, yes, I’ll just call you Mr. Stone instead.”

“Lily!”

“I’m joking! You’re so tense.” I hear her laugh lightly through my headset. “Don’t worry. I won’t disclose your secret identity, Superman.”

“Thank you.” I sigh. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous.”

“Because you’re meeting the family. This is a big step in your relationship.”

“Don’t say it like it’s romantic.”

She pauses. “Can you honestly say that there’s no romantic spark between you two?”

“Honestly? I don’t want to have this conversation right now.”

She huffs. “We have a few minutes. They’re not supposed to be on until seven.”

I take a moment to consider her question. *Do* I have romantic feelings for ClockStriker? “I wouldn’t say they’re romantic feelings necessarily. But I do feel strongly for her. She’s a great friend, and I know she’s also going through some difficult things in her personal life, even if she doesn’t share all the details. I look forward to spending time with her every day. But can you have true romantic feelings for someone

you've never met?" I shake my head, even though Lily can't see. "It's not the same as how I feel about Luna."

"Luna," Lily repeats with another laugh. "You're so infatuated with her."

"But it's not just surface," I insist. "We spent hours talking on that train ride. And we keep getting interrupted every time we've met in person since then."

"I feel like you need the attraction to Luna mixed with your personal attachment to ClockStriker, and you'd have the perfect relationship."

She might be right, but I don't want to admit it. "The potential is there with Luna. We just need to spend more time together. We've been texting quite a bit over the last few days, now that I've got her correct phone number. And I'm going to ask her to come to the gala. As my date."

Lily squeals out loud. "Yay! That's perfect! She can't run away from you there."

I laugh. "Let's hope not."

"And ClockStriker?"

"I'm going to invite her too, of course. She's going to be credited as one of the animators on the game, and she deserves to have that praise. But I don't know if she'll make it."

"Why not?"

"For one, I don't know where she lives. I know she's on the West Coast, but it might be a trek. And for another, she's got financial difficulties. I don't want to stress her out with needing to find a dress."

"You could buy her one."

"I could." I consider it for a moment. "I'll offer. But I doubt she'll accept, after how much I had to push to get her the Xbox in the first place."

Just then, I see her name appear on my screen. I invite her to the party, and she invites her family members.

“Hello, everyone,” I say. “Thank you so much for agreeing to test out my game tonight.”

“Oh, my, he sounds sexy,” a voice similar to ClockStriker’s says.

“Ivy!” ClockStriker squeals.

“What?” I hear her sigh. “It’s these pregnancy hormones. They’re making me say crazy things.”

“What was your excuse before?” mutters a childish, female voice.

“And in front of your father,” a deep, male voice chimes in. “Ivy, please keep those thoughts to yourself.”

“Fine. Hi, MidKnight, I’m Ivy, MooMoo’s older and more fun sister.”

“And I’m Katy, MooMoo’s younger and even *more* fun sister.”

“And I’m Brent, MooMoo’s dad.”

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I say, already knowing this is going to be an entertaining evening. “I’m here, along with my younger sister, Lily.”

“Hey, everyone,” Lily says. “You sound like a lot of fun.”

I notice that ClockStriker has been unusually silent. “So, MooMoo, are you ready to play?” I tease.

I hear her groan while the rest of her family laughs. “I had a feeling you’d latch onto that.”

I can’t help the smile that grows on my face. Her family is *fun*—teasing, but also loving. It’s similar in some ways to my family, but my siblings and I aren’t nearly as close as these girls.

“Okay, MidKnight, tell them about the game so we can get this over with,” she says, but I can hear the lightness in her voice that tells me she isn’t truly upset.

I take a few minutes to explain the premise of the game and the controls. I’m most worried about Katy, ClockStriker’s

youngest sister, but if she can figure it out, I'll have a lot of confidence in the user-friendliness of the game.

"How should we split up the teams?" I ask her.

"You and I should split up since we're the most experienced," she says. "So do you want—"

"I volunteer as tribute!" her older sister, Ivy, says.

"Huh?" ClockStriker asks.

"I'll play with MidKnight and Lily."

"Oh, no," ClockStriker mutters.

"It's decided! You, Dad, and Katy, versus me and the siblings. Let's go!"

Based on ClockStriker's reaction, I feel like I *really* want to play with Ivy now, so I don't delay and set up the teams. "All right, here we go!" I announce. "I'm adjusting our voice chat groups now so we won't hear each other's strategies. We'll discuss afterwards."

And with that, I'm alone in the chat with Lily and Ivy.

The countdown for the game has begun, but Ivy doesn't waste any time. "So, MidKnight, what are your intentions with our MooMoo?"

"I'm...I'm sorry?"

"You heard me."

ClockStriker's sister is intimidating. Now I understand what she meant when she said her sisters steal the spotlight, while she fades into the background. Not that she fades into the background with me. But I can see why she'd feel that way. Even though Ivy is outspoken and admittedly amusing, I much prefer ClockStriker's quiet presence and steadiness.

"She's a good friend of mine. A very good friend. And I'm thankful for her assistance in the game. I really hope it helps her find a job. I've already promised to serve as a reference for her."

"But she doesn't know who you really are."

I swallow. “True. I suppose we’ll have to share that soon enough.” If I’m inviting her to the gala, she’ll find out then, as well.

“Hmph. Well, as long as you’re planning on sharing your actual identity soon, then maybe you’re not so bad. I’m still worried that you’re a creep hanging out in your parents’ basement.”

“I can assure you, he’s not,” Lily chimes in. “But I appreciate your spunk. He’s extremely successful. In fact, he’s next in line to—”

“Oh, here goes the game!” I cut Lily off. I hear her laugh, but she follows my lead.

Ivy is really fun to play with, full of squeals when she gets eaten by sharks and cheers when she shoots bubbles at the obstacles in the way. At the end of the match, we reach the center first.

We exit the game, and I create a voice chat for the entire group again. My heart races as I wonder what everyone is going to think.

“So?” I ask once everyone is back on.

“That. Was. Awesome,” Katy says enthusiastically.

“It really was great,” Brent agrees.

“The graphics are a million times better,” Lily adds. “It was *so* much worse before MooMoo got her hands on it.”

“You, too?” ClockStriker groans, and we all laugh.

“Where did that nickname even come from?” I ask. Maybe I can take advantage of this opportunity to find out more about ClockStriker in real life.

“Oh, it’s from me!” Katy says excitedly. “When I was little, I had a really hard time pronouncing words, so saying L ___”

“MooMoo was easier than saying my name,” ClockStriker says loudly, covering Katy’s words.

Was she about to say her actual name?

“Well, kind of,” Katy protests. “It’s really—”

“Not important,” Ivy says, and I can imagine that ClockStriker is grateful for her sister’s intervention. Apparently, she warned some of them not to say her real name, the same way I warned Lily about mine.

“Want to play another round?” I ask, changing the subject.

I hear a chorus of yeses.

“I actually have to go,” Lily says. “I have to be somewhere.”

“Oh. Okay.” Where is she going? I shouldn’t be so overprotective, but she’s still my baby sister. “Thanks for coming on. I’m glad you made the time for me.”

“Of course, big bro. Love you. Have fun.”

She signs off, and with ClockStriker’s family, we play a few more rounds. We switch up the teams, so I play with her father and youngest sister, and then ClockStriker and I take on her family members.

“That wasn’t fair,” Katy complains after the last game. “You guys have way more practice than we do.”

“How about you keep practicing, and we’ll play again another time?” I ask.

“Yay!” she squeals.

“Katy! Bed!” I hear a faint female voice coming from someone’s headset.

“Ugh, Mom!” Katy complains.

“Your mother’s right,” her dad says. “MidKnight, it was nice meeting you. Thanks for having us play your game. It was a lot of fun.”

“Thank you so much for spending time with me. Have a good night.”

“I should go, too,” Ivy says. “I can’t sit like this any longer. Baby girl is crowding my lungs and pressing on my bladder. Have fun, guys.”

And then ClockStriker and I are left alone.

“Your family is pretty amazing,” I comment. “I can see why you love them so much.”

“Thanks. We’ve been really close over the years. There’s been...a lot of hardship.”

“Oh?” They seem so perfect, with their intact parental marriage and stable daughters.

She hesitates. “About four years ago, my parents and Katy were in a car accident on the way home from a wedding. My dad was temporarily paralyzed. It was pretty terrifying.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.” I pause, thinking back on our relationship over the last couple of years. “Is that why you were living at home?”

She pauses. “Yes, it was. Ivy took over when it first happened because I was still in college. But after she got married, I took the responsibility.” She pauses. “I’m glad I did it. They needed me, and those first few years were really difficult for them. But...I think I used it as an excuse. I should have been braver and taken more chances.” She takes in a breath, and I can even hear how shaky it is on my side of the headset. “So that’s what I’m doing now. Sort of. I don’t know. But moving out was a big step for me.”

“And that’s going...well?”

She laughs tightly. “Hah. Not really. But I’m working on it.”

There’s silence for a moment. I’m not sure what to say.

“I miss them,” she adds quietly. “It was almost harder being online with them today. Even though my best friend lives here in this same city, it’s really lonely.”

“I can relate,” I say, looking around my apartment. How many times lately have I thought about how lonely I am, especially once my brothers abandoned us after my mother’s passing? But being friends with ClockStriker has made me feel like I have a friend. “That’s why I’m grateful for you. And our friendship.”

“Me, too.” And I swear I can hear a smile in her voice.

chapter twenty-four

LUNA



Playing with Henry last night got way more personal than I meant.

I still wonder what exactly Ivy said to him when they played their match, but she's not saying a word. Then Katy said my name out loud, but I'm hoping I was even louder so he wouldn't hear. It's not like Luna is a super popular name.

I wonder if even using my sisters' and dad's names was the right call. If he really wanted to, he could look up my family's names and surely find us somewhere online. But I can't do anything about that now.

But then I really went deep with him, sharing my family history and how lonely I feel. I try hard not to dwell on that. I'm here for Madeleine. She needs me. But I still miss having someone in my corner supporting me.

Since it's Sunday, my only task today is to mop the floors of the bakery. I'm planning on doing that as soon as I get out of bed, but I'm allowing myself a lazy morning for once.

My phone buzzes.

It's a call from Henry.

I sit upright in bed, suddenly awake. We've been texting back and forth over the last few days, just some sweet messages saying how he hopes I'm having a good day and joking about riding in a pumpkin carriage, but nothing serious.

And now he's calling.

I clear my throat and pick up the phone. *Oh, no. Will he realize I sound like ClockStriker now?* “Hello?” Oh, thank goodness. My voice is super gravelly from waking up, and I know I sound pretty different from our usual late-night chats.

“Hello, Luna?”

“That’s me!” Oh, goodness. *Tone it down, Luna.* “How are you?”

“I’m doing well, thank you. I wasn’t sure if you’d pick up. Many people avoid phone conversations.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine.” Of course, I don’t say anything about being used to talking to him over voice chat now, so it’s natural to speak with him on the phone.

“Well, I’m glad you did. I was wondering if you were busy this morning. I was hoping we could grab a coffee together.”

My eyes widen. He’s asking me out...on an official date? This has to be a dream. “Um, I’m mostly free.” Unless you count mopping the floors, but I can do that at any point in the day.

“That’s great! I was thinking I could come to Brookhaven and we could go to the coffee shop across the street from Twin Cakes, since that will be close to you.”

“Are you sure? You just drove out here a few days ago.”

“It’s not a problem. I’m happy to do it.”

Butterflies start fluttering all around my stomach. I can’t believe he’s willing to make that drive just to see me again. Twice in one week. And three times in the last eight days, if you include the Pumpkin Patch Festival.

I’ve never been pursued like this.

I’ve been silent too long, so I ask, “What time do you want to meet?”

“I can be there around ten, if that works for you.”

I check my phone again for the time. That’s an hour from now. “Sounds good!” I might even mop the floors quickly before heading to the shop.

“See you then.” He hangs up, and I hop out of bed with renewed enthusiasm for the day.



I WALK in the door of the coffee shop at 10:10, my enthusiasm completely morphed into anxiety. Why didn't I think about the fact that I know he's both Henry and MidKnight?

As I mopped the floors this morning (which is why I'm ten minutes late), I thought about the fact that I haven't been asked for my number or been on a first date since Chad. Two years of no dates, no admirers, nothing.

Why?

Was Chad right, after all? Did I lose all of my appeal when I moved back home to help my family?

Will Henry feel the same way when he realizes that I'm unemployed and homeless?

So now, my confidence is a little shaken.

And I have to be *extra* careful to make sure he doesn't realize I'm also ClockStriker. The scary thing is, he knows a lot about my personal life as ClockStriker, and not as much as Luna. So how can I go on a date with him, when we're clearly trying to find out more about each other, without giving too much away?

My excitement has waned, but that doesn't mean I'm staying away.

As soon as I walk in, the bell on the door rings to alert my entrance. I immediately find Henry sitting at one of the tiny tables. He stands immediately when he sees me, and I'm *again* struck by his handsome good looks, perfect physique, and overall incredible presence. I'm not the only one who notices; all the women in the shop turn and stare.

I wave at him, and he strides over to me.

“Sorry I'm late,” I say. “I had a couple of things to get done before I had my day free.”

“Not a problem. I don't mind waiting for you.”

I smile, my heart fluttering. He gestures over to the counter so we can place our orders.

“Henry?” A blonde woman with two little boys eating cake pops interrupts us before we can reach the counter.

“Gwen! I haven’t seen you in forever!” He gives her a hug, and of course I feel a twinge of jealousy. But maybe those are her kids?

“So good to run into you,” she says. She peers around him to see me. “Hi! I’m Gwendolyn. But you can call me Gwen.”

Henry chuckles. “Or, like my brother Peter, you can call her Wendi.”

She fixes him with a teasing glare. “He’s the only one allowed to call me that.”

“I’m Luna.” I hold out my hand, and she shakes it.

“You two are...” She raises her eyebrows.

“On a date,” Henry says.

Holy smokes. So assertive. I absolutely adore it.

“That’s great.” She smiles widely, and I figure she isn’t interested in Henry, after all. She clears her throat. “So, how’s Peter doing? It looks like he’s having quite an adventure from his social media.”

I don’t miss the faint blush that rises on her cheeks as she mentions Henry’s younger brother. Ooh, this just got interesting.

Henry’s jaw tenses. “I haven’t spoken to him much lately. But yes, he looks like he’s having a great time.” Putting together the information I know about him in real life with our conversations online, it makes sense that he’s a little bitter about his younger brother’s lack of responsibility and desire to act like...well, a little boy.

“Are these...” Henry gestures at the children. “Yours?”

“Oh, no!” She laughs. “I’m just their nanny. That’s all I can handle for now.”

“Ah.” Henry nods. The barista calls us over to place our order, and Henry smiles at Gwen. “Well, it was good to see you.”

“You, too! And if you talk to Peter, tell him I said hi.” She waves and leaves the shop with the two kids.

“She’s clearly into your brother,” I whisper.

“No kidding,” Henry responds. “There’s a lot of history there.” He turns to the barista and orders a London fog latte, then turns to me. “And yours?”

“Oh!” Another five points for Henry Stone. I was hoping he’d offer to pay, but I know better than to expect anything. After all, I’ve been the “just friend” to many guys over the years. “A pumpkin spice latte, please.”

“I didn’t think you’d want anything to do with pumpkin after that carriage ride,” he says with a smirk.

I chuckle. “Drinking it in coffee form is different.”

The barista rings us up, and we head to one of the little tables. Like a perfect gentleman, Henry pulls out my chair and waits for me to sit before taking a seat himself.

“So, how are you enjoying Brookhaven so far?” he asks.

I set my elbows on the table and lean toward him. “It’s been really nice. Canyon Cove was on the smaller side, but still suburban. Living in this small town has been a welcome change...but it’s still an adjustment.”

“How so?”

I tip my head to the table behind me. “Suzette is back there, and I’m pretty sure she’s taking diligent notes to post on the Brookhaven Buzz. She runs the gossip section.”

His eyes flick over to Suzette, then back to me with a conspiratorial smirk. “Well, maybe we should give her something to write about.” He reaches his hand across the table and holds mine.

“Oh.” I can’t help the little exclamation that passes through my lips. After all, we’ve already *kissed*. But this is so

public and intentional. And I hear a little gasp from behind me, no doubt from Suzette paying rapt attention to our interactions.

The barista calls Henry's name, and he squeezes my hand once before standing to get our drinks. I'd fan myself if I didn't know that Suzette was watching my every move.

"Here you go," he says, setting my drink down in front of me. I take a sip, noting that he watches me with a smile. "How is it?"

"Delicious." I grin at him. "So, you have some event coming up?"

"Oh, yes. I guess you overheard some of that a few days ago."

I nod, but don't say more. I don't want to really go into the details of what happened at the bakery.

"It's a very important event for my company. I'm starting up a gaming division of my family's business, Stone Technologies, and I'll set up a demo version of the game there for investors and game critics to try out." He exhales. "That's actually a big reason I wanted to see you today, so I could invite you to come. As my date."

My jaw drops. Henry Stone is inviting *me* to be his date to a huge gala? This can't be real. Going out to coffee is one thing, but being his date at a public event for his family's company is way more than I was expecting.

"What do you think?" he asks. I guess I've been silent for too long.

"I—I wasn't expecting this."

"I hope it's not too much of a surprise." He pauses, tilting his head. "I'd like to think I've been pretty clear about my feelings toward you."

Someone pinch me. Not only is this man gorgeous, he has no qualms with letting a girl know how he feels. Is he real? He seems fictional, like someone I've conjured in a dream.

"I think I had some kind of idea," I say slowly. After all, that kiss after the train ride was obvious enough. But it's been

so long since then, I didn't know.

He chuckles, low and light. "You don't have to give me an answer now, if it's too much—"

"No!"

"No?" He raises his brows in alarm. "Meaning you won't come with me?"

"No." I laugh. "I don't need time. I'd love to come with you."

"Really?" His eyes light with joy, and his childlike excitement makes me grin from ear to ear. "That's great. Just so you're prepared, it's in two weeks, and it is a formal event."

My heart sinks for a moment. Why didn't I put together the fact that a gala would be a formal event, meaning I'd need some kind of gown? I can't afford something fancy. But I can't let him know. I'm sure I can pull something together. I paste a bright smile back on my face. "Sure. That makes sense. Thanks for letting me know."

"Great." He reaches across the table and squeezes my hand again. "I'll text you the details. Thank you, Luna."

"Thank you? For what?"

He shakes his head slightly. "I just...I'm really glad I met you."

Oh, my. He's made me into a puddle again.

"Me, too."

chapter twenty-five

HENRY



“What about Undersea Race?” I ask.

ClockStriker sighs. “MidKnight, you’re terrible at this.”

I snort a laugh. Only she can call me out on my flaws without hurting my feelings.

“You made a great game,” she continues quickly. “But naming is...not your strong suit.”

“My feelings aren’t hurt. And your input saved the game.”

“Thank you,” she says softly. “Let me look at the poster again and see if I get some inspiration.” She’s quiet for a moment, presumably analyzing the image I sent her through Discord. “The art is really beautiful, but I feel like it’s missing something.”

“Oh?” I check the image on my phone, a blonde mermaid gliding across the front, smiling like she has a secret.

“It’s missing the point of the game,” she says.

Of course. “The stone,” I say.

“Right.” I can imagine her nodding, except I don’t know what she looks like. “You want to know what she’s doing and why. Maybe if you had a peek of the world above, too? Not just the underwater scene?”

“That’s a great idea. Should I just have them put the stone in the background?”

“You could do that.” She pauses. “Or you could have her reaching for it.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant. You’re so good at this, Striker.”

“Thank you.” She’s quiet another moment. “I feel like the name of the game should allude to the quest for the stone, too.”

“How about Quest for the Stone?”

“Mmm,” she hums thoughtfully. “That’s better than Undersea Race. And Underwater Adventure.”

I laugh out loud. “True.” I wait another moment. “Nautical Nexus?”

She sighs loudly. “Please tell me you’re not on ChatGPT trying to find a name of your video game.”

“I...” I laugh out loud. “You caught me.”

“You’re ridiculous.” She pauses. “How about...Sea Stone: Race to the Shore?”

I stay silent for a moment, letting it sink in.

“Never mind,” she says quickly. “That was worse than Underwater Adventure.”

“Not at all. It’s...it’s perfect.” I shake my head. “I don’t know what I would do without you. Truly.”

“Oh.” Her voice comes out like a squeak. “Thank you. I’m just happy to help.”

I wish I knew how to repay her for everything she’s done for me. Because she’s done this out of the genuine kindness of her heart, but she’s saved me and this game from complete humiliation and failure.

I just have to think.



“GOOD MORNING, SUE,” I say, walking past her desk on Wednesday morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Stone.” She smiles at me, adjusting her purple glasses.

“How are the plans for the gala going?” I ask.

“Wonderful! Everything is nearly set. With ten days to go, we’re ahead of schedule.”

“That’s great to hear.” One less thing for me to worry about. I wave goodbye and head into my office.

Settling into my chair, I review the list of investors and critics who will be at the gala. While it fills me with excitement, I can’t help the dread I feel at the consequences of the night. This will either make or break my career. The board is watching my every move, and I have to make sure I exceed their expectations.

My phone rings with a call from Lily. “Lily? Is everything okay?”

“Ugh, yes.” She sighs. “I need help with math again. I have a test in two hours.”

“Sounds like we should have studied last night.”

“Yeah, well...something came up.”

I can feel her secrecy growing over the last few weeks, but I’m trying to respect her rights as an adult. A young adult, at that, but still. She deserves to be treated as...well, not like my baby sister.

“All right, what are we working on?”

She switches to FaceTime and we work through a few business calculus problems together, calculating the maximum profits using derivatives and testing for intervals of increase and decrease. Once she seems to understand the concept, she sits back in her chair.

“Thank you,” she says. “That was so helpful. I think I’ll be okay.”

“I think so. You seem to have a good grasp on it now.”

“Okay, and now back to you.” Her eyes have a mischievous twinkle to them.

“Excuse me?”

“I know Luna is coming to the gala, but have you invited ClockStriker yet?”

I gape at her. “Is that what this phone call was really about?”

She smirks. “Maybe.”

I huff. How do I explain my reasoning to her? “I know you’re a fan of ClockStriker’s, but I’m not sure she’d come.”

“So you *haven’t* invited her yet?”

I clear my throat, delaying the inevitable. “Not exactly.”

“Why not?”

Where do I even begin? “For one thing, it means I’d have to share my actual identity with her.”

“So?”

“So, she’ll realize even more the disparity between us. She’s been very open about her financial struggles, and I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. Not that I feel that way at all. I have a lot of respect for her and the way she’s taken care of her family over the years. But I know that she’s sensitive about it.”

“I feel like she’ll respect you more, knowing that you’ve been her friend this entire time and you haven’t judged her for it.”

I tilt my head. “Maybe.” I rub my cheek with my hand. “But then there’s the issue of her even attending. Based on all of her financial issues, I don’t think it would be an option.”

“Well, that’s up to her, not you. You still need to put the invitation out there.”

She’s got a point. It’s not my decision to make. I need to allow her to make her own choices.

“And even if she doesn’t come,” she adds, “you need to do something nice for her.”

“I know. She’s saved my game and my career, probably more than she even knows.”

“And you said she helped with naming the game, right? By the way, major props to her on that one. Sea Stone is *so* much better than Underwater Adventure.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, I’m aware.”

“You got her the Xbox and headset, which was really nice, but she deserves a gift. Even if she won’t accept money.”

Again, she makes a good point. “Thanks, Lily. I’ll think about it.”

She nods once. “Well, it’s time for me to go take my exam. Thanks again for the ‘help.’” She uses finger air quotes and winks at me, then hangs up the call.

A gift for ClockStriker. What would she enjoy?

Something game-related for sure. But not another piece of technology. That would be boring and impersonal.

Sitting on my desk is the final proof of the poster for the game. The mermaid across the front is the focus, but I made the adjustment ClockStriker suggested to have her reaching for the stone.

The stone.

That gives me just the idea I need.

I grab my phone and dial our local jeweler. Hopefully, he can complete this project within the next ten days.

chapter twenty-six

LUNA



“I’m sure they’ll have *something* here for you,” Madeleine says, lightly touching the faded jean jackets on the carousel. “Martha’s been running this vintage shop for years, and I’ve always found hidden gems.”

I’m not so sure. Martha’s Magical Museum, the Brookhaven vintage shop, is anything *but* magical. It smells like mildew, the clothes are mostly from the nineties, and the only other person in here is an elderly man who looks at me with a scowl. I’m exhausted after a long week of work, but Friday night was the only time Madeleine had to go shopping. After all, we’re going to Thea’s hotel tomorrow in Silver Lake City to have her first dress fitting.

The twins have been even more insufferable lately. I was right about Suzette—she took down every detail of my coffee shop date with Henry and posted it in the gossip section of the Brookhaven Buzz. It’s not like he tried to kiss me or anything (although part of me really wished he did), but she made it very clear that we were romantically involved. The twins haven’t said anything specifically about it to me, but I can sense their growing animosity in the doubling down on my tasks.

And I haven’t said anything to them about the receipts. How exactly am I supposed to address it? “Hey, I found a bunch of receipts, and either you’re massively in debt or you’re lying about paying me.” And then what? I demand to be paid? I can’t do that. The only option I have right now is to stick it out as long as I can, get my name on Henry’s game,

and use that as experience to find a paying job in animation. At that point, I'll be able to afford a decent place to live.

The old man keeps staring at us, his brows furrowed. Maybe he's having a bad day. I smile at him, and, to my surprise, he smiles back a wide, toothless grin.

"Hey, Martin," Madeleine calls to him. "He's Martha's husband," she whispers to me. "He's the real genius behind the store."

"Ah." I glance around the room, trying to see if there's any kind of formalwear section.

Martin hobbles over to us with his hunched back and cane. "Hello, Madeleine," he says, his voice gruff but his face still smiling. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Luna. She's from Canyon Cove."

"Canyon Cove. Bah! All those fancy-pants women doing nothing but drinking all day."

"I agree," I reply, and his face lights up. "But I'm not interested in those fancy things."

Madeleine squeezes my shoulder. "She does need a gown for an event coming up, though, and she's a little short on cash. Do you have anything she could look through?"

He looks me up and down, sizing me up, then points his cane from the top of my head down to my toes. "You're about five foot three?"

I smile. "Yes."

"Those feet look tiny. Size five?"

"Four, actually. Shoe shopping is almost impossible."

He brightens. "Come back here to the formal section. I have a few things you can look through. And I think I have the perfect shoes for you."

He hobbles to the back corner of the store, uses his cane to point us to the gowns, and then disappears behind a curtain into another section.

Madeleine and I flip through a few dresses. “Remember,” Madeleine says, “Thea is here for my dress fitting, so she can probably do minor alterations on any dress you choose, even if it’s not the perfect fit.”

I nod, that sinking feeling in my stomach returning. *Thea* is coming because *Ethan* is coming for *Henry’s* gala.

Again, this is getting so complicated.

“I have to tell you something,” I say suddenly.

Madeleine looks at me, alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

“I haven’t told you everything. I was so shaken up when I ran into Henry at the cake shop, and I wasn’t sure if he was who he was then, and we haven’t seen each other much since that day, and—”

“Luna! Just say it!”

“Henry and MidKnight are the same person!” The words explode from my mouth.

Madeleine slaps a hand over her mouth, her blue eyes wide. “You’re kidding.”

I shake my head.

“That’s amazing!” She squeals and pulls me into a hug. “Oh, I’m so happy for you!”

I pull away from her. “Wait, what?”

“The guy from the train and your best online friend are the same person? It’s like a fairy tale!”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t understand. He doesn’t know that *I’m* the same person.”

She blinks a few times. “Why haven’t you told him?”

“Because he thinks so highly of me as Luna. I presented myself as this collected, together woman moving to a new city with a job and a place to stay. But as ClockStriker...” I gesture at the store. “Well, let’s just say he wouldn’t be surprised that I’m shopping here.”

She tilts her head. “Do you think he’d care? I feel like he’d be thrilled to know the truth.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I’m...too scared to find out. I don’t want to lose him.”

“Lose him?” She blinks at me a few times, processing. “Are you still worked up over what happened with Chad?”

I’m grateful she knows me so well, but I’m not ready to admit all my issues to her. “I mean...”

She holds my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “Luna, you need to be brave.”

“That’s what Ivy would say,” I mutter.

She gives me a gentle shake. “Exactly. You need to tell him who you really are. He’s not Chad.” She turns back to the dresses. “But let’s find you a pretty dress first.”

We rifle through the dresses for a few minutes in silence. Could I do it? Could I tell Henry who I am?

“This one is nice,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. In her hands is a deep purple gown with a v-neck.

I grimace. “That’s a little old-fashioned.”

“It’s not so bad.” She hangs it over her arm. “You’re trying it on.”

I shake my head at her but keep looking. We pull out three more dresses for me to try, then head to the dressing room. I emerge in the purple gown she chose first.

“Blech.” Madeleine shudders. “No. You were right. Take it off.”

I laugh and head back into the room. The next two dresses elicit a similar reaction. But when I pull on the last dress, a rose-pink gown with off the shoulder sleeves, I feel like this one might work.

I step out of the dressing room, and Madeleine lights up. “Yes! That one is beautiful!” She walks a slow circle around me. “It needs to be taken in at the waist a little. And, of course, the hem needs to come up. It’s really pretty.”

I look at myself in the mirror and feel a small twinge of excitement. It's not perfect, but with a little bit of Thea's help, I should be able to pull it off.

The tag itches under my arm, and I finally look at the price.

A small gasp emerges from my lips. "Oh, Madeleine. I don't know if I can afford this."

She looks at the price, then back up at my face. "I've got it."

"No! You've already done so much for me!"

"Absolutely not. You moved up here and have spent every non-working hour helping me plan my wedding. This is the least I can do."

Tears fill my eyes with gratitude for my friend. "Thank you."

We hug, and while I'm so thankful for her, I feel a small amount of insecurity at not being able to afford even a second-hand dress. What would Henry think if he knew that this dress came from a vintage shop, and that my best friend had to buy it for me because I couldn't afford it myself?

"Here they are!" Martin says, hobbling toward us. He has the cane in one hand and a shoebox in the other. "The only size fours we've had for a few years." He looks me up and down. "That's a pretty dress."

"Thank you." I take a seat and open the shoebox. Inside are peep-toe stilettos. The fabric is sheer silver, and the sides are dotted with crystals. The toe has a beautiful crystal butterfly, and the heel is studded with incredible sparkling gems.

I flip the shoe over and see the signature red sole. And it has absolutely no scuff marks.

"Christian Louboutin?" I squeak. I look around the box for a price. "Even at vintage rates, I don't think I can afford these." I put the shoe back in the box and hold it out to Martin.

“Thank you for showing me these shoes, but I think it’s best that I don’t even try them on.”

His grumpy eyes turn soft. He places a wrinkly hand on mine, pushing the box back into my lap. “They will be my gift to you.”

My mouth drops open. “There’s...you can’t...”

“I insist.” He opens the box and takes out one shoe, handing it to me. “Try it on.”

So I do.

And it’s a perfect fit. It’s like the skies have opened and birds are singing. I slip the other shoe on my other foot and stand.

“Whew, these are high,” I comment.

“They look like five-inch heels,” Madeleine adds. “But you could use the height.”

I shove her shoulder, and she laughs.

“They’re perfect,” she says.

I sigh and look at myself in the mirror. The dress needs work, but these shoes...these shoes are everything.

I allow myself to feel a glimmer of hope, seeing the possibility of the evening.

I’m going to the gala.

chapter twenty-seven

LUNA



“I love it.” Madeleine turns side to side, admiring her reflection in the floor-length mirror of Thea’s hotel room.

I have to agree. The dress is stunning in its simplicity. Satin white with a sweetheart neckline, the bodice fits perfectly with her curves and flares out just below her hips.

“Oh, Madeleine, it’s perfect.” Her mom’s voice comes through the phone in my hand. She wasn’t able to make it out to Silver Lake City today, since her arthritis was flaring up, so she stayed home with Mason’s mom, and the two of them are watching the fitting over FaceTime.

“Truly stunning,” Mrs. Bond agrees.

“Luna?” Madeleine asks, turning to face me.

Getting the full effect of my best friend in a wedding gown is overwhelming. I can’t even speak, just nod enthusiastically as I blink back tears.

She squeals and jumps up and down. “Thea, you are a miracle worker!”

Thea stands to the side, beaming with a pink cloth tomato of pins in her hand. Her red hair is up in a bun on the top of her head, her green eyes pensive as she takes in the fit of the dress. She walks around Madeleine and smiles as her wide-legged jeans swish around her. “I’m so glad you love it. Let me make a few adjustments and then it will fit like a glove.”

I hold the phone in place, letting the moms get the full effect of Madeleine in the gorgeous gown.

“Luna, hon, we’re going to head out,” Madeleine’s mom says. “I have a phone call with my doctor set up in a couple of minutes.”

I switch the camera so they can see my face now. “Sounds good. I’m so glad we were able to do this.”

My phone buzzes in my hand. I see a notification at the top: a Discord message from MidKnight—Henry.

The preview says, *Hey CS, I wanted to invite you to come to...*

And that’s it.

Invite me to come *where?* Or do *what?*

“Luna? Is everything okay?” Madeleine’s mom asks.

I notice how pale my face is in the little corner at the bottom of my screen, and that my expression looks completely stricken. I quickly switch to a big smile. “Yep! All good!”

“You gave me a scare there. Have a great time, girls. And Madeleine, we love you!”

“Love you, too, Mom!” Madeleine calls back.

As soon as Mrs. Sweet and Mrs. Bond hang up, I switch over to the Discord app to read the rest of the message.

Hey CS, I wanted to invite you to come to the gala where I’m premiering the game. It’s a week from today in Silver Lake City. I don’t know if it’ll be a possibility for you, but I’m happy to give you all the details tonight online.

Oh, no.

The lines are getting crossed.

Because if he’s inviting me to the gala as ClockStriker, that means he’s willing to tell me who he is in real life.

“Luna?” Madeleine sounds alarmed.

“Mm?” That’s the only sound I can manage. I don’t even look up from my phone.

Madeleine and Thea appear on each side of me, sitting next to me on the small couch.

Madeleine looks over my shoulder at my phone. “What’s going on?”

“MidKnight—Henry—just invited me to the gala.”

“He already did that.”

“No. Just now, he invited *ClockStriker* to the gala.”

Madeleine’s mouth forms an O.

Thea looks at us both, her brows furrowed in confusion. “Anyone want to fill me in here?”

With a sigh, I begin the story for Thea, explaining how Henry and I first met online, then in person, and how convoluted things have gotten now that I know who he is, but he doesn’t know that I’m the same person.

“Wow, Luna.” Thea smooths her red hair in place. “You’ve really gotten yourself into some trouble.”

I shake my head. “I know. You’re right. I’ve made a huge mess of things. I probably should’ve just told Henry right after the bakery that I knew who he was.”

Thea grimaces. “That probably would have been best. But at this point, all we can do is move forward. So, what do you think you should do now?”

I pinch my eyes shut and speak the words I’ve denied for the last week and a half. “I need to tell him.”

“That’s what I said!” Madeleine exclaims.

“I’m so afraid to lose him,” I explain.

Thea pauses, tilting her head to the side. “What do you think Ivy would say?”

I don’t even have to think. It’s exactly what she told me over the phone last week. “She’d tell me to be brave.”

Thea nods with a smile. “That sounds like Ivy.”

“I haven’t been brave at all while I’ve lived here.”

“It’s not exactly your strongest suit,” Madeleine adds.

“Hey!” I exclaim.

She laughs. “You know it’s true. You’ve been taking the easy road for the last few years. And even living here, staying with Ana and Drea—”

“I would NOT call living with them taking the easy road,” I protest.

“Maybe not easy, but definitely not brave,” Madeleine says. “Can you honestly say you’ve been brave with them? That you’ve stood up for yourself?”

My stomach sinks as I think back on the last few weeks I’ve been here. I’ve let them walk all over me. I did everything they asked, and even Henry said it probably wasn’t ethical or legal. But I’ve agreed to it all for the sake of being easygoing and kind.

“You’re one of the kindest, most positive people I know,” Madeleine says softly. “But it’s about time that you took some risks.”

“You DESERVE to take some risks,” Thea agrees.

“Thank you both,” I say with renewed determination. “I’m going to do it. I’m going to be brave.”

They squeeze me into a Luna sandwich, hugging me tightly from both sides. “Now let’s get your dress fitted,” Thea says.



“So, like I said, the event is next Saturday night in Silver Lake City,” Henry says through my headset that night. He pauses a moment. “I think at this point I need to tell you my real name and what this event actually is, so you don’t think I’m trying to kidnap you or do something crazy.”

I snort a laugh. “I never thought that.”

“Good.” I hear him take a deep breath. “My name is Henry Stone. My father is the CEO and founder of Stone

Technologies, where I work as well. I'm...preparing to take over the company when my father retires."

I don't say anything. How would I have reacted if I didn't already know this information?

"You don't have to tell me your name, if you don't want to," he says quickly. Maybe that's why he thinks I'm quiet. "I can even credit you on the game as ClockStriker."

"No, no, that's not it." I take in a deep breath, preparing myself for the way he's going to handle this information.

Can I do it?

Can I tell him I'm actually Luna, and I was planning on coming already?

As his date?

"There's something else," he says before I can tell him the truth. "I have a small gift for you that I'll be leaving at the front entrance of the gala. It's a thank you for everything you've done for the game."

My heart flutters. A gift? But he's already done so much for me.

"You already got me the Xbox and headset," I protest.

"I know. But those gifts were just for trying out the game. You have no idea how invaluable that was. You didn't stop there, though, and you actually fixed my problems. Striker, I can't tell you how grateful I am. Because of you, I have hope that this will all work out."

My chest fills with warmth, and I beam at his words. "Thanks MidKnight... Henry."

He chuckles. "It's strange to hear you call me by my real name. I hope it doesn't...change anything between us."

"What do you mean?"

He's quiet. "I know you've had some financial struggles of your own. And telling you who I am, knowing that I'm the heir to a huge company...I don't want this to affect our friendship."

My heart sinks. It's the reminder of the true difference between us. The difference that he doesn't see when he looks at Luna, but the one he never forgets when he's talking to ClockStriker. And the reason ClockStriker is his friend, but he wants to go on dates with Luna.

"And I worried that the expense of coming to the gala might be too much," he continues, unaware of my inner turmoil. "So I'm willing to help with the cost. I know you're on the west coast, but I'm not sure where, so maybe you'd need a flight and a dress—"

"No, it's fine," I cut him off.

I can't do it.

I can't be brave.

Because telling him I'm Luna might mean losing him.

And I can't lose him. Not yet. Not when his friendship means everything to me, and his touch sets me on fire. I need to see him at least one more time, as Luna, and then...I'll go from there.

I swallow hard. "Um...I don't think I'll be able to make it."

"Oh." His voice is soft. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah, work has just been crazy lately, you know?" I fight the shakiness in my voice, willing the tears to stay inside my eyes, even though he can't see me. "You've already done so much for me, though. I really appreciate the offer."

"Of course." He pauses. "If anything changes, you're welcome to come. And I'll still leave the gift at the front, in case you're able to change things at the last minute."

"I doubt it, but thank you." I paste on a smile, knowing it will come through in my voice. "Well, I should get to bed. It's been a long day."

"Oh. Okay. Have a good night, Striker."

"Thanks, MidKnight—Henry. You, too."

As soon as I turn off the Xbox, I let the tears roll. Stupid. Coward. What would everyone think?

But no matter what names I call myself and the doubts I feel, I still can't convince myself to call him back and let him know who I really am.

chapter twenty-eight

HENRY



ClockStriker says she won't come to the gala. I shouldn't be so disappointed, but I am. I would love to meet her in person, to look her in the face and explain how much she's meant to me over the last few weeks...years, even. But there's only so much I can do. I extended the invitation, and I can't force her to come.

The last week has been insane with plans for the gala, so I've only been able to text Luna here and there. Today is Thursday, and I have a brief moment of relief in my office, so I decide to call her.

The phone dial rings in my ear. *Please pick up.*

"Hello?" Luna says, immediately filling me with calm.

"Hey, Luna." I sigh with relief. "I wanted to apologize for not communicating much over the last few days."

"Oh, it's fine." She pauses. "I'm guessing you've been busy with...the game?"

"Yes. But with the gala only three days away, it's all finished now. There aren't any more changes to be made." I only wish ClockStriker could have spent another evening playing with me, but every attempt I've made to play with her has led to one excuse after another. I haven't spoken to her since I invited her to the gala.

Did I do something wrong?

"I'm glad everything is ready," Luna says. "I'm really looking forward to spending the evening with you."

“Me, too.” A grin spreads across my face. “The event begins at six, and I’d love for you to be there at the start. I’ll be busy talking to investors and critics, but I want you by my side. Hopefully, after a couple of hours, my work will be done and we’ll be able to enjoy each other’s company.”

“That sounds great.”

A knock sounds on my office door. “Mr. Stone?” Sue peeks her head around the doorjamb, and I wave her in.

“One second, Luna,” I say.

Sue holds out a jewelry box to me. “This just came from Heigh-Ho Jewelers for your approval.”

I take the blue velvet box from her. “Thank you, Sue.” Still holding the phone against my ear, I carefully open the box and observe the contents. The side of my mouth lifts into a half-smile. “It’s perfect.”

“Would you like me to keep it for the gala?” Sue asks.

“Yes. Keep it at the front door, in case ClockStriker changes her mind and decides to come.”

I hear a crash on the other end of the phone. “Luna? Are you all right?”

“Yep!” she squeaks. “It’s just the devil cat.”

“You have a cat?” I ask.

“Do you think I would refer to my own pet as a devil cat?” She giggles, an adorable little laugh. “No, it’s...my boss’s cat. He’s a terror. Or she. I can’t tell.” She pauses. “Well, I should probably get back to...work. Thank you for calling.”

“You’re welcome. Just hearing your voice makes me feel calmer already.”

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. “I’ve missed hearing your voice.”

Wow. A little surprising, since we haven’t spent that much time talking on the phone or even in person, aside from the ride on the train and the time in the coffee shop. But just those words fill my heart with warmth. “I look forward to seeing

you on Saturday. We'll hopefully get to talk more then. Six p.m."

"I wouldn't miss it."

I hang up the phone, looking out my office door at Sue. She's putting the necklace away in a drawer. It's perfect, the exact thing I can imagine ClockStriker loving. I feel a twinge of guilt at the relationships I have with the two women. Would it be awkward if they both showed up at the gala? But they both mean so much to me. I have to hope they'll understand.

chapter twenty-nine

LUNA



It's Saturday morning, the day of the gala. I'm going to see Henry as Luna, and then I'll figure out what the future holds. I can't think too far in advance right now, or I'm going to puke. Because I'm nervous enough about tonight as it is.

The twins frantically baked all day yesterday, and today they're going to frost and decorate the cake, then transport it to the gala. I should have the day off. The twins don't know that I'm going to be Henry's date because, well, I saw how terribly that went last time I was around him. Besides, they're already insanely jealous after the post on the Brookhaven Buzz. I don't need to rub it in their faces anymore. There's a chance I'll see them at the gala, but I know they're not actually guests at the event, just bringing the cake. I should be fine.

Speaking of not knowing, I didn't tell Madeleine or Thea that I chickened out about telling Henry who I really am. I'm ashamed that I'm still letting my baggage with Chad get in the way of my bravery, and I just want to live in this little bubble where Henry is still so enamored with me as Luna for as long as possible. Besides, they've been so busy with their own preparations, Thea attending the gala with her husband, and Madeleine with her wedding.

I threw myself into helping Madeleine with her wedding this week, which included *actually* going cake tasting and discussing designs for the cake with Ana and Drea. Thankfully, that went smoothly.

And Henry...well, Henry's the sweetest. He's been busy getting ready for the gala, so we haven't talked much other

than the phone call a couple days ago when I heard him tell his assistant to leave the gift for ClockStriker by the door.

And then I slipped and said I missed the sound of his voice. Not only was that way too personal, but the only reason I missed his voice is because I've refused to turn on my Xbox ever since he invited me as ClockStriker to the gala.

"Luna!" One twin is shouting my name from downstairs.

"Coming!" I call back. I run down the narrow, dangerous stairs as fast as I can. Thank goodness I've never gotten hurt on them.

Ana looks frazzled, with flour in her hair and frosting on her clothes. "We're almost done with this cake, but we need to replenish supplies. We have another huge cupcake order to work on tomorrow." She shoves a list in my hands. "Here. You need to go to the store and get these."

She's got to be kidding. "Now?"

"Yes, now! Otherwise, we won't be in business and you won't have a place to live!"

Panic rises in my throat. How can I explain to her I don't have time for this? "But I...I have to..."

Ana rolls her eyes, grabs my hand, and slips the paper in my fingers. "Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to play your games tonight." She smiles, fake and patronizing, and I want to scream.

But I don't.

"Besides," she continues, "we have to make ourselves look presentable for the gala."

I furrow my brow. "I...thought you were just dropping off the cake."

A smirk fills her face, full of pride. "Henry Stone said we could stay as guests." She waggles her eyebrows. "Who knows, if he likes the cake, maybe he'll want some more."

Ew.

And how extremely rude, knowing that he and I went on a date a couple of weeks ago. But there's no point in making an issue right now. I'll show her tonight.

It's one thirty. I still have enough time to get the supplies and get ready for the gala at six.

I can do this.



“I’M BACK!” I exclaim at four.

Four p.m.

The gala is at six, and I look like a disaster. Because the general store here in Brookhaven didn't have the quantities that the twins needed for their cupcakes tomorrow. No, I had to drive all the way out to Silver Lake City to buy the amount of flour and sugar they needed for tomorrow.

Yep, I drove all the way to Silver Lake City, just to have to travel there again tonight. At least this afternoon, I got to use the twins' car. Tonight, I'll have to call an Uber.

“Okay, great, just put everything away in the canisters and you can be done for the evening,” Drea says.

Seriously?! But it'll be quicker to do it than to make a fuss, so I spend another ten minutes unloading all the supplies and putting them away in the system that I organized for them a month ago.

“We need you to clean the kitchen,” Ana says. “The dishes need to be done before tomorrow.”

I want to scream. But I hold back. I paste a smile on my face and head to the sink, scrubbing the dishes and counters as quickly as I can. By the time I'm done with everything, it's four forty-five. I'm cutting it *ridiculously* close, but I can still do it.

I have to.

“I'm going to shower,” I announce. Not that they care. I rush into the laundry room to grab a (hopefully) clean bath towel for myself. Drea promised she'd do a load of towels this

morning. It would be a miracle if she did, since she's never washed a single item since I've been here. But to my surprise, the dryer is full of towels. She mixed up all the colors, so now the white ones are pink, but I can deal with that.

I stick my hand in the dryer, pulling out a bunch of small towels and searching for one that will be big enough for my body.

Until I feel something satin.

"What is this?" I mutter to myself, pulling the fabric out. The rose-pink color hits my eye first.

"No, no, no," I whisper, slowly pulling the length of fabric out of the dryer. It's not smooth satin anymore—oh, no. It's full of pulls and fuzzy patches.

It's my dress for the gala.

It takes a moment to sink in. My dress, the only dress I could possibly wear to the gala, is ruined. There's no way to fix this disaster.

My stomach is in knots. There's no way I can go now. I couldn't even afford THIS dress, much less a new one to fill its place. Besides which, there's no time left in the evening. I'm supposed to leave here in thirty minutes.

"Luna, hey," Ana says from the doorway. "We need you to help us put the cake in the truck."

I don't know what has taken me completely over the top—the stress of rushing to get the ingredients and putting them away, or the dress being ruined. Maybe it's Ana implying that something romantic is going to happen between her and Henry.

Or maybe it's anger at my own cowardice with him.

Whatever it is, I'm seeing red. I look over at Ana, and I can't take it anymore. I snap.

"No."

Ana furrows her brows. "What?"

"I said no."

Drea appears next to her. “What’s going on?”

I straighten, holding the dress out for her to see. “This is my gown. For the gala tonight.”

“Oh, was it?” The lilt in Drea’s voice tells me she knows exactly what it is. “I didn’t know you were going.”

“I was. As Henry Stone’s date.”

She blinks a few times. She must not have known that piece of information.

“Why did you put it in the wash?” I ask.

She shrugs, resuming her smug exterior. “It was in the laundry room, so I figured it needed to be cleaned.”

“By washing it with the towels?” I can’t help the way my voice raises.

Drea doesn’t say anything. Neither of them does. I think they’re a little shocked at hearing me speak up for the first time.

My breaths are shallow, my heart is racing, and I’ve reached my limit. I’ve been holding back for weeks, and I can’t take this anymore. Especially not when their actions have turned from misguided and ignorant to blatantly hurtful.

I’m being brave.

I throw the dress on the ground. There’s no way I can fix it now. My dreams are dashed, but I might as well stand up for myself for the first time in my life. “I’m done. I’m moving out tonight.”

“What?” they say in unison.

“I’m. Done,” I repeat. “I’ve dealt with you two for long enough.” I turn to stomp up the stairs.

“But you don’t have anywhere to stay,” Ana says, fake sympathy dripping from her words. “I thought you needed us.”

“Not anymore.” I run up the stairs to my room, shaking like a leaf. Being brave doesn’t make me feel very strong physically, but emotionally, I feel like a warrior princess.

Until I remember that I can't go to the gala tonight.

After shutting the door behind me, the weight finally crashes down on me. I crumple to the ground, my back against the door, and start to sob.

All the stupid decisions I've made over the last few weeks flash through my mind. I pinch my eyes shut, but it just makes everything more vivid. Living here with the twins and being a pawn in their ridiculous game where they made me think *I* needed *them*. Really, they just took advantage of me.

And Henry.

Oh, I've been an idiot with Henry.

I should've told him who I was right away. Being a coward has gotten me nowhere. What was I expecting would happen tonight, anyway? Getting coffee together was hard enough. I could never actually date him without letting him know who I was.

And at the top of my mind is the immediate issue—where will I go tonight? I can't impose on Mason and Madeleine again, and I don't have money for the Brookhaven Bed & Breakfast. Could I even afford to take the train back home?

My phone buzzes in my pocket. I don't want to talk to anyone, but I see that it's my sister, Ivy. Her due date is in three weeks, and she could be in labor.

"Hey, Ivy, is everything okay?" I ask.

"I'm fine. I just wanted to see how everything was going for you."

"Oh..." I can't even speak, just trail off in quiet sobs.

"Luna! What is wrong? You better tell me or I'm driving my pregnant butt all the way up to Brookhaven and—"

"Don't you dare!" I exclaim. Taking in a shuddering breath, I tell her the whole story. Meeting Henry on the train, my true living situation, MidKnight asking for my help and buying me a headset and Xbox, finding out they're the same person, and my fear of coming clean to him. All the things I've been hiding from my family for fear of them worrying

about me. They already have so much on their plates. They don't need the burden of my issues.

But maybe they should have been worried this whole time.

“Oh, Luna,” Ivy says softly. “I’m so sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be!” I swipe at my cheeks, brushing away my tears. “You told me to be brave, and I wasn’t. I’ve let everyone walk all over me, and I let my fears take control. I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” she says firmly. “But you do need my help. I’m going to make a quick phone call, and then I’ll call you back. Start packing your things, but don’t leave yet.”

She hangs up. With an exhale, I realize how much better I feel just by sharing everything with Ivy. There are no real solutions, but at least I’m sharing my burden. I stare at my phone and figure I should text Henry. He’s probably busy preparing for the gala, since it starts in an hour, but I don’t want him looking for me.

With shaky fingers, I type out a text.

I’m so, so sorry to do this to you, but I won’t be able to make it tonight. I hope to explain soon.

And wiping the last tear from my eyes, I start to pack my things.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, at five thirty, I’m standing on the street corner right outside the main square of Brookhaven, waiting for a car that supposedly is coming for me. This is when I was supposed to leave for the gala, but instead I’m standing on the corner with my belongings packed. Ivy told me she was taking care of everything, including a place to stay for the evening.

A black Mercedes pulls up and rolls down its window. “Luna Jones?” the driver asks. He’s a middle-aged Middle Eastern man with a mustache and a friendly smile.

“That’s me,” I reply.

“I’ve been sent by Ivy King and Thea Taylor to pick you up.” He exits the car and pops the trunk. “Your bags, please.”

I hand him my suitcase and backpack, which holds my gaming laptop. I thought about bringing the Xbox but decided against it. Ana and Drea can keep that as a parting gift. I brought the crystal Louboutins that Martin gave me for free, though. No matter what, I’ll treasure those shoes forever.

He opens the door and I climb in.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

He tilts his head. “Ivy didn’t tell you?”

I shake my head.

“We’re going to Thea Taylor’s hotel. She’s going to get you to the gala.”

He shuts the door, and just like that, my entire night has changed.

chapter thirty

HENRY



“Mr. Stone, what an incredible evening.” Bronson Nichols shakes my hand heartily. “You can count on our investment in Stone Gaming.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Nichols.” This isn’t the first promise of investment tonight. In fact, nearly every investor here has complimented me on the game and the event as a whole, promising they’d get back to me within the next week with an official offer.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening,” he says. Taking his wife by the arm, he turns and leaves. I watch them smiling and laughing, a reminder that I’m here alone. No Luna, and no ClockStriker.

I check my watch. It’s nine p.m. I was hoping for some kind of notification from Luna, but there’s nothing. She texted me right before the event, saying something came up and she wouldn’t be able to make it. I’m disappointed, to be sure, and of course wondering if I did something wrong. But I genuinely hope that she’s all right. I sent her a message asking if she needed anything, but it’s been radio silence ever since.

“Any news from Luna?” Lily asks, appearing at my side. Her long blonde hair has been braided down her back with elaborate flowers, and she’s wearing a floor-length, light purple gown. I have the urge to hide her away from all the men here now that she looks like a woman. But she’s eighteen, I remind myself.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

She smiles sadly at me. “Looks like everything is going so well.”

I sigh and look around the room. “It is.”

“Mom would have been proud,” she adds.

I smile at her. She always knows the things to say that will lift my spirits.

“She would have.” I look around at all the underwater decor. Our mother loved the ocean more than anyone I knew, and this game is, in many ways, an homage to her. “Thanks, Lily.” I give her a sideways hug, and she rests her head on my chest.

“I’m sorry Adam and Peter couldn’t be here,” she says.

I shrug. “They’re living their own lives. Peter did text me to say he wants to try the game out when he gets home. He’ll love the underwater thing, too. And Adam’s at some awards show tonight, right?”

She nods. “Yep.”

We both glance around the room in silence, observing the people who are all familiar faces, but not the ones I was hoping to see. I catch a glimpse of Aunt Agatha, who has swapped her fedora and trench coat for a sequined dark blue gown. Apparently, she’s “in her Titanic era,” which worked out perfectly with the timing of the gala.

“And what about ClockStriker?” Lily asks. “Any word from her?”

I shake my head sadly. “I haven’t heard from her ever since I invited her to come. Things got so strange between us. But I still left the necklace for her at the front with Sue, just in case she changes her mind.”

“Henry, my boy!” Our father claps me on the back and pulls me into a hug. “The board members are thrilled with this event. They’ve been conversing with the game critics, and everyone loves the game.”

“Thank you, Father.” Those are exactly the words I’ve been hoping to hear for weeks. Months, even.

And so much of it is due to ClockStriker and her help.

If only I could thank her.

“Stephen!” my father calls to his CFO. He heads off in his direction.

“Now what?” Lily asks.

I shrug. “I’m pretty much done for the evening. The party is supposed to go on until midnight, but most of the investors and critics have already tried out the game and told me how much they loved it.”

“That’s amazing, Henry.” Lily beams at me, and having her admiration fills me with joy. “I’m so—” Her phone buzzes in her purse, and her attention is drawn away from me as she pulls it out and checks her notifications. Her eyes widen in shock.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, peeking over her shoulder at her phone.

She quickly locks her screen so I can’t see the message. “It’s, uh...fine. Yes. Everything is fine.” She glances at the clock up on the wall. “But someone needs me. I’ll just be a minute.” She smiles tightly at me and hurries toward the exit.

And, as usual, I’m left all alone.

chapter thirty-one

LUNA



It's crazy what a beautiful dress can do for your self-confidence. I almost can't believe the woman in the mirror is me.

"Thea, this is incredible."

"Thank you." I see her beaming behind me through the reflection in the mirror. "I'm so glad you'll be able to wear it."

We've spent the last two hours trying on dresses Thea brought for a formal wear line she will debut in the spring. In the process, I had a lot of time to reflect on the evening.

When I'm being a coward, nothing goes right. Goats eat my shoe, I break Henry's phone, my dress gets put in the dryer... The list goes on.

I'm done being a coward.

I'm going to be brave. I'm going to walk into that ball and finally tell Henry who I really am. While I haven't yet ironed out the details, I know I'll figure it out.

One of Thea's dresses fit me perfectly—minus the hem, which she was able to adjust in just a few minutes. The fabric is iridescent, sparkling blue in some light and silver in others. It's a simple design, strapless with a slight sweetheart neckline, fitted through the waist, and then flares out at the hips.

I feel like a princess.

“It’s a good thing you have those super high heels,” Thea adds. “I don’t think I could’ve taken the hem up any higher.” She fluffs my hair one more time. We left it simple with just some loose waves.

“Do you want to look through my jewelry?” she asks.

I shake my head. “It’s perfect the way it is.” I turn to face her. “Thank you so, so much. I can’t believe this.”

“You deserve it, Luna.” She pulls me into a tight hug. “Remember to be brave.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Good.” She pulls out her phone. “Let’s FaceTime Ivy. She’ll be so relieved. I was worried the stress would put her into early labor.” She calls Ivy, and we wait patiently for her to pick up. No response.

Thea hums. “Weird. She’s always on her phone.”

I shrug. “Maybe she’s hanging out with Mom and Dad, watching a movie or something.”

“Maybe.” She shakes her head slightly, then turns her attention back to me. “Let’s send her a picture, anyway.” She has me stand back and pose, which isn’t exactly my strong suit, and texts the picture to Ivy with the message *All ready for the gala!*

Just then, Thea’s husband, Ethan, walks through the hotel room door. “There you are,” he says, a smile on his face.

“Shouldn’t you be at the gala?” she asks.

He shrugs, loosening his tie that’s the same color as the dress I’m wearing. “Scott can handle it from here. I wanted to make sure you were all right.” He stands behind Thea, wrapping his arms around her waist and giving her a sweet kiss on the cheek. Then he zeroes in on me. “Isn’t that your dress?”

“What?” I squeak. My mouth drops open. “Thea. Please tell me this wasn’t your dress. You told me these were samples.”

She shrugs, the smile not leaving her face. “It’s more important that you wear it.”

I start to panic. “No, no.” I pull at the zipper on my side, but she breaks away from Ethan and stops me with a firm hand.

“I knew there was no way you’d accept this dress if you knew it was mine. But you need to go more than I do. Ethan and I attend so many parties together.” She glances back at him. “I don’t mind a night off.”

He winks at her and nods at me. “She’s right. I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but if Thea thinks you need her dress, then you should have it.”

My eyes get misty. Everyone’s kindness is overwhelming. The people who truly care are supporting me—Ivy, Thea, Madeleine, even Martin and his gift of these beautiful shoes. I owe it to them, and myself, to make the most of tonight. “Thea, I will never forget this. And I promise to find a way to repay you, however I can.”

She shakes her head. “Just go to the gala and tell Henry the truth. That’s all I need.”

I hug her one last time. “Thank you,” I whisper in her ear. “For everything.”



THE ENTIRE DRIVE over to the hotel, I reinforce my decisions to myself. My promise to Thea, along with Ivy’s words to me, echo in my mind. *Be brave, Luna.* Hopefully, if I focus on those words, I can stop imagining the worst-case scenario. The one where Henry hates me for keeping the truth from him. But I have to believe that our friendship can withstand this, and that I can make him understand.

I can do this.

Thea’s driver drops me off at the venue. Tightly grasping the small silver clutch that Thea lent me, I marvel at the exterior of the hotel. Glass windows line the entrance,

showcasing the chandeliers inside. The doorman at the front opens the door for me with a smile, which I return.

Breathe, Luna.

I follow the signs to the Stone Technologies Gala, and when I reach the front, there is a table with two women checking people in. Maybe this is where Henry meant for me to get my gift as ClockStriker.

“Hi,” I say to them with a small, awkward wave. “My name is Lu—ClockStriker. I believe Henry Stone left something here for me.”

One of the women, an older woman with graying hair, purple glasses, and a matching purple gown, smiles widely. “Ah, you came after all. Yes, he did.” She reaches under the table and pulls out a small jewelry box. “He said you’d understand what this was.”

I take the box from her, murmuring a “thank you,” and head to a secluded corner to open the blue velvet box. When I see what’s inside, I let out a little gasp.

It’s a necklace. But not just any necklace. It’s a necklace based on the game. The centerpiece is an exact replica of the stone in the center of the game, the end goal that everyone is racing to reach. And instead of a typical chain link, the necklace is made of pearls, just like the oysters I added around the floor of the seabed.

Henry knew exactly what I would love. No one would understand the significance of this necklace more than the two of us.

And just like that, the final problem has been solved.

I know exactly how to tell Henry who I am.

I pull the necklace out of the box, set the box on the floor, and try to clasp it around my neck.

“Here, let me help.” I look over my shoulder to find the woman who handed me the necklace, holding her hands out to clasp the necklace for me.

“Thank you so much,” I say, handing the necklace to her.

“I’ve known Henry since he was a little boy,” she says softly. I lift my hair up so she can affix the necklace, listening carefully. “He keeps a solitary existence, and his heart guarded, but he’s one of the kindest people I know.” She finishes her work and pats my back twice. “You must be someone special to him.”

I turn to face her. “I hope so. He’s very special to me, too.”

She smiles warmly. “Keep me updated, dear. I hope to see you around more.”

I bend down to pick up the box, and she holds her hand out. “You don’t need to carry that around. I’ll keep it for you.”

“Thank you,” I say again, and with a wave (less awkward this time), I head toward the double doors that lead the way into the gala itself. As if performing a dance, the doormen open the doors in unison, and I take my first look at the party.

The doors open to a staircase leading down into the main event. Underwater decorations line the walls, seaweed blown by fans to make them look like they’re waving under the ocean—just like the ones I perfected for the game. The lighting is mostly blue with a halo effect, like the sun peeking through the water. On each side of the room, there are rows of tables set up with Xboxes and monitors. The seats are filled with people laughing and playing the game.

I feel slightly out of place. Everyone’s wearing dark-colored dresses and suits, but here I am in my shimmering, light blue gown. Thank goodness it’s gorgeous and fits like a glove. Thea is a miracle worker.

My fingers reach up to my chest and fidget with the necklace. It’s a tangible reminder that Henry knows me, all of me. He just doesn’t realize that I’m the same person as Luna.

Or ClockStriker.

Whichever way this is going to work.

I gaze down the stairs at the crowd, wondering where and how I’m going to find Henry. But the crowd decides for me. As if we’re in a movie, the sea of people parts, and at the other end of the aisleway is Henry.

His hair is neatly done, and he wears a simple black suit, white dress shirt, and black tie, but no one has ever looked so devastatingly handsome in formal wear. Even from here, I can see the blue in his eyes, accentuated by all the surrounding decor.

I suck in a breath and take slow steps down the stairs. Nothing would ruin this moment more than a head over heels tumble down the stairs. I grip the banister tightly, keeping myself upright.

I know Henry is watching me descend the stairs, and I see the exact moment when he clocks the necklace. His jaw drops with realization, and I think my heart is going to stop beating.

But it doesn't. And instead of anger, his face lights with something resembling amazement and wonder. He's not standing still anymore; he's taking long strides so he can catch up to me sooner rather than waiting for me to reach him.

With a shy smile on my face, I finish my climb down the stairs just as Henry reaches me.

I open my mouth to say hello, but I don't get a chance to say anything.

Because Henry wraps his arm around my waist, pulls my body right up against his, and presses his lips to mine in a deep kiss.

Magic.

Fire.

Passion.

This kiss is everything I could have ever dreamed of and more. It's not gentle and sweet like our kiss at the train station. No, this is the explosion of longing that has built up between us over time.

My body melts against his. The only thing keeping me standing is his strong arm around my waist. I said it before and I'll say it again; I am melted into a liquid puddle by Henry Stone.

He cuts the kiss short much too quickly, leaning his forehead against mine and taking in a shaky breath. “I probably shouldn’t have done that here,” he says, glancing around at the crowd that’s now gaping at us.

I blink slowly, like coming out of slumber. “I can’t say I mind.”

“Let’s go somewhere more private.” Keeping hold of one of my hands, he leads me to a small alcove behind a large cardboard display. I notice all the eyes watching us, including Aunt Agatha, who’s no longer in her fedora and trench coat, but I’m not about to smile and wave or do anything crazy.

Once we’re alone, without any peeping eyes, he pulls me in close and kisses my lips again. Shivers run down my spine as he lifts one hand and threads it through my hair, cradling the back of my head.

“Luna,” he murmurs between kisses. “You’re ClockStriker.”

His nose gently caresses mine, and I smile against his lips. “Yes.”

He pulls back to look at me again, this time taking a moment to gaze at the necklace and then back at my face. Shaking his head, the smile on his face only grows, his dimples deepening in his cheeks. “I couldn’t have imagined anything more perfect.”

The tears that I’ve been fighting all day fill my eyes again, and this time I’m too overwhelmed with emotion to hold them back. I blink and they fall down my cheeks.

Henry’s expression fills with concern. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. “Nothing at all. Everything is better than I ever could have dreamed.”

He uses his thumb to wipe the tears under one eye, then softly leans my head into his hand and presses the sweetest kisses to my other cheek, kissing my tears away.

My heart just can't take it, and I cry even more, but now that he knows it's not sadness, he just holds me tighter. He's here for me, supporting me and holding me up when I need him most.

His lips reach my neck, and the kisses turn a little less sweet. I'm completely melted into a Luna puddle. His lips find mine again. Hunger flows through him, and I match him right back in intensity. His hands are gripping my waist, my hands are threading through the nape of his neck, the passion growing every minute.

Pulling back, he takes in a shaky breath and kisses my cheek softly. "No wonder you stopped talking to me online after I invited you. You must have been so shocked that I was the same person as MidKnight."

It takes me a moment to process his words.

Oh.

He thinks I *just* found out who he is. The realization makes me freeze.

He notices the reaction and stills, peering into my eyes. "Luna?"

I clear my throat. "I...I've known for a little longer than that."

He pulls back, his eyebrows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

I promised Thea—and myself—that I'd tell him the whole truth.

Here it goes.

chapter thirty-two

HENRY



I study Luna's face, waiting for her answer. Her eyes are big and bright, her face flushed, her lips almost bruised from the intensity of our kisses. The temptation hits to lean in and kiss her again, but the need to understand how long she's known my identity outweighs my physical desire. My hands sit heavily on her hips, holding onto her while she gathers her words.

"I figured it out," she says slowly, "when you came to Twin Cakes."

Twin Cakes? I blink, forcing myself to refocus on the memories.

Cake tasting.

Luna choking on her cake.

Spilling her coffee.

Breaking my phone.

All after I started describing the game I was working on.

"That was over two weeks ago," I say.

She nods meekly.

"And...you didn't say anything then?"

"I was going to!" Her hands are on my chest, and she tenses up for a moment. "Not right away. But after you invited me here, as Luna, I wanted to come clean."

Still, that was two weeks ago. What has made her keep this secret for so long? “And then?”

“And then...” She swallows hard. “You invited me as ClockStriker, and you said all those things about paying for me to get here, and I felt like you wouldn’t...” Her voice trails off and her lower lip trembles.

“I wouldn’t what?” I ask gently.

She presses her lips together, looking me square in the eyes. “You wouldn’t look at me as Luna the same way. If you knew I was broke and unemployed.”

How could she think that? I thought that inviting her to come would make it clear that I respected her, even knowing everything about her troubles. Sure, this is difficult to comprehend. I met Luna in first class on the train, and she let me think she had a remote job. But that’s not why I fell for her.

I shake my head. “I wasn’t attracted to you because I thought you had money. You were the first person I’ve connected with in years on just a human level. That conversation on the train... I wanted to share everything about myself and learn everything about you. And you’re beautiful”—she blushes—“intelligent, kind...but...”

Her eyes widen more as she waits for me to finish that sentence.

My chest tightens as I prepare to say the words. “But I can’t overlook the fact that you lied to me. Twice, now.”

She furrows her brow. “Twice?”

“Well, you’re ClockStriker, right? We went through this once when you didn’t tell me you were a girl.”

“I know. But I explained why.”

I nod. “And I understand now. In fact, I agreed with you after Lily explained it to me further. But you have to know that it stings to find that you’ve been hiding things from me.”

She blinks a few times, looking deep into my eyes as she processes this information. “Twice,” she repeats softly.

I nod.

Neither of us has pulled away from each other. It's almost as if we can't. We've waited so long to be close to each other, but this revelation is tugging at my chest, making it impossible to fall back into the bliss we just shared. Her eyes dip downward, and I feel awful for making her feel this way.

I need to know something. Her insecurity wouldn't be so heavy if it weren't founded on some kind of past experience. I lift one hand to her face and gently stroke her cheek with my thumb. "Luna. Who hurt you?"

Her eyes dart back up to mine. Her perfect lips part, then shut again, and her eyes fill with more tears. "It was—"

"Mr. Stone?" Charles's voice sounds behind me.

This could not be worse timing. Why on earth is he here now?

I sigh, keeping one hand on Luna's hip, and turn to face him. "What is it, Charles?"

"I'm...sorry to interrupt." To his credit, he looks slightly embarrassed. "But there are some important family issues I need to inform you of."

"Family?" I repeat.

He nods curtly.

I swallow hard. "My father?"

He shakes his head. "Your brother, Adam...and your sister."

My sister? Nothing could make me panic more. I turn back to Luna. Her face is sympathetic. "Go," she says.

I want to stay and talk to her, but Charles seems anxious. And any mention of Lily has me on edge. What could be going on that affects Lily *and* Adam?

I squeeze her hands once, then turn and follow Charles into the darkness.

chapter thirty-three

LUNA



Henry's gone.

I've been waiting for twenty minutes in the same spot, hoping he'd come back after he handled his family drama.

But he hasn't.

I replay the conversation in my mind over and over, trying to decipher his feelings. Is he angry? He didn't seem that way. Hurt, yes. But not angry. And especially at the end, when he asked who hurt me, it's like he knew there were more layers involved.

I don't know if he's even still here at the event. I peek around the corner of the display, trying to get a glimpse of the crowd, and I don't see him anywhere.

I wait another ten minutes, but it's clear that he's not coming back. And I have no idea what that means for us.

While he didn't kiss me goodbye, he didn't say to never contact him again. But should I be the one chasing after him now? I need to know that he can move past all of this once and for all.

The ball is in his court.

How can I let him know? My hands absently move to my chest, fingering the necklace.

That's it.

The necklace.

I reach around my neck, undoing the clasp of the most beautiful gift I've ever received. But it doesn't belong to me anymore. Not until Henry has decided that he can forgive me.

Did I even say I was sorry? I'm sure I seemed apologetic, but did those words ever leave my mouth? Because I truly am sorry that I kept my identity from him. That I wasn't braver.

I wish I said those words. Maybe leaving this necklace will let him know.

I look around the corner, trying to find somewhere safe to leave it to ensure it will get back to Henry.

I walk out into the ballroom, searching through the crowd of people. Maybe Lily? But apparently the family issues extend to her. I even would have settled for Agatha, but she must have left because of the family issues, as well. I keep scanning the unrecognizable faces until I find the perfect person: the older woman with the purple glasses and purple gown, happily eating a piece of cake and watching the crowd.

I rush over to her as fast as my butterfly heels will allow. "Can I give you something?" I say breathlessly.

She looks at me, and her eyes fill with alarm. "Of course."

I hold the necklace out to her. "Can you please give this to Henry?" I can barely get the words out without tears spilling down my cheeks.

"Of course I can." She takes the necklace from me, placing it delicately in her clutch purse. Purple, of course. "Are you all right?"

I shrug and paste on a small smile, because that's all I can manage right now. "I'm leaving. Can you please tell him I'm so sorry? I wish..." I take in a shuddering breath. "I wish I had handled things differently. And tell him thank you for everything."

She blinks at me, as if she can't understand what I'm saying. I smile again and turn toward the exit.

And there are Ana and Drea, with matching smug expressions on their faces. They saunter over to me, Ana

wearing a royal blue gown and Drea in deep purple. Maybe they intend to be intimidating, but seeing their dresses and the way they slink over to me reminds me of the last piece of information I never unleashed on them. My heart is broken, but I find the last bit of strength inside of me and march right up to them, meeting them halfway.

“I know about all of your shopping,” I say. “Your devil cat unleashed all of your receipts. I’m going to make sure you *never* take advantage of anyone ever again.”

The words I always wish I had said to Chad ring in my ears. Maybe I’ll never get the chance to say them to him, but the message still applies to them. “People are worth more than the clothes they wear and how much money they make; what truly matters is what’s in their heart. And you two...just make me sad.”

Their shocked expressions fill me with a measure of joy I didn’t think possible right now. I’m not sure how I’ll make sure they don’t take advantage of anyone again, but that doesn’t matter. I turn on my heel and continue my march toward the exit.

“Luna!” a familiar male voice calls to me from the crowd. But it’s not Henry. It’s my brother-in-law, Scott—Ivy’s husband.

“Hey, Scott. Everything okay?”

His hair is ruffled, and he looks unusually flustered. “Ivy’s in labor.”

“Already? She still has three weeks to go!”

“That’s what I thought. I’m about to leave. I was trying to call you to see if you wanted to drive back to Canyon Cove with me, but it went straight to voicemail.”

“My reception is terrible here. But I’m glad you found me.” I glance around the ballroom one more time, taking in the beautiful sights, the decorations all dedicated to the amazing game that Henry created, and that I helped perfect. “Let’s go home.”

chapter thirty-four

HENRY



I t's been one week since the gala.

And it's been one of the worst weeks of my life.

All I want is to talk to Luna—ClockStriker—but I don't know where we stand right now. And family issues have taken the front seat.

Not only was my older brother—Adam Stone, Hollywood star—in jail for assaulting another actor at an awards show, Lily disappeared.

And it has taken this entire week to unravel the full story.

Lily is home safe. She made poor decisions and faced some unfortunate consequences, but she's completely unharmed.

Adam, on the other hand, has some legal consequences to face. He's currently hiding out in our family's estate on the outskirts of Brookhaven, known in our family as “the castle,” while he waits for his trial. Not only that, he now has to deal with public backlash for attacking Hollywood's “golden boy,” Tristan Jackson.

Although now that I know the entire story, I'm convinced Tristan is the devil in disguise.

I've been out of the office all week, handling these family issues. Thankfully, my father knows what's going on and completely absolved me from any responsibility in the company. He's keeping me updated, reassuring me that the

board is thrilled with my game and the event, and that I have their full support for Stone Gaming.

Every night, I replay the small passage of time I had with Luna. The way she felt in my arms, the way her lips felt against mine, and the way the conversation ended. But she hasn't reached out to me at all. Does that mean she wants nothing more to do with me? She has both my phone number and our Discord conversation. Why hasn't she said anything?

I'm confused, exhausted, and emotionally drained when I finally make it into the office on Monday morning, a full nine days after the gala.

"Hello, Sue," I say, walking past her desk.

"Mr. Stone!" she exclaims. "I'm so glad you're finally here!" She jumps out of her seat and gives me a sweet, grandmotherly hug. "How is your family?"

"Surviving," I say. "But healthy and safe."

"That's good to hear," she says, squeezing my shoulder. She holds up a finger. "I have something for you."

"Oh?"

She reaches into her top desk drawer, fishing around. "Someone left this for you at the gala." She straightens, her fingers wrapped around a small object.

I hold out my hand, and she drops a necklace into my palm.

Not just any necklace.

The necklace.

ClockStriker's necklace.

Luna's necklace.

I snap my head up to Sue. "What does this mean?"

"I'm not sure." She looks sympathetic. "She seemed really upset. But she wanted me to tell you she was sorry, and that she wished she had done things differently. And to thank you for everything."

I stare at Sue, trying to understand her meaning. I look back down at the necklace in my hand, hoping for answers. Nothing.

Does this mean that we're through? Not just our romantic relationship, but our friendship, too? I'm drawing a blank.

But I know who can help.

I'm just not sure she wants to see me right now.



THAT EVENING, I walk through the elevator doors into our childhood home, a penthouse apartment in Silver Lake City. Piano music echoes through the space, one of Chopin's nocturnes. I believe it's in C minor. It's Lily's favorite for when she's in a bad mood.

This might be a terrible time.

I slowly enter the living area, taking in the sight of my little sister banging away at the keys of the Steinway model M we've had for years. Her long, blonde hair hangs in a loose braid down her back, brushing the seat of the piano bench beside her sweatpants. I take a seat in the chaise next to the piano and wait for her to finish, absorbing the sounds and emotions.

After a few more minutes, she concludes the piece, holding the last note until it fades into silence. She turns to look at me. She has bags under her eyes and probably hasn't slept well in over a week. "Welcome to my prison."

"It's not prison, Lily," I say gently.

"It might as well be. I can't leave."

"But it's not a punishment. It's only temporary, to keep you safe."

She hums noncommittally, then crosses her arms over her chest. "Why are you here?"

I clear my throat and pull the necklace out of my pocket. "I need your help." I hold the necklace out to her, and she holds it gently in her hands, admiring the stone and pearls.

“I never got to see it in person,” she says, her voice reverential. She looks up at me. “But I thought this was for ClockStriker. Why doesn’t she have it?”

“That’s why I’m here. She…” I don’t even know where to begin. With my focus being entirely on Lily and Adam this week, I haven’t had a chance to tell her anything about Luna and the gala.

“Did she not show up to the gala?” she asks.

“No, she did. And she’s… Luna is ClockStriker.”

Lily takes a few moments to process that piece of information. I see the moment it clicks, and her jaw drops. Light fills her eyes, the first bit of happiness in her I’ve seen in the last few days. “Luna? The mystery train girl? She’s the same person as ClockStriker?”

“Crazy, right?” I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face, remembering the joy I felt at finding out.

“But why do *you* have the necklace, then? I would think you’d both be thrilled to find out the truth.”

“I am. I was.” I sigh. “That’s the problem. She knew for weeks and didn’t tell me.”

Lily looks back down at the necklace, running her fingers over the pearls in thought. “When did she find out?”

“When I went cake tasting in Brookhaven.”

“The day she broke your phone.” She looks up at me with a smirk. “Maybe she was scared to tell you.”

“That’s what she said. That I know all about her financial struggles, and when she realized who I was, she was afraid that seeing her as Luna with that information would change the way I felt about her.”

“Does it?” Lily asks the question that I wish Luna had been brave enough to ask herself.

“No, it doesn’t,” I say firmly. “I fell for Luna on the train, not because she was sitting in first class, but because of her

heart. Her spirit. I could share more of myself with her than anyone. She was the first person to see *me* in a long time.”

Lily raises an eyebrow.

“Except you, of course,” I say quickly.

She waves a hand at me. “I’m teasing. What exactly happened when she told you she knew who you were and didn’t say anything?”

“I was a little upset,” I admit. “She lied to me before, remember? About being a girl?”

She folds her arms over her chest. “We already moved past that.”

“We did,” I agree. “But I still feel betrayed that she kept something from me again. I could sense something else was lurking in her thoughts, though. So while we were discussing this, but before I could fully understand why she kept this secret, Charles came up to me and let me know about...” I let my voice trail off and gesture vaguely at her.

She looks down, ashamed. “I didn’t know you were in the middle of something so important.”

“*You’re* important,” I say, squeezing her leg. “But I never came back to the gala. Luna left this with Sue and asked her to tell me she was sorry and to thank me for everything.” I run a hand through my hair. “I don’t know what that means.”

Lily blinks, her eyes alight again. “Yes, you do.”

I shake my head, confused.

“She’s leaving it up to you. She knows she should have told you, and that’s why she said she was sorry. And she didn’t want to take anything from you without knowing that you could forgive her.” She stands, determination radiating from her. “She wants you to prove that you love her.”

“Love her?” I repeat. “I don’t know—”

“Yes, you do. You love her. She’s the two halves of your soulmate. You knew you had an attraction and connection to Luna, and you shared your favorite part of your life with

ClockStriker. There's no one more perfect for you." She pauses, and her lip quivers. "She wants you to fight for her. To know that you'll always be there, by her side, no matter what happens. Because that's what real love is."

Tears fall freely down her cheeks, and I stand, wrapping her in my arms in a huge hug. She lets out a sob, but I hold her close, letting her cry.

"I love you, Lily," I whisper to her. "That's why I came for you."

"I know," she mumbles into my chest. She takes in a shuddering breath. "But he didn't love me."

"No. He didn't."

"I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid," I say firmly. I pull back, holding her by the shoulders and looking her in the eyes. "You're not stupid. You're young and naïve, and you were manipulated." I hold her close again. "And we'll make sure it never happens again."

She nods into my chest and gives a little snuffle. "Thank you, Henry." She looks up at me with a big smile. "Now go find Luna."

chapter thirty-five

HENRY



Now that I know what Luna was trying to say, I'm on a mission. I'm going to find her and tell her I forgive her, and that our love—because that's what this is—can overcome this obstacle. That I *want* to overcome this obstacle with her.

I tried texting, calling, and messaging her on Discord to talk in person, but I haven't gotten any response. So I'm now sitting in my car outside our family apartment, trying to plan my next move, when my phone rings with a call from Aunt Agatha.

"Hello, Aunt," I say.

"Henry, my dear," she says, her chipper British voice ringing around me in the car. "How are you? How's the family?"

"Oh, you know." I run a hand through my hair. "We're all surviving."

She hums. "I'm glad Lily is safe. We'll just have to hope Adam can make it out of his trial unscathed."

"Agreed."

There's a moment of silence. "But now that everything is settled, whatever happened with Luna?"

I heave a sigh. "Well, she came to the gala."

"Oh, yes. I saw that grand entrance."

I chuckle. "But she revealed some secrets she'd been keeping. I may have overreacted, but before we could get to

the bottom of it all, I had to leave to handle Adam and Lily.”

“Ah.” She pauses a moment. “Be patient with her, love. She’s been through quite a bit.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“Brookhaven is a small town. I’ve known who Luna truly is for a while now.”

A flash of irritation runs through me. “And you didn’t want to say anything?”

“It’s not my place. But if you want to find Luna, I suggest you start with those terrible twins at the bakery. The way they treated her...” Agatha’s voice trails off.

“What do you mean?”

“I think you need to find out for yourself. I wish you the best, Henry. Give me a call when you’ve found her.” She hangs up, and I stare at my phone in confusion.

I guess I’m heading to Brookhaven.



THE CHIME on the door rings as I walk into Twin Cakes bakery. The redheaded twin looks up from her task of wiping down the counter, and her mouth drops open. “Mr. Stone! What a surprise!” She bats her lashes and leans over the counter in what she must hope is a suggestive manner.

“Hello,” I say back. I can’t remember which twin this is, so it’s safer not to guess a name. Besides, I’m a man on a mission, and I want to get right to the point. “I was wondering if you’ve seen Luna recently.”

Her eyes dart to the swinging door beside her, then back to me. “No. Not since the gala.”

“I thought she said she lived nearby.”

“She...” She swallows. “She did. Not anymore.”

“Oh.” My heart sinks. I was sure this would lead me to her. Agatha made it sound like this was the answer to all my questions. “Do you know—”

The swinging door bursts open, and the brunette twin emerges, carrying an Xbox and headset. “What the heck am I supposed to do with this? She just left it up there.”

My eyes widen. “Is that Luna’s?”

The brunette twin looks at me, then back at her sister, eyes wide. “Uh...”

“Yes,” her sister supplies with a sigh. “It’s Luna’s. She used to live here.”

“In the bakery?”

“In the apartment upstairs.”

Her words unlock a key, clicking different pieces together in my mind. All the stories ClockStriker told me about her bosses, who made her work ungodly hours in exchange for free room and board. Now that I know it was these twins, and that I’m standing in the place she lived, I need to know more. “Show me her apartment.”

The twins exchange a glance, but I hold my ground. I want to get the full picture of what she was dealing with.

The brunette sets down the Xbox and headset on the counter. “Come with me.”

I follow her past a laundry room with dirty towels piled high, through the kitchen with dishes that are begging to be washed, up a narrow wooden staircase that feels like it will collapse under my weight, and through the creaking door to Luna’s room.

“Here it is,” she says.

I step inside, but I can’t even stand upright in this room. Thank goodness Luna is so short; she probably wouldn’t have noticed. Dust particles float through the air. A tiny bed takes up most of the bedroom, and a stale scent permeates the space.

I turn my head slowly, taking in the conditions. “This is nearly unlivable.”

She shrugs. “She never complained.”

She wouldn't, I think to myself. Because Luna, both in person and online, is always looking at the bright side and grateful for whatever she has. A shining light in the darkest of times.

Now I understand why she was ashamed to let me know who she was. While it would not have changed my feelings toward her, seeing exactly where she lived puts her in a different light than before. But instead of diminishing my attraction to her, it only makes me appreciate her heart.

I turn and head out the door. I've seen enough. "She should sue."

"What?" the brunette shrieks, running behind me.

"This is an unsafe living environment. And the hours you made her work were definitely unethical, if not unlawful." I reach the bottom of the stairs and pin her with a stare. "You should be grateful she was so accommodating. I can't believe she did everything you asked."

"Not everything," she mutters.

I furrow my brows at her.

Her eyes dart toward the entrance of the store, as if worried her sister will hear. She must be afraid enough of a lawsuit that she answers my questioning stare. "When you came here to talk about the cake for the gala, we told her to pretend to be looking for a cake for Madeleine's wedding. It wasn't that far-fetched; she's really helping Madeleine plan her wedding. But we wanted to make it look like we were these in-demand cake designers. And...well...you remember how that all went, with the coffee and the cake and your phone."

"Yes. I do." More puzzle pieces start fitting together, along with the realization that Luna wasn't trying to deceive me at the bakery itself. But her words give another clue to her whereabouts. "Thank you. I'll see myself out."

I walk out of the bakery and across the street to Cookies & Kisses.



“I WAS WONDERING when you’d be here,” Madeleine says as soon as I walk in the door.

“Oh?” I ask.

She smiles sadly. “She’s not answering your calls?”

I shake my head. “I worry I missed my chance. This last week has been...stressful.”

She nods knowingly, but she doesn’t have the full story. Word has spread about Adam, but few people know the extent of Lily’s issues.

“She won’t respond to my calls, texts, Discord messages, nothing.” I gesture across the street. “The twins said she moved out, and they showed me her living space.” Anger fills me again as I think of her apartment. I put my hands on the counter. “Have you seen it? Do you know what she was going through?”

“She never let me.” Madeleine runs a tired hand down her cheek. “It was that bad?”

I nod. “And the hours they made her work... I don’t understand why she was willing to endure it.”

“That might be my fault.” She explains that Luna came up to help with her wedding, which I already knew, but adds the detail that her mother’s arthritis has become so severe that she couldn’t go to any appointments with her. “I think she felt obligated to stay here...for me.”

“That sounds like Luna,” I reply. “Don’t blame yourself, though.”

She twists her lips. “Thanks.”

I inhale deeply, switching from past to present. “So, any idea where she is now?”

“Yeah, I know where she is.” She pulls her phone out of her pocket and types in a few things, then shows me her screen with a pin on her maps app. “She’s back home with her parents. Her sister, Ivy, had her baby a little early. It was

actually the night of the gala, so she drove back home with Scott.”

A wave of jealousy rushes over me. “Scott...Scott who?”

Madeleine snorts. “Scott King. Her brother-in-law.”

Recognition slowly washes over me. “Her brother-in-law...is Scott King?”

She nods.

“As in, King Taylor Investments?”

She nods again.

I laugh out loud. “Our worlds are so intertwined. It’s insane.”

Madeleine smiles again, a twinkle in her eyes. “I think you two were meant to be together.”

“Perhaps.” I glance at her phone again. “Do you mind if I take down this address?”

“Why do you think I’m showing it to you?” she teases. “Go find her.”

I copy the address into my phone, thank her profusely, and head outside. Charles is waiting outside the car for me.

“Where to, Mr. Stone?” he asks.

I look down at my phone, then back up at him. “Canyon Cove. But I have something to do first.” I march back across the street to Twin Cakes bakery, push the door open, and walk up to the counter. The twins stare at me, openmouthed.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” I say. “Luna may be too kind-hearted to pursue legal action, but I’m not.” Between Adam and now this situation, I’ll be keeping my lawyer pretty busy, but it will be worth it.

“Wait!” the redheaded one cries. “We’re...sorry?”

I laugh. “That sounded very genuine. I’ll be surprised if you get to keep this bakery after he’s through with you.”

The twins’ eyes fill with worry, but that’s not my concern. I notice the Xbox and headset still sitting on the counter and

scoop them up. "I'll take these," I add, and walk out the door of the bakery. It'll make a nice gift for Luna when I see her.

chapter thirty-six

LUNA



“Luna! Let’s play a round of Mario Kart!” Katy calls to me from the living room.

“No, thanks,” I call back from my seat at the kitchen counter. I helped Mom bake some cookies, and now we’re just waiting for them to finish cooling.

She pokes her head around the doorway. “Come onnnnn, MooMoo. You can’t be serious about this.”

I shake my head. “I’ve sworn off gaming. I told you.”

As soon as I got home, I told my family everything. I can’t keep secrets from them. Well, maybe not as soon as I got home. The first thing we did was support Ivy. Scott and my mom rushed to be with Ivy until baby Fern was born, while I waited anxiously with my dad and sisters for the news that baby and mama were both healthy and well.

After that, I told them everything, along with my decision to swear off gaming. They probably thought I was being rash, but I mean it. Right now, it doesn’t feel worth it.

When I went to visit Ivy and baby Fern, she scolded me. Ivy, not Fern. She said I’m not being brave. But look where being brave got me in the first place! I think I deserve to be a chicken for a bit longer. And in the meantime, I’ll hang out with the chickens at my parents’ house, cuddling the new baby chicks, Chickaletta Jr. and Nugget.

Madeleine, the only reason I stayed in Brookhaven as long as I did, knows the entire story and told me to take as long as I

need. She said Mason can fill in the gaps with wedding planning, and she's been texting me with any important decisions. But since the most important things—especially the dress—are handled, I'm safe hanging out here for now.

Katy huffs. "Mario Kart is literally just racing cars. And throwing bananas."

"Nope." I stand firm.

She groans and turns back to the living room. "Dad?"

The doorbell rings. "I'll get it!" Dad calls through the house. I hear him mutter under his breath, "Saved by the bell." We all love playing video games, but Katy can get a little vicious when it comes to Mario Kart. One time, she hid actual bananas behind her seat on the couch and threw them at us every time she released one in the game.

My mom sets down the plate of her famous oatmeal cookies with chocolate-covered raisins. Madeleine tried to tweak the recipe and said that even *she* couldn't improve them.

"Thanks, Mom," I say.

She looks down at the phone I'm spinning through my fingers. "Has he called again?"

I shake my head. "Just a few hours ago. But I don't feel ready to talk to him yet." I look up at her. "I don't understand why he didn't call until today, though. Is he still that mad at me?"

Mom twists her lips to the side of her mouth. "What did his message say?"

"That something serious came up. I knew that—everyone knows what happened with Adam at the Goldies. But it seems weird that he'd disappear for an entire week." I shrug and set my phone down on the table. "I don't know. It's all so strange."

She hums sympathetically and strokes my arm. "Want some tea?"

I nod. She heads back to the stove, heating some water and fixing her special recipe for tea with cinnamon and cloves.

I can hear my dad's voice mingling with another deep voice from the front door. "Who is that?" I ask my mom.

She shrugs, her back still to me. "I wasn't expecting anyone. But it seems like someone your dad knows."

Curiosity gets the better of me. I stand and cautiously head toward the front door, not wanting to interrupt if my dad is having some kind of private conversation.

I hear my dad's voice. "I'm not sure where she's at right now, but I can check if she's willing."

"That would be great," the other voice says. It's a familiar voice, one tinged with a British accent.

No. It can't be.

I peek around the corner and nearly collapse when I see who's there.

Henry.

Stone.

Standing outside the door of my family home.

I scurry back behind the wall, hoping he didn't notice me.

"Luna!" Henry calls.

Guess I was too slow.

I slowly step around the corner with a little wave. "Hey, Henry. Good to see you."

A full smile lights his face, dimples burrowing into his cheeks. Just last week, I kissed those lips. And right now, it looks like he wants to do it again.

"I'll...give you two some privacy," my dad says. He looks pointedly at me. "As long as that's what you want." If I know my dad, he's ready to shove Henry out the door if I just say the word. Not that my dad would stand much of a chance, but it's the thought that counts.

But I nod. It *is* what I want. Seeing Henry just a few feet away from me fills me with hope, and I want nothing more than to finally get some resolution. My dad squeezes my

shoulder on the way back to the kitchen, and I hear him ask my mom about the cookies.

“May I come in?” Henry asks.

I nod again, stepping to the side so he can enter my family home. What does he even think of it here? It’s very homey and lived-in. My mom isn’t the best decorator. Family portraits from the last twenty years sit around the rooms, still not hung on the walls. We’ve never been good at putting things away; there are always random items scattered on the coffee table in the living room.

Speaking of the living room, that seems to be our best place to talk, except that Katy is still busy trying to get Mario Kart set up. She hasn’t noticed our visitor, and when I lead him into the room, she finally looks up. Her mouth drops open.

“Hey, Katy. This is Henry. Or MidKnight. Remember when we played his game?”

She blinks a few times, her cheeks pinking up, and I know her eleven-year-old self is majorly crushing on Henry. “Oh, I remember. But I never thought he’d be so—”

“Okay, time for you to eat some cookies!” I push her into the kitchen before she can finish that sentence. Just like Ivy, she’s not one to hide her feelings, especially when it comes to boys.

“Nice job, MooMoo,” she says in a stage whisper.

I sigh.

Henry clears his throat. “Before you leave, can I ask where the nickname MooMoo *actually* came from?”

“Oh!” Katy turns around, proud to have a moment to shine. “When I was little, I couldn’t say Luna. So she tried to get me to say ‘moon,’ since that’s what Luna means. The closest thing I could get out was MooMoo, and it stuck.”

His eyes light with understanding. “MooMoo,” he repeats with a grin.

Katy nods. “Now I’m off to get some cookies. Don’t get gross in here.”

“Katy!” I exclaim.

She just smiles and saunters off into the kitchen.

And now we’re alone in the living room. I’m shaking like a leaf, but I need to be brave and have this conversation. No more hiding.

I turn back to Henry and try to paste a smile on my face. “So...you’re here.”

“I’m here,” he repeats.

“In my family home.”

He nods.

“What... Why are you here?”

His eyes don’t leave mine. “You didn’t return my calls.”

My mouth drops open. “So you drove all the way down to Canyon Cove?”

He shrugs and shoves his hands in his pockets, repeating the boyish gesture I love so much. “It seemed reasonable at the time.”

“And now?”

“It still is.”

My heart races in my chest, hoping beyond hope that this means we can make things work. I sit on the couch and gesture for him to sit, too. Instead of giving us space, he settles right next to me, close enough that our knees are touching. I feel his warmth all the way down to the tips of my toes.

“I went to Twin Cakes today,” he says.

That was not the opening I expected. “You did?” I whisper.

He nods. “And I saw where you lived.”

My face flushes with embarrassment.

“Luna, I’m so sorry. They treated you so poorly.”

I shrug one shoulder, putting on a brave face. “It wasn’t that bad. At least I had a place to stay. Plus,” I hold out a finger, “free Wi-Fi.”

“That’s just it.” He takes my hand in his. “Luna, you embody your name perfectly. You’re just like the moon—you’re the light amid all the darkness. You see the best in everyone and everything.” He kisses the back of my hand, and shivers run down my spine. I suck in a breath at the gentle gesture. “You’re kind,” he kisses one finger, “considerate,” he kisses another finger, “and beautiful.” With his other hand, he strokes my cheek. “I wish you wouldn’t have been afraid to tell me who you are.”

“I know.” I look down at our hands. “I was so worried that telling you the truth would make you think less of me.”

“Not possible.”

I huff. “Trust me, it is.”

He puts his hand under my chin and lifts my head so I meet his eyes. “You never got to answer my question. Who hurt you, Luna?”

I blink a few times. “It was an ex-boyfriend. He broke up with me when I moved in here.”

“You mean when you moved in to help your family recover after a life-altering car accident?”

I shrug, pressing my lips together. “He said I wasn’t ambitious enough for him, and that I was throwing my life away.”

“Well, he’d think the same of me, then.”

“What...” I swallow hard. “What do you mean?”

Henry exhales. “I didn’t communicate with you this past week because I didn’t communicate with anyone. I’ve been away from work, managing all my family issues and ignoring all other responsibilities.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I know it’s not an excuse. I shouldn’t have neglected our conversation for so long.”

I squeeze his hand. “But I heard about all the craziness with Adam. I’m so sorry you have to deal with having him as a brother. He seems like a loose cannon.”

He shakes his head slightly. “Things are a lot more complicated than they seem.” He studies my face carefully. “I’m going to tell you the truth about what’s going on. No one outside of my family knows about this. And I hope that in telling you, you can know two things: first, that family is most important, and the fact that you took care of your family when they needed you makes you precious in my eyes.”

I blush furiously at that.

“And second,” he continues, “I want you to know that nothing and no one is perfect. That everyone has problems. And that I want you by my side as I work through the complications that both Adam and Lily have created.”

“Lily?” I repeat.

He nods, then launches into the explanation of what happened this past week. I won’t share it here, because it’s not my story to tell, but my heart is broken for Henry and his siblings. I feel a sense of companionship toward Lily and her naivete, giving me a new perspective on my own immature ideas of love.

“What a mess,” I say when he’s finished.

He nods. “Adam is staying in our family’s estate on the outskirts of Brookhaven, and Lily is staying home for the meantime. But, as you can see—”

“You had a lot to deal with this past week,” I supply.

He nods. “But I still should have said something to you. A text message seemed too insignificant, and I knew we needed to have a conversation, face to face, where we could finally work this all out. Besides, seeing the twins and talking to Madeleine gave me the full picture of your situation.” He scoots even closer to me, the sides of our bodies pressed together. “I want to help, but in a practical way.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to offer you a job. As an animator at Stone Gaming.”

My mouth drops open. “You’re kidding.”

He shakes his head. “Absolutely not. You were pivotal in the final game design. Without you, the game would have failed. But the gala was such a success; every critic has praised the game, and every investor we invited has pledged money. Stone Gaming will be up and running in the next month, and I have some positions to fill.” He fixes me with a serious expression. “I need you.”

I blink a few times, taking in the weight of his words. “I can’t believe it.”

“You should. You’re worth so much more than you even understand.”

My cheeks fill with heat.

“Luna? Will you come work for me?”

I want to say yes so badly. But this isn’t just a job offer. “What if... What if things don’t work out?” I gesture between us. “You know...”

He just smirks, half his mouth raising in a sexy grin. He leans in toward me and whispers, “I don’t see that happening.”

“No?” My voice comes out all breathy.

He shakes his head slowly. “You’re my soulmate, Luna. You’re everything I could have ever dreamed of and more. I love you. And I’m never letting you go.”

And with those words, he closes the space between us, brushing my lips with his. I close my eyes, savoring the sweet, gentle touch. His hands cradle my face, brushing my cheeks as he kisses my lips. Then his lips linger on mine, running his hands down my arms and wrapping them around my waist. My hands find his chest, running up his neck and into his hair, pulling him closer to me. He groans low, pulling me toward him and leaning me back to lie down on the couch. We lie side by side, our lips moving in time with each other, passion and heat passing between us, and then...

“Excuse me. I said not to do anything gross in here.”
Katy’s voice startles us both from our trance.

“We... I...” I try to speak, but there aren’t any words I can use to explain this to my eleven-year-old sister.

“Whatever. It’s not any worse than what Ivy and Scott used to do. I just want to play Mario Kart. Are you done with your video game strike now?”

I look back at Henry, who questions me with a raise of his brow. “Video game strike?”

I shrug. “I was in pain.”

He kisses me on the forehead. “I hope you’re not anymore.”

Katy huffs. “I *said* I want to play Mario Kart. Are you guys going to play with me?”

Looking up at Henry, I answer Katy’s question along with his request to work with him at Stone Gaming. “Let’s do it.”

THE END

epilogue

HENRY



SIX MONTHS LATER (MARCH)

An alert from my phone buzzes on my work desk, drawing my attention away from the numbers on my computer. It's a text from Lily.

Congrats on your nomination for the VG Awards!

I furrow my brow. Nomination? I hadn't heard anything. Pulling up a new browser window, I type "VG Awards nominations" in the search bar.

Sure enough, the VG Awards, the largest gaming awards show in North America, just posted their list of nominees for this year. I scan through the list, searching for Sea Stone, and find it under Best Family Game of the Year.

"Yes!" I cheer out loud, pumping my fist in the air. Sue looks over at me in alarm, and I wave with a smile, which she returns.

This calls for a celebration. Which I was already planning, but now I have an excuse. Maybe now it'll seem a little less suspicious.

I stride out of my office and find the one person I want to celebrate with—Luna. She's busy working at her desk and doesn't even notice as I approach. I run a gentle hand down her arm, and she looks up at me, her beautiful brown eyes shining and a perfect smile on her lips.

"Hi!" she says brightly.

I can't resist, even though we're in the office. I bend down and kiss her lips. When I pull away, she blinks a few times. "What was that for?" she asks.

"Sea Stone has been nominated for a VG Award. Best Family Game of the year."

She slaps a hand over her mouth. "You're kidding."

I shake my head, then hold her hands and pull her to standing. "And I think this calls for a celebration. Let's take the afternoon off."

She looks down at her computer. "I have some work to do on our next game." She looks back at me, her eyes shining with mirth. "Do you think my boss will be upset with me?"

I smirk and rest my forehead on hers. "I think your boss would insist you take the afternoon off to celebrate."

She smiles widely and presses a quick kiss to my lips. "Let me log off and grab my things."

I nod. "I'll do the same." I squeeze her waist once and she giggles. "I couldn't have done this without you, Luna. You're incredible, in every way."

Her cheeks turn bright pink, which is now my favorite color. "I think we make a great team."

I sigh. Her modesty, along with her kind heart, make her perfect. "I'll see you in a minute."

I head to my office, closing out my computer and sending a quick text to make sure everything is ready for the afternoon. After I get confirmation, I meet Luna at her desk, and we head to my car together.

As I drive out of the parking lot, she asks, "What's the plan?"

"I was thinking we'd head to Brookhaven," I reply. I hope I sound nonchalant.

"Oh, yay! Do you think we can stop by Cookies & Kisses? I haven't seen Madeleine since the wedding." They've been talking frequently, but we haven't had a chance to get together

with them since they came back from their honeymoon two weeks ago.

“I think we can squeeze that in,” I reply, as if I weren’t planning it all along. I grab Luna’s hand, kiss her fingers, and set our joined hands on the shifter.

Luna settles back into her seat with a small smile on her face. “If only we had time to head to Canyon Cove.”

“Maybe we can go this weekend.” We’ve gone to visit her family at least once a month, but I know she still misses them. She’s creating her new family here, but it’s not the same.

“How’s Adam?” she asks. “Is he...” She gestures at her face.

I inhale deeply. Adam got into a terrible car accident two months ago. The stress of the events with Lily and Tristan took its toll, and he went speeding down the mountain from our family estate, Stone Castle, only to crash into a tree. The windshield completely shattered, leading to severe injuries to his face and left eye. The rest of his body is unharmed but, as an actor, his career will be impacted for sure.

“He’s all right,” I answer. “Adjusting to his new circumstances. I don’t think he’ll be leaving the castle any time soon.”

“Understandable. And...Lily?”

Lily. My heart wrenches every time I think of her. “I just called her a few days ago.” I don’t tell Luna why, but she’ll know soon enough. “She’s still under lockdown. I don’t know how long my father intends to keep her there. But after everything that happened, it’s hard to know that she’ll be safe.”

“Hmm.” Luna starts stroking my hand with her thumb. “I worry about her mental health if she doesn’t get out of there soon.”

“I agree.” I sigh. “She spends most of her time practicing the piano. If only she had the opportunity to perform.”

Luna nods. “Let’s go visit her soon.”

“Great idea.”

We spend the rest of the drive in comfortable silence. Thankfully, Luna can't feel my racing heart, because the closer we get to Brookhaven, the more my nerves increase.

I park in the public lot near the main square of Brookhaven. Luna and I walk hand in hand into the town center.

She sighs when we pass Twin Cakes bakery—or, what used to be Twin Cakes. “I still feel bad for them.”

“I don't.” I squeeze her hand. “They put you through so much and lied the whole time. Besides, it's not like they're in jail or anything. They're just...back with their parents in Santa Barbara. Hopefully they'll learn from this and move forward with their lives in a more positive direction.”

“I guess. That's a good way to think about it.”

We walk across the way to Cookies & Kisses, where Madeleine greets us at the front counter. Luna rushes to her friend and squeezes her in a huge hug. “You're so tan!” she squeals.

Madeleine laughs. “Cancun will do that to you.” She meets my eyes, then leans down and picks up a picnic basket. “Henry texted me to set up this basket for you guys.”

“Oh!” She looks back at me with a big smile. “Where are we going?”

“I was thinking Sunrise Farms,” I say. “How does that sound?”

Luna chuckles. “Where the Pumpkin Patch Festival was? I wonder if we'll find my shoe.”

Madeleine raises her brows at me behind Luna's back, but I keep a straight face. “You never know.” I take the basket from Madeleine. “We'll come by after our picnic and catch up.”

“Sounds good!” she replies. “Enjoy your lunch!” She winks at me, and I have to control myself to not roll my eyes.

As we walk out of the cookie store, I fight the urge to open the basket and make sure everything is inside. But I decide to trust Madeleine and focus on our walk, instead.

“Did your Wi-Fi get fixed yet?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I’m going to lose my mind.”

“You could always move into my building instead.”

She fixes me with a glare. “You know how I feel about that.”

Yes, I do. She lives a couple blocks away from me, also in Silver Lake City, but her apartment building is not nearly as nice as mine. I’ve offered to help cover her rent so she could get an apartment in my building, but she refuses. And she’s especially determined that we will not live together until we’re married, which I completely respect.

We approach the farms, and Luna looks curiously at the flower archway set up at the front. “Are we crashing an event?”

I shrug. “I guess we’ll see.”

She raises a brow at me. “You’re being awfully cryptic.”

I don’t reply, just keep leading her down the path of flower petals until we reach the blanket that Madeleine set out for us. I set the basket down on the blanket.

“This is for us?” Luna asks.

I nod. “Yep. Let’s see what’s in the basket.”

Luna sits down next to me. I really hope Madeleine packed it in order. Sure enough, as soon as I open the basket, the first thing I take out is a cookie in the shape of a video game controller. “Dessert first?”

Luna giggles. “I didn’t know Mason and Madeleine made cookies like this.”

They didn’t, I want to reply. I had to buy the cookie cutters and send them to Madeleine. But I stay quiet and hand the cookie to Luna. “This is how we first met.”

She eyes me suspiciously, as if she's starting to realize that this has been planned for weeks. Which it has.

I continue. "Granted, I thought you were a guy, but this is how everything began."

She laughs softly and breaks the cookie in half, taking a dainty bite and handing the rest to me. I set the cookie down, not ready to stop my speech now that I've started.

The next cookie is a train. "And this is how we met in person for the first time."

Her eyes wide, she takes the cookie from me. She's still chewing on the first one, but I think she's more interested in where this basket is going.

"It's also the first time we kissed." I lean in toward her. "And the first time you fell asleep on me."

"But not the last," she replies.

I shake my head. "Definitely not." I pull out the next cookie in the shape of a pumpkin. "The next time I saw you, you were coming out of the pumpkin carriage."

She shudders. "That was the worst."

I chuckle. "You also lost a shoe that day."

She sighs. "It was one of my favorites. I tried not to make a big deal out of it, though."

With a smirk, I reach into the basket and pull out a single shoe. It's not the exact shoe she lost, since that one was eaten by goats, but I enlisted Madeleine's help to find the correct brand and style.

Luna gasps. "What is this?"

"I got you a replacement." I reach for her foot, taking off her current shoe.

"Oh, no," she giggles. "You really don't have to—"

"Shush," I say, a smile on my face. "Let me do this."

She presses her lips together, fighting back laughter, and nods. I slip the shoe on her foot. "See? A perfect fit."

“Thank you,” she says softly. She peers at the basket. “What else is in there?”

“Let’s see.” I reach in and pull out the next pair of cookies, a crayfish and a chicken. “In honor of Krusty and Chickaletta.”

She smiles sadly at me and takes the cookies. “You made that awful night so much better.”

I look her in the eyes, holding her gaze. “You make everything so much better.”

She inhales sharply. We’re almost there.

The next few cookies make her laugh—a phone with a shattered screen, seaweed to signify her contribution to the game, and a cup of coffee for our meeting in Brookhaven.

I pull out the final cookie, decorated like the necklace I gave her. “And finally, the night when you had the courage to show me who you really were.”

She tilts her head. “I wish I had been braver sooner.”

“I do, too.” I lean in and kiss her softly. “Only because we could have started doing this much sooner.”

She melts into me, brushing her lips on mine and making me forget why we’re here. “I intend to make up for lost time,” she whispers.

I kiss her once more, regaining my senses. “And I intend to hold you to that.” I reach in the basket for the final item, a blue velvet box. Luna gasps when she sees it.

“Luna Jones, you are my soulmate in every way imaginable. You are the light amidst the darkness, and I never want to spend a day away from you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she squeals, wrapping her arms around me and burying her face in my neck. And this is again why I adore Luna. I haven’t even shown her the ring, but just the idea that I’ve proposed is enough for her to throw herself at me.

I lean back so I can open the box for her. Her eyes grow misty as she takes it in.

“It’s a moon,” she whispers. The ring, which I designed for her, has a simple platinum band, a round diamond as the centerpiece, and small diamonds circling on one side to make it look like a crescent moon.

I nod. “It’s you, MooMoo.”

She swats my arm playfully. “Not the most flattering nickname to come from my boyfriend.”

“Fiancé,” I correct. “And what would you like me to call you instead?”

She twists her lips to the side, thinking.

I take her left hand and slip the ring on her finger—a perfect fit. Thank goodness I asked her mom to ransack her jewelry and find her size. “How about I call you Mrs. Stone?”

Her cheeks pink up again, and her eyes fill with joyful tears. “I think that would be perfect.” She gently rests her hand on my cheek. “Thank you for everything.”

I shake my head. “*You* are my everything. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” And with a kiss, we seal our happily ever after.

KEEP READING for a sneak peek at Adam’s story, Isabelle and the Beast!

bonus epilogue

ADAM



TWO MONTHS LATER (MAY)

The fireplace roars in front of me, the only light I have on in the study of the Stone Family Castle. Dancing shadows line the walls, and I sit in my stiff wingback chair, scrolling through my phone for any mentions of my name.

It may have been eight months since the incident on the red carpet of the Goldies, but Hollywood gossip channels never cease.

Adam Stone spotted in Aruba!

Hah. Nope, not me.

Where is Adam Stone? Reliable sources say he might be dead.

Also not true. I love when they cite “reliable sources” that are completely incorrect.

But the next one catches my eye.

Henry Stone, brother of actor Adam Stone, engaged to Luna Jones!

Yes, yes, I knew about that. They’ve actually been engaged for two months and will be getting married in the summer. Henry called me to let me know the good news. I feigned happiness, but I’m sure he could sense my underlying irritation with his picture-perfect life.

I can’t be too angry with him. He was the only one who defended me when everything went down with Tristan

Jackson, and he saved Lily from Tristan's clutches. But the juxtaposition of our situations gnaws at me.

I click the article and study the picture of the two of them, so happy together. Henry's good-boy charms and looks, Luna's bright eyes and genuine smile.

It makes me sick.

I throw my phone in frustration, and it hits the wall with a satisfying *crack*. No worries. I'll have Lionel get me a new one tomorrow.

I sit in silence by the fire, trying to remind myself that this was all worth it. Giving up my success in the spotlight was the right decision. Maybe speeding my car down the winding road of Stone Castle wasn't the right decision, but in the end, what does it matter?

"Mr. Stone?" Lionel's voice sounds from the doorway behind me.

"Yes?" I don't turn around from my chair.

"You have a visitor."

That gets my attention. I stand from my seat and turn to see someone I hadn't expected. My manager, Jim Lovett, stands behind Lionel. His stout, plump silhouette makes an almost comical contrast to Lionel's thin, wiry frame, their shadows dancing against the walls. Jim is almost completely soaked through.

"Jim. This is a surprise." I lift a hand to Lionel, dismissing him. Before he leaves, he notices my shattered phone on the floor and picks it up, then walks out of the study and shuts the door behind him.

"Yes, well," Jim says, "you haven't been answering any of my calls." He brushes some leftover droplets off his coat. "That was a terrifying drive. Nearly two hours just to get up this mountain. No wonder you never leave." He clears his throat. "At least, not anymore."

Jim knows about the accident, and so does my family. Once again, Henry worked with his lawyer to keep it from the

press. The public doesn't need to know everything. As long as I stay up here, no one will know what happened to my face.

"There's no one to see," I reply.

"And the rain?" he continues. "How is it raining up here? It's literally pouring, but down in Brookhaven it's perfectly sunny and bright."

I lift the side of my mouth in a half-grin. Not that he can necessarily see it in the dark. "They say the weather up here reflects the current resident."

He removes his coat, slinging it over his arm, and takes a few steps toward me. I track the moment he finally sees my face and recoils in horror. "Adam! What...wWhat happened to you?"

Ignorance is my best play here. I *am* an actor, after all. "What do you mean?"

He gestures at his own hair and face. "The hair. The beard."

"Oh, yes. That." I stroke my light brown beard, completely untamed and wild, matching my hair that is now nearly at my shoulders. "There hasn't been a need for a haircut or shave. Besides, I think it takes the attention away from my scars."

Jim gapes at me openly, then collects himself. "Well, you'll never get another acting job looking like that."

I laugh, throwing my head back. "You think that's my concern right now?" I step closer to him and point at the left side of my face. "Do you think anyone will want to hire me when I'm blind in one eye and look like this?"

"I think they would."

I shake my head. "Besides, I'm the 'Hollywood Hothead.' No one wants to work with me, especially after...you know."

Jim tilts his head. "Adam, if you'd just tell me what happened and *why* you punched Tristan—"

"Absolutely not."

“But clearly you had a valid reason. And then he dropped the lawsuit. Why?”

I smile to myself but don't say a word.

“Fine.” Jim throws his coat over my wingback chair.

“Hey, you're getting it all wet!” I grab his coat and hand it back to him, pointing at the wall. “There are hooks by the door.”

He huffs and walks back to the door, fumbling to hang his coat on a hook in the dark. I brush the water droplets off my favorite chair, where I spend most of my evenings.

Jim turns back to face me, his expression soft, with a small, self-deprecating smile. Ah, he's going for the friend approach now. “I didn't come here to hound you for information. I have an opportunity for you.”

“I'm not interested.”

“You don't even know what it is.”

“Does it have to do with acting?”

“Of course.”

I shake my head and fold my arms across my chest. While I'm not doing much up here, there is a gym at the castle and I work out regularly, so I know I look intimidating. My current look is best described as Mountain Man. “Absolutely not.”

“Be practical, Adam. You can't hide here forever. Your acting skills are unmatched. You were the hottest thing in Hollywood, and you have to strike while the iron is hot. The fact that someone is even asking for you, despite everything, shows that you have what it takes to make a comeback.”

He's right, and he knows it.

And I hate it.

I miss acting. Of course I do. But I can't fathom putting myself out there again, looking the way I do now, especially when it means potentially running into Tristan Jackson. I'm not sure I can hold back from punching his stupid, smug grin a second time.

“What’s the project?” I ask, despite myself. “Superhero? Alien apocalypse?”

“Eh, no.” Jim smiles nervously. “It’s a...rom-com.”

Silence.

“You’re kidding,” I finally say.

He shakes his head.

“A rom-com. You want *me* to do a rom-com?.” I laugh sarcastically. “No way.”

But Jim is undeterred. “This would completely change your image. Seeing you fall in love, have silly moments, it would put you in a new light for the public. It’s the best move for you.”

I stay firm and silent.

“When have I ever led you astray?” he continues. “Seriously. Every move we’ve made together has been a success. It’s only when you go rogue, punching Tristan Jackson on the red carpet of the Goldies, then taking that stupid drive, that your career falls apart.” He steps right in front of me, reaching his short, stubby arms up to grasp my shoulders. “Trust me.”

“Do they want me when I look like this?” I ask. “No one knows about the accident besides you and my family.”

“I’ve got it covered.” He shakes my shoulders gently, and repeats himself. “Trust me.”

He’s breaking me down, and he knows it. But I can tell he’s hiding something. “Who’s producing the movie? Why do they want me?”

He takes a step back and rubs his forehead. “Ah. It’s...one of those family-friendly channels. It’s called the Family Entertainment Network.”

I snort. “And they want *me*?”

He shrugs. “They think having a big name would be good publicity for their channel.”

“Who else is signed on?”

“Well, the script was written by Bryan Storm, the director is Fred Armstrong...” His voice trails off.

I’m getting annoyed with all the pieces of information he’s giving. I need the full picture. “What aren’t you telling me?” I ask, my voice raised.

He sighs. “My daughter is going to play the female lead.”

I tilt my head. “One of the models?”

He shakes his head. “No. My youngest daughter, Isabelle. She’s been trying to break into acting, and this is her chance. They loved her. And she’s wonderful to work with.”

“So *my* acceptance of the role would be beneficial for *your* daughter.” I shake my head. “This is absurd.”

I pace back and forth across the room, and Jim speaks quickly. “It’s not about me. You know I’m not like that. Of course, it would be beneficial for Isabelle, especially to be paired with a name like yours. But I’m thinking about *you* here. If you don’t take a job soon, your career is going to go down the toilet. You won’t get another opportunity for one of those big action movies again until you prove you can play nicely in the sandbox.”

His words are going in one ear and out the other. But I think I have a solution.

“Fine.” I say.

“Fine?”

“But I have a condition.” I stop pacing and turn to face Jim. “Send your daughter here. I need to meet her and make sure we can work together.”

“Send her...here?” Jim stammers.

“Yes. I’m not going anywhere. Let her see exactly what she’s signing up for. She doesn’t know what happened from the accident, right?”

Jim shakes his head slowly.

“Then she needs to know what’s involved. And I’ll make the call of whether or not we’re compatible. After that, I’ll decide if I want to do the movie.”

Jim swallows hard. “She’s a bit stubborn. I’m not sure I’ll be able to convince her to come.”

“I thought you said she was wonderful to work with.”

He just opens his mouth, then shuts it again.

I shrug. “Not my problem. Those are my conditions.” I point at the door. “You can leave now.”

“In this rain?” He laughs nervously. “Surely you have a place I can stay. This castle is enormous.”

I grunt. “Fine.” I raise my voice. “Lionel!”

Lionel opens the door. “Yes, Mr. Stone?”

“Please escort Mr. Lovett to the dungeon.”

“The *dungeon*?” Jim cries.

I smirk at him. “I’m kidding.”

Lionel smiles tightly at me. At least he gets my sense of humor. “Shall I prepare the Lily room?” he asks.

I nod, the mention of my younger sister’s name creating the usual lump in my throat. “Yes. The Lily room.”

“Very well.” He gestures for Jim to follow him, and I watch them leave the study.

Alone with just the fire, I wonder at the possibility of acting again. I do miss it. The thrill of the lights, pretending to be someone else, enacting scenarios that are generally impossible. A dash of excitement runs through me at the possibility of starting over.

But before I can get there, I have to meet Isabelle.

Let’s see what she’s made of.

a note from marie



Thank you SO MUCH for reading Cinder Luna! I hope you truly enjoyed Henry and Luna's story.

I've loved fairy tales ever since I was a little girl, and Cinderella was my favorite by far. Even when I was a teenager, I would say that the classic Disney Cinderella cartoon was my favorite movie (along with *The Count of Monte Cristo*). It was so comforting, and even today, I can recite every line of that movie. When the 2015 live action Cinderella came out, I was in LOVE. That version added so much depth to her relationship with the prince and her strength of character. "Have courage and be kind" has become a life motto for me.

So what is it about Cinderella that I love so much? In a nutshell, it's her spirit. Her ability to keep a positive attitude despite circumstances that she didn't ask for. Her grit and determination, and finally, her courage to stand up for herself. And while, yes, the love story is every girl's dream (hello, a prince who searches the land for the one girl who stole his heart?!), the beauty of the story to me is her kindness and courage.

I really hope I portrayed that same kindness and courage in Cinder Luna. While she begins the story a little more timid and shy, I hope everyone cheered at the end when she stood up for herself and got her Happily Ever After. And, of course, I hope you all swooned over Henry, too.

If you enjoyed Cinder Luna, I'd love it if you left a review! And if you haven't read Mason and Madeleine's short story,

Cookies & Kisses, click the link below to download it for free. And if you'd like to read about the original Canyon Cove characters, like Ivy & Scott and Thea & Ethan, make sure to read my other series, the Canyon Cove Love Stories!

Link to Cookies & Kisses: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/tp7ozuzsb8>

Thank you for reading, and I hope you will follow along for the other fairy tales, as well!

also by marie soleil

Canyon Cove Love Stories

Speak Your Truth

Feel the Rhythm

Let Love In

Take a Chance

Standalone Novels

Exceptional Emma

Once Upon a Rom-Com

Cookies & Kisses

Cinder Luna

Isabelle and the Beast

acknowledgments

Here we go! I'm pretty sure this will be my most extensive acknowledgements yet.

First of all, I have to thank Melody Jeffries for this incredible cover. I LOVE our relationship, where I can just tell you the premise and you create the perfect cover. You're the best!

My author friends who have encouraged me to keep going every time I felt too overwhelmed or stressed to write: Monique, Taylor, Anne, Sara, Elysia, Patty, and Julie. I'm so thankful to have your support! The voice messages and cheers for each step of the process were so encouraging.

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Jennifer, thank you, as usual, for your amazing editing job! I'm so happy we connected early in my writing career. You're amazing.

My husband, Caleb—I couldn't ask for a better best friend. You're my number one supporter, and I'm forever thankful for

you. And, thanks to you, I know enough about video games to write a whole book centered around them.

My sweet kiddos, thank you for always being patient and proud of Mommy's writing.

And my readers! You are the reason I keep writing books. The excitement for this story propelled me forward, even when I didn't want to write, and I hope you all enjoyed it.

about the author

Marie has had two goals since she was seven years old: to be a mother, and to be an author. She has been a storyteller her whole life and loves sharing these stories with the world. When she's not writing, she can be found watching *The Office*, playing the piano, sewing a dress, or reading a book (while consuming copious amounts of chocolate). She lives in sunny Southern California with her husband of 15 years, four children, and seven chickens.