



AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS'S
HEA
HAPPILY EVER ALPHA

Until
REMINGTON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

SHAW HART
CAMERON HART

UNTIL REMINGTON

A HAPPILY EVER ALPHA BOOK

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Until Nash

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 Created with Vellum

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Is she about to kiss her prince or a frog?

Lucy has been avoiding dating and falling in love all her life. She grew up watching men leave and break the hearts of the people closest to her.

So, she developed a mantra. Stay away from the opposite sex and never, ever, fall in love.

Then she meets Remington.

She tries to stick to her own rules and keep him at arm's length, but Remington keeps breaking through all of her walls.

No one has ever tempted her or made her wish for her own happily ever after. No one until Remington.

When she finally lets down her guard and lets Remington get close, will it prove to be the start of her happily ever after or her biggest mistake?

Will the BOOM between Remington and Lucy be strong enough to break down Lucy's walls?

Until Remington is part of Aurora Rose Reynolds's Happily Ever Alpha World. If you loved Until November, Until Rex, and Until Nash from the HEA World, then you will want to read Until Remington.

ONE

Lucy

“ARE YOU HEADED OUT?” Scarlett asks me as I dig through my bag to make sure I have everything. Hand sanitizer, snacks, wet wipes, a water bottle, chapstick... I just need one more thing.

Where’s that little devil...

“Ah-ha!” I exclaim as I grab the keychain with an adorable red stuffed devil on it. “Yeah, I’m meeting June,” I tell my friend, showing her the cute keychain. “What do you think?”

“She’s going to love it!” I smile, looking down at the big, dopey eyes and lopsided grin. It’s perfect for June. “Have fun!” Scarlett says as I throw my bag over my shoulder and walk toward the front door.

It’s a short drive over to the community center where the Big Brothers Big Sisters program is located. I’ve been volunteering with them ever since I moved to Tennessee with Scarlett a few years ago. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do, but never had the confidence until I finally found some stable footing of my own.

As someone who grew up in the foster care system, I know from personal experience that love can be hard to come by. Not all of the kids here are in foster care, but most of them come from rough home situations, whether it’s a parent in

prison, a single mom who can't make ends meet, or substance abuse.

Whatever the reason, the kids enrolled in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program need a safe place and a safe adult to hang out with once or twice a week. It's fulfilling and healing to be a Big Sister to kids dealing with similar things I was at their age. That's not to say I haven't had my doubts and awkward moments, but I always try to think of what I needed to hear growing up and the friend I needed but never found.

Aside from a few intimidating foster fathers and one foster mom who had a habit of locking us up in our rooms, I lucked out. Still, even in the best foster family I stayed with, I knew I didn't belong. Their home was always going to just be a pitstop in my endless journey to find somewhere safe to land. I hope I can be a safe place for the kids I volunteer with, a harbor in the chaotic storm they've been born into.

I pull into the parking lot, all of my thoughts flying away as soon as my eyes land on June and her pale brown hair. She's the sweetest girl and always has a big, toothy grin for me. I smile at her, returning her enthusiastic wave. Her mom is next to her, dressed in scrubs. She must be headed to work after this.

June and I were just assigned to each other last year and we became fast friends. She's an adorable kid with the best sense of humor. June also loves collecting weird and eccentric trinkets from thrift stores and gas stations, hence the devil keychain I can't wait to give her.

Hopping out of my car, I grab my bag and lock up, following the two of them inside. I see Brenda, June's mother, checking her in and dropping her off in the designated room. She spins around when she spots me, giving me a relieved, if not a bit frazzled, smile.

"Hey! I just dropped her off. I'm running late to work," she tells me, her blue eyes showing just how exhausted she is. "Last minute shift, and you know I can't pass up on those." I nod, leaning in to give her a quick hug. My heart hurts for her. I wish I could do more to help her out, but I know she's

grateful for the time I spend with her daughter. “What are two going to do today?” she asks.

“I thought we would head over to the ceramics place and paint for a few hours.”

“That sounds fun. I hate to ask this, but if you’re up for keeping her longer, that would be a huge help.” Once again, her eyes show me just how desperate she is. Brenda doesn’t often ask me for favors like this, and I know she’d never take advantage of our relationship. Plus, I love June.

I smile, assuring her it’s not a problem. “Sure! I have a movie night with my friends tonight but she can come if she wants,” I offer.

“You’re a lifesaver, Lucy. I seriously don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Nonsense,” I tell her, resting my hand on her shoulder. “You’re an amazing mom, a hard worker, and a good person. You would have found a way to thrive with or without me.”

Her eyes glass over with unshed tears, and she nods, giving me a small smile. “I needed to hear that today,” she whispers.

“You can do this, mama,” I tell her before taking a step back. “Now, off to work! June is in good hands.”

“I know she is. Thanks again. I’ll see you later,” Brenda tells me, giving me one last hug. I wave as she walks out and jogs over to her car.

Brenda works as a dental hygienist and she takes on as many hours as she can get. She must be assisting with an emergency surgery today to have to work on a Saturday. She’s a single mom dealing with a chronic illness, and when she’s not working, she’s resting up or going to doctors appointments. Once a week, I get to babysit and hang out with June while Brenda either works, sleeps, or catches up on chores and all the other things that go into being a single parent.

I head inside the Big Brothers Big Sisters room, laughing when June throws herself into my arms. She’s on the smaller

side as far as nine-year-olds go, so I have no problem lifting her up in a big bear hug.

“What have you been up to?” I ask as I set her down and turn to fill out the sign-out forms.

“We had a big test at school yesterday and I think I did pretty well,” June says.

“I’m sure you did. You’re so smart! Did you do anything fun this week?” I ask as I take her hand and lead her out of the building.

“I went to the park by our house with Noah. We took turns trying to see who could jump off the swing higher.”

“Yeah, and who won?”

“Me. Obviously.” I laugh when she rolls her eyes as if she’s offended I even had to ask.

We step outside and I glance up as we pass a guy coming inside. Our eyes meet and time freezes, the air draining from my lungs the longer I stare at this captivating man. *Why can’t I look away?*

He’s tall, well over six feet, and I have to crane my neck back to look at him. The man has dark green eyes, and they’re locked right on me. I can’t quite make out the look he’s giving me. Shocked? Angry? Feral? Confused? Whatever it is, I can feel the intensity of his stare all the way down to my core, where something sparks to life.

His black hair is cut short on the sides and longer on top, hanging over his forehead. A gentle breeze ruffles the strands, and I have to physically hold myself back from brushing them away from his eyes. The dark hair paired with thick, dark eyebrows and sharp cheekbones make his emerald eyes pop even more.

I don’t even realize I’m gawking at him until I stumble, tripping over my own feet.

Oh my god, am I going to fall on my ass in front of the sexiest man I’ve ever met?

Just when I'm bracing myself for impact, a large, warm hand wraps around my waist. The man pulls me into his chest, absorbing the impact.

"Easy, beautiful," he says, his tone low and growly.

I can feel the vibration of his deep voice rattle my bones. Warmth spreads from his body to mine at every point of contact, and I gasp when goosebumps break out all over my skin. Every part of me is hyper-aware of this man, from his chiseled chest pressing against my curves to his sandalwood and spice scent. Shivering, I take a step back from him.

"Thanks," I murmur as I hurry to catch up to June.

Don't look back. Don't you dare look back at him, I repeat in my head. Something tells me he's staring right at me, and if I turn around, I'll be caught up in his gaze again.

I'm not sure what to do with the rush of sensations coursing through me right now. I'm somehow overheated and clammy at the same time, my racing thoughts making me lightheaded. I've never been interested in a guy before. In fact, I've purposely stayed far away from dating, nipping any would-be crushes in the bud before they get out of hand and I do something crazy like trust them or sleep with them or lose myself to a man who will inevitably hurt me in the end.

I watched my older foster sister get her heart broken over and over again. She came crying to me every time someone dumped her or cheated on her or just straight up ignored her existence after they were tired of dealing with her drama.

If that weren't enough to make me weary of relationships, observing the horrible marriages of my various foster families certainly did. So much resentment, bitterness, and anger from both husbands and wives. One or both of them using alcohol or drugs to cope with life.

Honestly, the best example of a father or a husband was Paul Brenner. He sat on the couch and ate pork rinds most of the day, ignoring everyone, including his wife. If that's the best-case scenario, then *no thank you*. I'll pass on relationships. Plus, being a volunteer at Big Brothers Big

Sisters and seeing how many single moms there are has only reinforced that getting involved with a guy would be a bad idea.

Shaking my head of those thoughts, I force myself to ignore the feelings Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Stupidly-Handsome inspired in me.

June has been telling me about her test, and I feel bad for zoning out. Nodding along to whatever she just said, I reach my car and open the back door for her, getting her settled before climbing in behind the wheel. Before I start the car, I can't help but look back at the mystery man.

Dammit.

He's still standing on the sidewalk, staring after me. I watch intently as he lifts a hand to his chin, rubbing the slight scruff there as if in a trance. I can't help but notice his forearm flex, the muscles coiling as he continues to scratch his chin. Another shiver runs down my spine, snapping me back to the present. I start the car, wondering why this man is making me feel like this.

What is it about his presence that makes me feel jittery and on edge? Should I be frightened?

My phone buzzes, pulling me from my spiral, and I smile when I see Emilia's name on the screen.

EMILIA: Don't forget about movie night tonight!

Lucy: I won't!

Emilia: Do I need to pick anything up?

Lucy: Want to grab some pizzas? June is coming too if that's alright?!

Emilia: Yay! Okay, let me know and I can grab whatever.

Lucy: Sounds good! See you soon!

I MET Emilia when she moved in with Scarlett and me a year ago. She and her brother, Spencer, moved in with us when they first got to town. She's so strong and smart, and Spencer is the sweetest kid. We all became our own little family.

Spencer and Emilia moved in with Rex, her boyfriend, a few weeks ago. Seeing her so happy has been great, even if I'm skeptical of relationships and men in general. My friend deserves all the good things and endless joy after everything she's been through. Emilia struggled to take care of Spencer and take him to all of his doctor appointments, let alone pay for everything. Rex swooped in and has been taking care of her and Spencer for the last several months. I truly hope it works out, and that Rex is as good as he appears to be.

"Do you have to work tonight?" June asks me, directing my attention back to her. I smile brightly, determined to stay focused on what's most important - June.

"Nope, I finished up work this morning. I'm good until tomorrow," I tell her.

"Does that mean we get to hang out all day?" she asks with a delighted sparkle in her eyes. How could anyone not love this kid? She's the absolute cutest, and so sweet and thoughtful.

"It does. You're even invited over for movie night tonight."

"Pizza?"

"Of course," I say with a laugh, and she cheers in the backseat. "Now, are you ready to go paint some ceramics?"

"Yes!"

I smile, shifting into drive and taking one last look at the man before I drive away.

TWO

Remington

THINGS SURE HAVE GOTTEN BETTER AROUND HERE, I think as I watch my dream girl drive off.

I still can't fucking believe it. My heart hasn't slowed down for a single second since my eyes first landed on hers. The force of her gaze hit like a damn Mac truck to the chest, and I swear my world ground to a halt. It took a full minute for me to remember how to breathe again, though I'm still struggling with lightheadedness.

She was the most beautiful, precious woman I've ever seen in my life. I noticed her smiling down at the girl with her but didn't get a look at her face. Then her chocolatey brown hair caught a soft breeze, the strands swirling around her face and revealing blue eyes that glowed with life and happiness as she looked up at me.

I've all but forgotten what true joy looks like. I've been surrounded by war, death, and despair for too long. A pang of loss threatens to pierce through this perfect moment, but I push it away. Nothing can take away from the satisfaction of meeting my future wife.

Wife?

Did I really just think that? Wife. *Wife.* Yes. That feels right. Fuck that, it feels incredible. It feels like the thing I've been missing my whole life. Maybe that's what woke up the

ferocious, possessive beast inside of me. She gave me one ounce of hope and goodness, and now I'm addicted. Determined to make her mine.

She's the reason I survived all the shit I've been through in my life. I had to keep going so I could meet her. I didn't know it at the time, but this woman has been my reason to live from day one.

I saw kindness and fierceness in her clear blue eyes, and I knew she was a fighter, just like me. I don't know her story, not yet anyway, but I'm sure of it. She's got a fire in her, just like I do. That fire calls to me. I don't even know her name, and I'm ready to burn down the world just to be closer to my new obsession.

When I was younger, girls were the last thing on my radar. I was too busy trying to figure out a way to get out of this town and away from my alcoholic mother. It would have been cruel to invite someone into that dysfunction.

I joined the military as soon as I graduated high school and left for boot camp right after. I went through boot camp and then went right to BUDs. I became a Navy SEAL and never thought that I would be back here.

I might have come back if I knew she was here.

I never entertained one-night stands, never got tangled up in messy emotions, just kept my head down and did what I had to do to survive. Plus, no one ever caught my eye. No one ever made me want to open up or risk being vulnerable. One look at my mystery woman, however, and I'm ready to rip out my heart and place it at her feet.

Okay, maybe work on the metaphor a bit, I tell myself. It's not exactly the most romantic imagery, but Jesus, after my visceral reaction to the gorgeous, curvy woman who fell into my arms, I swear that's exactly what happened. One touch of her soft, creamy skin, and I was done for.

I glance back to where her car was parked, but she's long gone now.

It's okay, I tell myself, trying to push back the panic. This is a small town, and I'm sure I'll run into her again soon. When I do, I'm not going to let her get away from me. Not without getting her name and phone number. And her address, so I know where to send the moving crew to gather her things. Obviously, my woman will be living under my roof from now on.

Taking a deep breath, I try moving those life-changing realizations to the back burner. At least for the moment.

I got out of the SEALs three months ago, and found out my mom had passed away. I might be a horrible son, but I wasn't shocked or saddened to hear the news. It just made me feel... numb. Even so, I'm back in my hometown, dealing with the aftermath. First, I need to fix up my mother's house and sell it. And then... well, I'm not sure what I want to do with my life next, but this will be a good project in the meantime.

Speaking of projects...

I turn back to the building where the Big Brothers Big Sisters program is located. It was my old commanding officer who recommended that I volunteer somewhere. He said that giving back to the community would help me get acclimated to civilian life faster and it would give me something else to focus on. Something other than the men I lost on my last mission. Something good.

Right about now, I'm thinking dating might have been a better option. What the hell do I know about kids?

About as much as you do about dating, my not-so-helpful inner monologue points out.

I sigh as I head inside and up to the front counter.

"Hey there," says an older woman, Sharon, according to her nametag. I force a smile to my lips.

"Hi, I'm here for the Big Brothers Big Sisters program."

"Great! Do you know who your Little Brother is yet?"

“Um, yeah, they said his name is Noah,” I say, pulling the letter out of my back pocket.

“Great! Let me get him for you and I’ll get you the paperwork to fill out. Do you know what you were going to do together today?”

“Oh, um, I thought we would go to the park.”

“Which one?” she asks, flipping through some papers on her desk.

Which park? I don’t know the names of any parks nearby.

“Which one is closest?” I ask her.

“The one on Main Street is probably the closest, but it’s for younger kids. The one over on Maple might be a better option,” she tells me.

“Okay, we’ll go to that one.”

She smiles, passing me some papers to fill out.

“I’ll go get Noah for you. Be right back.”

I fill out the papers, entering in my information before I push them to the side.

Sharon returns with a boy trudging along behind her. I take him in, sizing him up. The kid, Noah, looks up at me and I can see him sizing me up, too.

He’s got to be about ten, and he scowls at me, his brown hair hanging like a mop and covering up part of his eyes. Noah glares at me, and I give him a passive look back.

“This is Noah. Noah, this is your new Big Brother.”

“Hey, I’m Remington,” I introduce myself, holding out my hand.

“Whatever,” he grumbles at me, rolling his eyes. Noah crosses his arms over his chest, ignoring the handshake offer.

Well, we’re off to a great start.

“Remington is going to take you to the park over on Maple,” Sharon tells him. The boy scoffs and shifts on his feet.

“Great,” he says sarcastically.

Sharon smiles at me like everything is going great, and I stare blankly back at her. Can I ask her to come with us? Would that be inappropriate on the first day?

Why did I think this would be a good idea?

“Well, off you two go,” she says, and I nod, turning and heading back out the door.

“I hate the park,” Noah mumbles.

I bite back a sigh. I have to at least try to set a positive tone here, even if Noah is just going to constantly bring it back down. “What do you want to do then?” I ask.

“My friend June is going to the ceramics place in town,” he tells me. “You can paint stuff and they bake it and you get to take it home.”

Huh. That sounds cool. I probably should have looked up a fun activity for us to do. *Strike one.* “Well, maybe we can go there next time. I already told Sharon that we were going to the park this time,” I tell him.

“If there *is* a next time,” Noah grumbles as he climbs into my truck.

I frown at his words, wondering how many Big Brothers he’s had.

Have they all abandoned him after one session?

Noah isn’t a bad kid, just a little... moody. His attitude could use some work, but I can’t blame him. If he found himself hanging out with me on a Saturday, things in his life probably aren’t going great. It’s obvious that Noah is angry at the world, which is only a testament to whatever he’s been through. I wonder if I can get him to trust me enough to tell me his story.

One look at the disgruntled ten-year-old in my truck tells me that day won’t be today.

I start up my truck and we drive in silence all the way over to the park. Noah hops out as soon as I’ve parked and I watch

as he stomps over toward the swing set. I'm not sure if he's going to sit in a swing or roundhouse kick the damn thing.

I climb out a bit slower, wondering where my future wife was going. The little girl she was with didn't look anything like her so I wonder if she's a volunteer at the program too. Of course, she has a big heart. I knew it from one look. I wonder what she's doing with her Little Sister right now. I know I'm not going to be able to forget about my dream girl until I talk to her and see her again.

But right now, I have something else that needs my attention. I slowly make my way over to the swings, pleasantly surprised to see Noah sitting, not kicking. It could have gone either way with this kid.

"You know, I grew up in this town too," I tell Noah as I sit on the swing next to him. "I left for a bit and just got back actually."

"Jail?" he guesses, kicking at a few pebbles beneath his swing. I frown.

"No, I was a Navy SEAL."

He perks up at that and I can see the interest on his face. He blinks, trying to play it off a second later, and I slowly swing back and forth.

"Did you ever get shot?" Noah asks.

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt?"

"You don't feel it right away, too much adrenaline running through you, at least for me," I explain. "But then, yeah. It hurts a whole fuck of a lot."

"You're not supposed to swear around me. I'm a kid," he reminds me.

"Right. Well, don't tell."

He shrugs, going back to ignoring me, and I look around at the empty park.

I wonder what my friends are doing right now. Not that I have many, especially around here. I've kept in touch with Romeo, my old friend from the military. We did basic together and rose up through the ranks. He was with me during my recovery and encouraged me to come back here to Tennessee and wrap things up with my mom's estate.

Other than that, my friends are mostly just the Mayson brothers. I'm sure that they're all with their women and families. That's certainly one thing that's changed around here. I left for a few years, came back, and every one of the Maysons is hitched to their dream girl.

A pang of envy hits me, and I once again think back to the woman I saw earlier. I want what my friends have. I want to be happy and settled. I want to have a family. A real one, filled with love and laughter and protection.

And if I have anything to say about it, I'm going to have that very soon.

"How much longer do we have to stay here?" Noah asks, kicking the pebbles with more force. A few of them fly through the air, and we both watch them crash back down to the ground and bounce a few times.

"How long do these sessions usually last?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Everything," he says with a sigh. This kid sounds so sick of the world already, and he's barely experienced anything at his age. It's shocking to hear such a young kid sound like that.

"What's your story?" I ask him. "Do you live around here?"

"Kind of," he hedges, eyeing me suspiciously.

"With your parents?"

He tenses at that question, and I know I've hit a nerve. It's no secret that a lot of the kids in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program have rough home lives. I thought coming from a

similar background would help me be... I don't know, insightful or something. So far, that's not been the case.

"That's none of your damn business," Noah snaps.

"I thought we weren't supposed to swear," I point out.

He scowls at me and stomps away from the swings, while I wipe a hand down my face and try to figure out what to do next.

The rest of the time should be a blast.

I stand and follow him over to the monkey bars. Noah is standing there, leaning against the side of the structure, and I mirror his stance. He crosses his arms over his chest, glaring off into the distance, and I do the same.

"Family can be, uh, tough," I say, sounding awkward and unsure of myself.

"Thanks for that observation," Noah tosses back.

A few more moments of quiet tension pass as I scramble for a way to talk to this kid. Maybe if I offer something about myself, he'll reciprocate. It can't be worse than standing here in silence, right?

"I never knew my dad," I blurt out. *Jesus, what is wrong with me?*

"Boo hoo," Noah mutters, sarcasm dripping from his words.

Fair enough. This is a lot better than before I opened my mouth.

Maybe if I don't say anything, I won't mess this up again. That's the plan anyway.

I look over at Noah, noticing the stiff way he's holding himself. He may think he looks tough, and to other kids, he probably does. I can see his well-constructed defenses, though. If he's a jerk and pushes everyone away as soon as he meets them, he doesn't risk getting attached only to be abandoned later.

I get it. He has no idea how much I get it.

This session might be a bust, but I'm not giving up on him. I'll just have to come up with a better plan before next Saturday when we meet again.

THREE

Lucy

“THANKS FOR TAKING me to the pottery place!” June says as we pull into the grocery store and park. “When can we pick up our pieces? I want to show my mom the mug I made for her!”

“You’re welcome,” I say with a grin, looking at her in the rearview mirror. She has a few spots of blue paint on her cheek, and I dig through my bag for the wet wipes before hopping out and opening the back door for her. “We can get our finished pieces next week. Here, you’ve got some leftovers on your face,” I tease, handing her the wipe. She rubs it all over her face, making me laugh. “And I have one more thing for you before we go inside.”

Her eyes light up, and my heart melts for her. “Did you go to the flea market across town like you said you would?” she asks, rocking on her heels.

Brown eyes peer up at me with excitement. They are so different from her mom’s bright blue eyes, and I wonder, not for the first time, who June’s father is. She must have inherited his dark eyes. How could someone look at this adorable kid and leave her? Another reminder of how heartless men can be.

I nod, then hold out my closed hand in front of June. She stares at it, her eyes growing wide when I open my hand to reveal the little keychain I found for a quarter.

“I love her!” June exclaims, pinching the keyring between her thumb and pointer finger, holding it up so she can examine the dangling devil.

“Her?”

“Yeah, girls can be devils, too, you know.”

“Of course, my apologies,” I tell her seriously, nodding my head.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” she chants, wrapping her arms around my waist. I hug her back, soaking up all of her sweet cuddles.

“You’re welcome, June. I saw it and knew you had to have it.”

She nods, then threads the keyring through one of the belt loops on her shorts, grinning down at it while she walks with me inside.

“Alright, you get the candy, I’ll load us up on chips,” I tell June as I grab a cart and head toward the junk food aisle.

“Red Hots and Sour Skittles?” she asks. I grin, loving that she knows my favorites.

“Of course. Better get a bag of gummy worms for Emilia,” I add. June nods, skipping ahead to check out the candy.

I smile as I scan the shelves, looking for all of our usual chip staples. Emilia is picking up Spencer and the pizzas as we speak, and then we’re all meeting at the house to start our movie night.

I’m debating between Pringles and Doritos when a shadow falls over me. I glance over and my heart starts to thunder in my ears when I see who it is. The tall, dark, ridiculously handsome man from this morning. He’s standing a foot from me with a huge grin on his face, and I know he must recognize me, too. When was the last time someone was this happy to see me? It’s kind of endearing.

God, I forgot how tall he is. And how green his eyes are. Before I can stop myself, my gaze drops to his chest, my face heating as I think about what it felt like to be pressed up

against his firm muscles. I think I could curl up there and fall asleep.

“Hey,” the man says, his deep voice washing over me and drawing me forward like a hypnotic wave. My eyes snap to his, and I’m stunned by the fierceness of his gaze. It rolls through my body, making me aware of every sensation from my heartbeat to the goosebumps breaking out over my skin.

“I’m Remington.”

My eyes are transfixed on the way his lips form the words. I’m only able to break my gaze when I see the corner of his mouth twist up into an amused smirk. I shake my head and blink a few times, still in a haze from being in this man’s presence.

“Um, hi,” I squeak out.

I look around, not sure if I’m praying for June to interrupt us or for her to stay in the candy aisle.

“What’s your name, beautiful?”

Beautiful? No one has ever called me that before. I try to ignore the warm, comforting feeling that settles deep in my chest at his words. Maybe I should be wary of him. In fact, my brain is blaring a warning signal, trying to remind me to stay away, keep my heart closed, and not let him in.

But my heart?

My heart is leaping out of my chest, wanting more of Remington. He’s said a handful of words to me, and already I feel more connected to him than any man I’ve met.

Maybe that’s why I don’t run away. Maybe that’s why I tell him, “I’m Lucy.”

“Lucy,” he says in that sexy voice. I know my cheeks are a deep red now, but I hope he doesn’t notice.

I look around again, unsure of what happens next. I have no idea how to make small talk with a guy. My first reaction is to turn, grab June, and get the heck out of here. I am not prepared to handle this situation. I’m not ready to talk to the

first and only man who can make me feel like there are butterflies taking flight in my stomach.

“Are you new to town?” Remington asks me. I blink, trying to get my thoughts in order. It’s difficult to think of anything when his eyes are so green and so fixed on mine.

“Not really. I moved here about a year and a half ago.”

“I just got back to town.”

I nod, not knowing what to say to that.

“There are a few new restaurants in town I’m going to try out. Want to join me?” he asks with a smooth smile.

“No, I can’t,” I say before I can really even think it through.

It’s a knee-jerk reaction for me. It’s been that way with every guy that’s shown an interest in me since I was a teenager. *Men can only hurt you. Whatever fleeting happiness they bring surely isn’t worth the inevitable heartache.*

At least, that’s the mantra I’ve repeated to myself for years now. I’ve never minded before, but staring at Remington, I realize this is the first time I wish I had said yes.

I can’t deny that I’m drawn to him. There’s just something about him that intrigues me. But then I think about the look on my foster sister’s face when she learned that her boyfriend had been cheating on her for months. I think about the black eyes some of my foster moms had to hide with makeup. I think about Brenda and her awful ex who abandoned her and June for another woman. It’s a little easier to force my feelings aside when I consider the eventual outcome of most relationships.

I need to forget about Remington and dating. I should be focused on my business and friends, not this man I just met. No matter how charming. And sexy. And sweet. *Gah, get it together!*

The tall, captivating man’s easy smile fades slightly, and I steel myself, wondering if he’s going to turn mean or start

yelling. At least I'm in public and hopefully, someone will stop him before things get out of hand.

Instead, Remington gets a glint in his eyes and smiles wider, like he's glad I'm turning him down. Like he likes the challenge.

"Let's try this again," he starts, a mix of amusement and confidence flashing across his eyes. My heart beats hard against my ribcage. "I'm picking you up tomorrow night for our dinner date." Remington passes me his phone, and I grab it without thinking. "Put your number in and we'll figure out the details," he orders me.

I bite my bottom lip, debating what to do now. *Should I really give him my phone number?*

I type in Lucy, glancing up at him from under my eyelashes. He's watching me and I swear he can read my thoughts. One thick eyebrow lifts, as if in challenge. He's excited to see what I do next. So am I.

I type in a random number, giving him a sweet smile as I pass the phone back to Remington. He glances at it, and my smile slips away as he clicks on the contact information and brings the phone to his ear.

Crap.

He stares at me as the phone starts to ring, the smirk on his face growing wider. He shakes his head, and I sigh, starting to back away slowly. Remington follows me, ending the call and cupping my elbow. Everything in my past tells me to slap him or grab a bag of chips from the shelf behind me and empty it on his head. But when the rough pads of his fingers glide across my skin, every thought falls right out of my head. How can he be both gruff and gentle? Demanding and somehow sweet?

"How about we try it this way? Give me your phone," he says, and I automatically pass him my phone.

At least this way, I don't have to use the number.

He types in his information and then hits call on my phone.

“There. Now we’re all set,” he tells me. I fake a smile as I shove my phone back into my pocket.

“Great,” I say sarcastically. “I wish you better luck with the next part of your plan.” Remington chuckles, the rich sound filling my chest. Once again, I have the urge to curl up in his arms and press my ear against his heart. I want to feel his laughter roll through me.

“Are you ready, Lucy?” June asks from behind me. *Thank god.* Things were getting too intense here.

“It’s nice to see that at least you gave me your real name,” Remington quips. I roll my eyes at him.

“Yeah, I just need to grab some more chips,” I tell her.

June looks down at the empty cart and frowns.

“Okay, I can help,” she says, and I smile.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” Remington whispers, leaning close to my ear.

His breath tickles my skin, his whispered, gravelly tone causing a soft sigh to slip from my lips. I shiver, and he smiles before he turns around and walks the opposite way down the aisle. I watch him go, one thought on repeat: *what the hell do I do now?*

FOUR

Remington

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED A CHALLENGE, and Lucy is definitely that.

A grin stretches across my face as I make my way over to her house to pick her up for our date. She was so adorable when she typed in the wrong number on my phone. I knew exactly what she was doing. If her furrowed brow didn't give it away, her scrunched-up nose certainly did. And when I called the fake number? Her eyes grew comically wide, the pink blush on her cheeks turning crimson.

Like I said. Adorable.

I don't know why she's fighting this thing between us, but I aim to find out. I could see that she was interested in me. The way her eyes drank me in, her gaze focused on my lips when I said her name, and her curvy little body swayed closer to mine with each passing moment.

So, why doesn't she want to give me a shot?

My girl is going to make me work for it, and I for one, am excited at the prospect of winning her over. It will be all the sweeter once she gives in and surrenders to the inevitability of us. I've never backed down from a challenge, and I don't plan to start now.

I texted Lucy and told her that I would pick her up at seven. It took a bit to convince my girl to give me her address,

and part of me is expecting it to not actually be her house. No matter.

Pulling up outside of a Victorian-style house just a few streets off Main Street, I park next to an old Volkswagen Beetle. I climb out, looking around as I head up to the front door.

I ring the doorbell, straightening out my button-up shirt as I wait for Lucy to answer the door. I didn't want to dress up too much for the first date, especially knowing my woman isn't exactly the dating type for whatever reason. Keeping it casual, I chose a black button-up, untucked, and dark wash jeans.

Footsteps sound from inside, and I glance up as Lucy opens the door. I grin when I see her. She's wearing a pair of yoga pants with several holes here and there, and an old t-shirt that's been washed so many times that it's threadbare and see-through in some spots. Her hair is piled up on her head, a few dark strands falling around her face and neck.

With no makeup, no filters, and no bullshit, I can confidently say that she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I might like this look more than the cute outfit she had on yesterday.

"You look gorgeous," I say with a smile, meaning every word. "Are you ready to go to dinner?"

Lucy scowls at me and I know she was hoping for a different reaction. I anticipated something like this. I figured that I was either going to show up to the wrong house or she was going to try to dress down in an attempt to drive me away or make me lose interest in her.

"Yep," she sighs, stepping out onto the porch with me and closing the door behind her. At any point, she could tell me to go away. She could have slammed the door in my face and sent me home. Not that I would have left that easily, but my point is, Lucy is here. With me. She might not think we're connected, but we are. I know my woman wants this as much as I do.

I take Lucy's hand in mine as I lead her over to the truck. Her hand is soft and clammy in mine, and I wonder if she's nervous about our date.

That has to be a good sign, right?

I help her into the truck and she settles in the seat as I climb behind the wheel. Resisting the urge to rest my hand on her thigh, I start the car before looking over at her again. She has her arms crossed over her chest in a defensive stance, much like Noah during our Saturday session.

Who hurt you, sweet girl?

I can't dwell on that thought right now, however. I might let my mind wander into dark places, imagining all the ways I'd make those responsible pay.

"I thought we would grab dinner for starters. Is there anything you're hungry for?" I ask as I back out of her driveway.

"Whatever you want is fine," she says, staring out the passenger window.

"How was your day? What did you do?" I ask, trying to get to know her better.

"I just did some work."

"What do you do for work?"

"I'm a freelance website designer."

"That's cool. You must be pretty good with computers then."

"I'm proficient enough," she says, but I get the feeling she's being modest.

We head toward downtown and I search for a good restaurant option. I barely remember half of these restaurants and I'm guessing they opened while I was gone. We never had a lot of money when I was growing up, so we rarely ate out. Even if they had been around for a few decades, the chances that I've eaten there are slim to none.

Downtown is still pretty busy with couples and families milling around. I park outside of an ice cream shop and we hop out.

“We can walk and see what sounds good,” I say, reaching for her hand as I help her out of my truck.

She half-heartedly tries to pull away from me but I squeeze her hand and she sighs, leaving our hands intertwined.

We only make it a few steps when I spot a familiar face in the crowd.

“Remington!” Asher Mayson calls as he waves and heads our way.

“Hey, man. It’s good to see you again,” I tell him, shaking his hand with my free hand. “Asher, this is my Lucy. Lucy, this is Asher Mayson.”

“Nice to meet you,” Asher tells Lucy, and she smiles, tugging on the hem of her shirt. I wrap my arm around her shoulders, tucking her into my side. I don’t want her to be embarrassed about her outfit choice when meeting someone new. It was for my benefit, after all.

“You too.”

“When did you get back? How was your time in the military?” Asher asks me. “Are you out for good?”

“Yup. I got out a few months ago but I just got back to town a couple of weeks ago,” I tell him.

“We’ll have to catch up soon,” he says, and I nod.

“I’ll text you,” I promise him.

We wave goodbye, and I lead Lucy down the sidewalk.

“You were in the military?” she asks.

“Yeah, I was a SEAL for the last eight years. I just got out.”

“What made you decide to leave? Were you injured?” she asks, looking over me with concern.

I nod, and her eyes turn soft. She has a tender heart beneath those layers of protection. I knew she was perfect. “I got shot and decided not to re-enlist,” I tell her as we pass by a pizza joint. She doesn’t look interested so we keep walking, past a Greek restaurant and then a Thai place.

“I’m so sorry,” she breathes out, squeezing my hand.

I shrug, not wanting to bring the mood down. Truthfully, it hurt like hell and the healing process was long and lonely. My oldest friend and brother-in-arms, Romeo, visited me when he could. I’d do the same for him in a heartbeat, but I’m glad I haven’t had to.

I can hardly remember the pain and how awful the healing was, though. Not with Lucy by my side. Every bad thing I’ve ever been through fades into the background whenever I’m around her. Even the nightmares of my time in combat ceased last night, and I know it’s because Lucy is in my life.

When we hit the Mexican restaurant, my girl licks her lips, so I stop and lead us inside.

“This place good?” I ask her, and she nods.

“Sure.”

“For two?” the hostess asks, her eyes scanning over me.

“Yep,” I answer, tightening my hold on Lucy.

I tug my girl closer to my side and smile down at her, making it obvious that I have no interest in anyone but my Lucy.

We’re led over to a table in the back and I pull out Lucy’s chair before I take my own seat across from her. The hostess has a sour look on her face as she passes us our menus and then heads back to the front.

“Have you been here before?” I ask Lucy.

She seems to have relaxed a bit, and I’m not sure if it’s because we’re starting to get to know each other or if seeing how I rejected the hostess has her starting to trust me more.

“We’ve ordered from here before,” Lucy says.

“Who’s we?” I ask.

“Me and my friends. Scarlett and Emilia,” she clarifies.

“Is it any good?”

“Yeah, their tacos and enchiladas are mind-blowing.”

She smiles as she studies the menu and I smile as I study her.

“Why did you decide to move here? Did you grow up nearby?” I ask her.

“Yeah, about an hour away.”

“You must like small towns then.”

“They’re cheaper,” she says with a self-deprecating laugh.

“That’s true. Some of the bases I was stationed at were in big cities and it was hard just to live.”

“Where all have you lived?” she asks me.

“I was in South Carolina for basic training and then Georgia for further training. After that, I was stationed in Texas, Virginia, and Washington. Then I was deployed overseas a few times.”

“That’s cool that you’ve seen so many places.” Her blue eyes sparkle, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from leaning over the table and stealing my first kiss from her. It would be too much, and the last thing I want to do is scare my Lucy away.

I nod as the waiter comes over to take our orders. His eyes look over us and then back to Lucy, and I glare at him as he ogles my girl. She doesn’t notice, but I sure as hell do. I don’t think my woman has any idea how sexy she is or the effect she has on people.

“Can I get you something to drink?” he asks her. Lucy looks between him and me, then back to him.

“Um, I’ll take a strawberry margarita,” she orders.

“Same. And a water,” I order.

He nods, smiling at Lucy, and I'm seconds away from tackling him to the ground when he turns and heads back to the kitchen. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my possessive thoughts.

"What about you?" I ask Lucy, trying to get us back to learning about each other. "Do you like to travel?"

"I don't know. I've never really been anywhere," she admits.

"No vacations? Weekend trips?"

"No." She shakes her head, staring down at her lap. Shit. I didn't mean to bring up something that upsets her. I'm about to change the subject when she sighs and looks up at me. "I grew up in foster care," she says softly. "The families I stayed with either didn't have money for that or didn't want to waste the money on us foster kids."

"Lucy, I'm sorry," I tell her sincerely. Christ, my chest aches just thinking about everything she's been through. I hardly know her story, but I can see how much damage her unstable childhood has done. I hope I can help her heal and show her that she's worthy of every good thing.

"It's fine," Lucy says with a shrug, looking away from me. "I'm past all that. It feels like another lifetime, really."

I don't believe her, but I let it slide. This is more information than I thought she'd give me, so I don't want to push my luck. *All in good time*, I tell myself. I'll win my girl over one smile at a time and make sure she never has a reason to doubt me.

"So you didn't get to travel much growing up, but what's stopping you now?"

"Money," Lucy says flatly. "I've got to pay bills now and there never seems to be enough for that. Or if there is, something happens like my car breaking down or rent going up."

"Well, we'll have to go somewhere soon. What's your dream vacation?" I ask as the waiter comes back with our drinks.

“Hawaii,” she says right away.

“Oh, I’d love to go there too,” our waiter says, practically beaming at Lucy as he sets the drinks down on the table.

“Me too,” I interrupt him before he can go on.

Lucy looks back and forth between us. She’s starting to find my annoyance and jealousy towards our waiter to be funny and that’s the only thing that has me backing down from pinning the guy to the nearest wall and threatening him.

“Are you ready to order?” he asks us, his eyes never leaving Lucy.

“Yeah,” Lucy answers, flipping open the menu and finding what she wants. “I’ll have the taco plate with sour cream and guacamole on the side.”

“I’ll have the same,” I say, passing the guy our menus and turning back to Lucy, effectively dismissing him.

“Are you going to take him out?” Lucy whispers across the table to me as he walks away, and I lean forward.

“Only if you want me to. Or if he gets handsy or too forward with you,” I whisper back.

She smiles, trying to hide it behind her margarita but I see it.

“Let’s let him live for now. I want my tacos sooner rather than later.”

I chuckle and take a sip of my drink as well. I love seeing more of her sassy personality.

We discuss some of our favorite movies and shows, and discover we both enjoy true crime documentaries. Lucy also indulges in reality TV, which has never been my thing. For my woman, though, I’d endure every episode of the Kardashians and whatever other hundreds of shows they’ve come up with by now. Whatever keeps a smile on her face.

Our over-eager, dipshit of a waiter comes back with our food. He plops my plate down in front of me, then slowly places Lucy’s meal down on the table.

“Careful,” he tells her, his eyes staring a little too intensely for my taste. “It’s *hot*.”

A growl rumbles up from the very depths of my being, and both Lucy and our waiter turn their attention to me. “Leave,” I snarl, my voice sounding feral. The man audibly gulps and backs away, wisely spinning on his heel and scampering away.

My eyes land on Lucy, who is barely containing her grin. “I think he might have peed his pants,” she whispers conspiratorially.

I grin and lean back in my chair. “I waited until you had your food, didn’t I?”

Lucy giggles, the sound rushing through my body and breathing new life into my bones.

We dig into our food, and I love that she isn’t shy about eating like some women are. Then again, I hope it’s because she’s comfortable with me, and not because she grew up in homes where food was scarce. I know all too well the trauma of childhood poverty.

I pepper my girl with questions here and there, trying to keep things light. I want her to feel safe with me and to know that I don’t view her any differently for the way she grew up. In fact, it draws me closer to her and only makes me want to protect her even more. I want to fill her life with so much joy, it cancels out all of the bad things that have ever happened to her.

“How was everything?” a woman asks from off to the side. I didn’t even notice her standing there until she spoke.

“Delicious,” Lucy answers, her eyes darting to me with a knowing grin.

“Very good, thank you. We’ll take the check whenever.” The waitress nods and heads over to the register.

“You scared the other guy off!” Lucy whisper-shouts. “Maybe he really did pee his pants.”

I chuckle and take her hand in mine, rubbing my thumb over her knuckles. “Want to get out of here?” I ask. “We could

grab a drink somewhere else or a coffee, depending on what you're up for."

Lucy hesitates, nibbling her bottom lip. I know I asked too much, too soon when she tenses her shoulders. I swear I can see her constructing a wall as she thinks of some excuse to let me down gently. I beat her to the punch, however.

"Scratch that," I say easily, letting her know I'm not upset. "It's getting late, and I have a lot of work to do on my mom's old place tomorrow. Maybe we can try again another night?" I figure my chances are better if I spread things out rather than overwhelm her all at once.

"Yeah," Lucy says with a nod, sighing a bit as she relaxes. "Thanks," she adds, though it's so soft, I don't know if she meant for me to hear it.

I'm not sure why she's thanking me at first, but then it hits me. My girl is thanking me for realizing a boundary and respecting it. My heart breaks for her, but I'm more invested than ever to show her how a real man treats the woman he loves.

Ten minutes later, the bill is squared away and Lucy and I are headed back to her house. The ride is much smoother than when I picked her up, and I hope our date showed her she can let her defenses down around me, at least a little bit.

Pulling into the driveway, I hop out of the car and sprint over to the passenger side, opening her door and holding out my hand. Lucy places her delicate palm in mine, and I wrap my fingers around her hand, helping her out of the car. I don't let go when she's standing in front of me, and she makes no move to back away.

I lean forward slowly, aware of her every breath, every blink, every beat of her heart. She's not shrinking away from me. My girl tips her chin up and sways toward me, her blue eyes locked on mine.

Cupping her cheek, I glide the pad of my thumb across her cheekbone, loving the way she flutters her eyes closed and leans into my touch.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur into the shell of her ear. Resting my forehead on hers, I rub our noses together, breathing in her sweet, citrusy scent.

Lucy blinks up at me, her lips slightly parted, her breath skating across my skin, making my dick press against the zipper of my jeans. “I almost believe you,” she whispers.

My lips press against hers in the next instant, slowly at first. Softly. Treasuring her like she deserves.

My girl gasps, tensing for a second before sighing sweetly and melting against my chest. I slide my tongue inside her mouth, groaning when she welcomes me. Stroking my tongue against hers, I let my hand slip from her cheek to her neck, ghosting my fingers over her sensitive flesh before dropping my hand to her hip.

Lucy moans as I squeeze her there, anchoring her to me as we get lost in each other. Pinning her against the car, I growl possessively when her soft, ample curves press against the hard slats of my muscles. She’s perfect for me in every way.

My girl tips her head back, breaking our kiss. I continue to nuzzle into the side of her neck, kissing and licking her pulse point while she catches her breath.

“Wow,” she whispers, her chest still heaving as she takes in fresh air.

“Wow,” I agree, my voice hoarse.

As much as it pains me, I peel myself off of Lucy and take a step back. Her eyes immediately focus on my throbbing erection, obvious even through my dark jeans and the setting sun. I cover it up with my hand, trying to readjust and make it less obscene. She blushes, then looks up at me with a satisfied, smug little grin.

“Do you like knowing what you do to me?” I rasp.

Lucy nods, nibbling her bottom lip.

I groan, taking her hand in mine and tugging her into me for a hug. I press a kiss to the top of her head and rock my girl back and forth.

“I’ve been dying to know what your lips taste like since the moment I laid eyes on you,” I whisper.

“And? Did they meet your expectations?”

I chuckle, kissing her head again.

“Exceeded them, by far.”

“Good,” she says in a satisfied tone.

“Maybe we can do it again soon?”

Lucy leans back, untangling herself from me. “The date or the kiss?”

“Both, if I’m lucky.”

She smiles and nods, taking a few more steps back toward her house. “I’ll pencil you in,” she teases.

I narrow my eyes at her, then laugh. “Good night, Lucy. I’ll see you soon,” I promise her before I turn and head back to my truck. I don’t know how I’m going to get through the night without her next to me, but I’ll have to manage. She’ll be mine soon enough.

FIVE

Lucy

“ARE WE PAINTING CERAMICS AGAIN?” June asks as we head inside the shop.

I’ve had her with me for most of the day, and so far, it’s been a blast. June’s mom took another Saturday shift, so I have my Little Sister all to myself for most of the day.

“No,” I tell her with a smile. “We’re just picking up the ones we painted last week. They had to put them in the kiln and bake them, remember?”

She nods, squeezing my hand as we wait in line.

“Hey there, gorgeous,” a deep voice whispers in my ear. I jump, turning to face Remington.

How are his eyes greener than I remember? His gaze sharper? His smile brighter? Good lord, this man has my nerves buzzing as if I’m teetering on the edge of something big. From everything he’s shown me, Remington seems like someone who would catch me if I fell. He already did when we first met, so his track record is perfect at the moment.

June tugs on my arm, and I realize I’ve just been staring at Remington’s dark scruff and soft lips. I can still taste his kiss from the night of our date, still feel his lips parting mine, his tongue diving into my mouth and claiming me in possessive strokes.

“H-hey,” I stutter out, knowing my cheeks are bright pink from my wayward thoughts. “What are you doing here?” I ask him, looking between him and Noah.

“Noah!” June exclaims, hugging her best friend. “Are you picking up your ceramics too?”

“No, I think we’re painting them,” Noah tells June.

“You’re his Big Brother?” I ask Remington, and he nods.

“Yeah, we just got paired up last week. He told me that his friend June was painting ceramics last week, and I told him we could go today. That must make you June,” he says, smiling at her.

“Yeah,” she says shyly.

“Sorry, Remington, this is June. June, this is Remington.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Remington tells her.

“You too.”

Noah scowls when he sees June blushing at Remington, and I bite back a grin. I’ve always thought that Noah was in love with June and it’s nice to see I was right.

“What are you guys doing today? Want to paint with us?” Remington asks me.

“No, we’re going to the indoor trampoline place today. We’re just here to pick up our pieces from last week and then we’re headed over there.”

“Can we do that instead?” Noah asks Remington.

“Sure, buddy.”

Noah side-eyes Remington and I bite back a smile. At least if Remington and I hang out today, I’ll be able to fill Remington in on a bit of background about Noah. He has a huge chip on his shoulder, but he has a good heart once you earn his trust.

“Hey, can I help you?” the girl behind the counter asks. I turn back to smile at her.

“We’re just picking up our order from last week. Should be under Mitchell.”

“Just a second,” she says, and I turn back to June.

“Can they come with us to the trampoline park?” she asks me, and I nod.

“If they want to.”

“We do,” Noah and Remington say at the same time.

“Here you are.”

I turn around, smiling as I grab the paper bag with our pieces in it.

“Thanks.”

“Come again soon!” she calls as we head out the door.

“Can I ride with you?” Noah asks.

“We’ll meet you there,” I tell him. “The place is just around the corner.”

“We’ll follow you,” Remington says, and I nod.

June and I climb into my car and she rambles on about how excited she is to get to play with Noah. The drive is short, and I climb out at the same time as Remington. The kids run up ahead to the front doors, and I smile as Remington falls into step beside me.

He’s texted me all week, usually in the morning to tell me he’s thinking of me and in the afternoon to try and convince me to go on another date with him. I keep turning him down, blaming it on work, which isn’t exactly a lie. I had a few big deadlines this week that I finally crushed, but that’s not the real reason I haven’t seen Remington since our date.

The truth is, I’m terrified of abandoning my no-boys rule. Remington is the kind of guy I could fall in love with. But is he the kind of guy who won’t abandon me at the first sign of trouble? Everything about him is inviting, trustworthy, and solid. Or so it seems. How can someone ever really know another person though? I’m sure my foster sister thought the men she was with were great guys at the time, too.

“How was work?” Remington asks me, startling me from my thoughts.

“Busy. I think I’m all caught up now though,” I tell him as we walk inside the building and wait in line.

“Great, then we can go out again this week,” he tells me.

I walked right into that one. I should have lied and said I was still swamped.

“Um,” I start but it’s our turn next in line.

I tell the front desk person my phone number and get June and Noah all checked in. Luckily, I’ve taken both of them before so they’re under my account. Remington insists on paying, and we both get the wristbands on before we follow the kids over to the benches lining the place.

“I’m going to sit here,” I tell June, and she nods distractedly before she runs off after Noah.

“They’re friends?” Remington asks, taking a seat next to me.

“Best friends. They actually live next door to each other,” I tell him.

“You know him pretty well then?”

“A bit. June talks about him all the time, and I’ve watched them both before. Usually when Noah’s Big Brother flakes or drops him.”

“That’s happened a lot?” Remington asks.

His tone has changed and become more somber. Concern floods his emerald eyes, and I fall a little more for him at this moment. Noah can be difficult, but Remington isn’t deterred by a challenge. I suppose that fits perfectly with the man I’m growing dangerously close to.

“Unfortunately,” I say with a nod. “Noah doesn’t make things easy on a lot of his Big Brothers. He’s used to people leaving him, and I think he pushes people away. You can’t be hurt by them leaving if you leave first.”

He nods, looking sad for the kid. “I was thinking the same thing after our first session last week. It’s hard to imagine what made him so wary and defensive already in his short little life.”

Remington leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. From where I’m sitting next to him, I can see his muscles flexing beneath his tanned skin. He shakes his head, as if disgusted at the thought of anyone abandoning Noah.

“What about his parents?” Remington asks after a few moments of silence. “I tried to ask about his family last week but he got mad and stomped off.”

“His dad is in jail. I think he has been since Noah was like three or something. He doesn’t have a relationship with him at all.”

“Will he be getting out soon?”

“I don’t think he’s ever getting out,” I tell him quietly.

Remington’s eyebrow rise, almost hitting his hairline. He gets my meaning without me having to spell it out.

“And his mom?”

“She’s not much of a mom. She’s been in and out of jail too. Trying to get sober and hold down a job. He’s been taken out of her care a few times and put in foster care.”

Remington scowls at that, and I feel the same anger rising up in me. I hate that he has to suffer from the choices of the adults in his life.

“I’m not going to let him down,” Remington says quietly, and I think he’s talking more to himself than to me. My heart knocks against my ribs, stupidly tripping all over itself for the too sexy, too-sweet man.

He turns to look at me over his shoulder, those green eyes going soft. My stomach flips as he sits up and leans toward me, his lips pressing a kiss to my temple before grazing my ear. “I won’t let you down either, sweet girl,” he murmurs.

My breath catches in my throat, and I swallow back unexpected tears.

“Um, so, how was your week?” I ask, trying to change the subject. I don’t want to fall apart in front of him, especially not in front of June and Noah. Remington smiles softly as if sensing the moment is too much.

“Slow. I’ve been cleaning out my mom’s old place and getting it ready to list it. It’s mostly just me throwing out a bunch of junk.”

“Fun times.”

“Hardly,” he laughs.

“What will you do after you’ve sold the place?” I ask him.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll need to find a new house and a job.”

“What do you want to do next?”

June and Noah run past, laughing as they start to jump in the dodgeball section.

“I’m not sure yet. Maybe I’ll teach Krav Maga or consult for some security companies.”

“Do you think you’ll stay in this town?” I ask him.

“Maybe. It’s starting to have some pretty tempting qualities,” he says, staring right at me.

I try to fight off the blush but it’s no use. He’s so smooth, so attentive, and romantic. I’m not prepared to handle this.

“We’re hungry,” June says as she runs up to us.

“Can we buy food here?” Remington asks, looking around.

“Yeah, over there,” Noah tells him, pointing over to the concession stand.

“Let’s get everyone something to eat,” he says, pushing to his feet. “Lucy, want to grab a table for us?”

I nod and watch them head over to the concession stand, and my phone buzzes with a text.

SCARLETT: Nash is taking me out for dinner tonight so I’ll have to cancel on movie night this week.

Emilia: Rex just promised Spencer that he would take us out to putt putt so we'll have to postpone too.

Lucy: No worries! Have fun!

I TUCK my phone back into my pocket as Remington, Noah, and June all walk back over to me with their arms full of snacks and drinks.

“We got you an Icee,” June says, passing me my drink.

“Thanks.”

“And I got us a soft pretzel and some nachos,” Remington says, setting everything down at the table.

“Looks good. Did you say thank you?” I ask June and Noah, and they nod, their mouths already stuffed with popcorn and candy.

The kids devour the food fast and then run back to the trampolines.

“I wish there was a place like this when I was a kid,” I say. “Although, we wouldn't have been able to afford it.”

“Me either,” Remington says, nudging the nachos closer to me.

My phone buzzes again and I pull it out.

SCARLETT: See you tomorrow!

“WHO WAS THAT?” Remington asks as I tuck my phone back into my pocket.

“Just this guy,” I lie. He drops the chip that he's holding, glaring at my phone. “Kidding. It's my friend Scarlett.”

“Not funny,” he mutters, and I grin.

“It was a little funny. I like messing with you.”

“Is that so?” Remington says in a deep, gravelly tone. I nod, ignoring the shiver running down my spine.

“Yup,” I confirm. “There’s a little vein that pops out near your left temple when you’re jealous. It’s kind of adorable.”

Before he can get a chance to say anything, the kids run up to us.

“Lucy! Can we go to the movies tonight? The new Marvel movie is out!” June says as she skids to a stop next to me.

“Maybe. I’ll have to text your mom and ask.”

Noah looks jealous and left out, and I glance at Remington.

“Maybe we can join you,” he says, looking over at Noah.

“Really?” Noah asks, eyeing Remington warily.

“Sure. I’ll just have to ask your mom.”

Noah’s face darkens, and I wonder what’s going on at his house.

“She won’t mind,” he says.

“Are you sure?” I ask him.

“Yeah. She won’t even notice,” he says under his breath, and my stomach knots.

Suddenly, I remember the way he had practically inhaled his food. Does he not have anything to eat at home?

“Why don’t you guys play here for a little bit longer? Then I need to run to the grocery store and we can go to your house and make sure that it’s okay that you go to the movies tonight,” Remington tells Noah.

Something tells me that Remington had the same thought about Noah’s lack of food. He’s so attentive and thoughtful, and I’m not sure he even realizes it.

“Whatever,” he grumbles, grabbing June’s hand and running off.

“He still hates me.”

“Give it time,” I tell Remington.

“I need to run some errands, but then I can pick you up for the movie. I can grab June when I get Noah since they live next door,” he offers.

“I can drive myself.”

“You don’t need to though.”

I eye him, wondering if I should put up a fight or not, and he smirks at me.

“Maybe I should get June. Her mom doesn’t know you,” I start, and he grins.

“You’re right. I should pick you up first and then we can go get the kids. My girl is such a genius.”

I open my mouth to tell him that I’m not his girl or a genius, but he surprises me by leaning over and kissing me. He tastes like spearmint gum and Coke Icee, and I blink, my eyes fluttering closed as his lips mold to mine.

The sounds of a game going off in the arcade behind us startles me and I jerk away from him, remembering where I am.

“Tonight,” Remington whispers and it sounds like a promise.

A really dirty, really great promise.

SIX

Remington

I WANTED to hang out with Lucy for the rest of the day but she had to go home and finish up some work. She took June with her to drop her off back at the Big Brothers Big Sisters center and make sure that she could take June with us tonight.

That leaves me alone with Noah. He's glaring out the passenger window, his arms crossed over his chest. I'm not sure how he's going to respond to my next tactic of earning his trust, but it's something that needs to be done.

"Are you good to stop by the grocery store with me?" I ask him as I hit the blinker to turn into the store parking lot.

He shrugs his shoulders, his stomach letting out a growl. My hands clench on the steering wheel, but I manage to relax before snapping the damn thing clear off. I hate the thought of any kid going hungry. It reminds me of my own childhood. How many nights did I go to bed starving? How many days did I go without eating anything and pretending that everything was fine?

"It will be fun. You can grab yourself some snacks too," I offer. That has him perking up a little bit.

The kid is like a wounded animal, and sometimes I feel like I'm taking baby steps. Then there are other times when I feel like I'm right back at square one.

I wonder if I was like this with others when I was his age. Maybe that's why I never had many friends around here.

I park the truck and we both hop out. I grab a cart, and Noah trudges along behind me.

“What are your favorite foods?” I ask him. “Anything you’re allergic to?”

“No.”

“What are your favorite snacks?” I ask him as we head down the chip aisle.

“I like Doritos,” he tells me, and it feels like a victory.

Getting information out of Noah is like pulling teeth and each new piece feels huge. He’s starting to let me in, even if it’s only letting me know what kind of chips he likes best.

“Me too. Are you a Nacho Cheese or Cool Ranch guy?” I ask him, holding up both bags.

“Cool Ranch,” he mumbles, but I can see a small smile playing around his lips.

“Me too.”

I toss a bag into the cart and we continue on. I pay close attention to Noah as we make our way around the store. Anytime I see him lick his lips or stare longingly at something, I toss it into the cart.

I try to stay away from perishable items since I’m not sure what his house is like. Our electricity got cut off from lack of payment quite a bit when I was younger, and I don’t want the food to go to waste if it’s the same for Noah. Crackers, soups, microwavable mac and cheese, granola bars, Pop-Tarts, and applesauce are all good options. Easy things he can make for himself or grab on the go.

We add a case of water to the cart and I throw in some gummy bears and a bag of apples before we make our way up to the registers.

“Remington!” Calls a voice behind me, and I turn to see Asher Mayson headed my way.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. Just picking up a few things for the wife,” he says.

His eyes shift over to Noah, and I clear my throat.

“Noah, this is my friend, Asher. Asher, this is my Little Brother, Noah.”

“Little Brother?” he asks, shocked, and I smile.

“I’ve been volunteering with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program,” I explain, and he nods.

“That’s great! It’s nice to meet you,” he tells Noah, and Noah nods.

He seems a little uncomfortable, and I wonder if Asher’s dad, the Sheriff for Murfreesboro, Tennessee, has been by his house before. Or maybe he’s always anxious around strangers.

Murfreesboro is a pretty small town and the chances of Noah not at least seeing the Mayson brothers or family around are slim, so I’m thinking that Sheriff Mayson has been by Noah’s place before for something.

The person in front of me moves up in line, and Asher smiles.

“I’ll let you two check out. I’ll see you later though. We need to catch up. Maybe we can grab a beer or something on Thursday?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you,” I tell him, and he nods, clapping me on the shoulder before he heads over to the produce section.

“Help me put everything on the belt?” I ask Noah, and he nods.

He seems deep in thought as we check out and I leave him alone as I pay and place the bags back into the cart. We load up my truck and I climb behind the wheel.

“Can you give me directions to your house? Or should I just drop you off back at the Big Brothers Big Sister center?” I ask him.

“Um...” he hesitates.

“Maybe I should drive you home. I need to ask your mom about taking you to the movies tonight,” I remind him.

He nods, chewing on his bottom lip. I can tell that he’s still worried about me seeing his house or maybe even meeting his mom. I take a deep breath, trying to figure out a way to put him at ease and show him that we’re not so different.

“What’s the address?” I ask him.

“267 Locke Lane,” he mumbles, and I nod.

“I actually grew up a few streets over,” I tell him, and his head snaps my way.

“You did?”

“Yeah, I was on Alastair,” I say.

I steer the truck toward that side of town. As we drive, the houses start to get closer together and more rundown looking.

“Where do you live now?” he asks me as we drive down the pothole-ridden streets.

“I’m actually staying at my mom’s house. She passed away recently and I’m fixing up and cleaning out her house to sell it.”

“I’m sorry about your mom,” he tells me, and I shake my head.

“Don’t be. She wasn’t a good mom or person. We weren’t close. I actually joined the military as soon as I could to get away from her.”

“Really?” he asks, and I nod.

“Yeah, I wanted to be able to take care of myself and make my way in the world. There wasn’t a whole lot here for me. The Mayson brothers were some of the only guys who were nice to me. To everyone else, I was the poor kid without a dad, and a mom who skipped town half the time.”

“Yeah,” he says quietly, and I wonder if it’s the same for him.

“It got better though. I made new friends in the military and got a whole new skill set.”

I turn onto his street and see a row of small apartment buildings. I pull up in front of the one he points to and park, and Noah immediately hops out.

“Let me help you with the groceries,” I tell him as I climb down and open the back door.

“But those are yours,” he says in confusion.

“Nah, they’re for you. Just something to get you by until I see you next week. We can make a trip to the store at the end of our Saturday sessions from now on. How does that sound?”

“But...” Noah furrows his brow, looking from me to the backseat filled with sacks of groceries. I know he wants to protest, to tell me he can take care of himself and he doesn’t need my help. I can practically see the words printed on his forehead.

Then his stomach growls again, and the kid dips his head down, nodding in defeat as he trudges closer to me. I place a hand on his shoulder, but he jerks away from me.

“Life isn’t supposed to be this cruel, especially at your age,” I tell him. Noah shrugs. “There’s no shame in getting help when you need it. It should be your mother’s job to provide the basics, but...” I take a deep breath, not wanting to let my anger get the better of me. I don’t want to make him more embarrassed than he already is. “But until she’s able to do that, I’m happy to step in.”

Noah nods, peering up at me through his shaggy hair. He doesn’t say it, but I know he’s thankful. I’ll take that as a win.

We each take some bags and I grab the case of water before I follow him up the stairs and into the ground-floor apartment. There seem to be two on each floor with four floors total.

“Is your mom home?” I ask when Noah opens the door without using a key or anything.

“Doubt it,” he mutters.

I look around at the bare space as I follow Noah into his bedroom. It's tiny, barely bigger than a closet, but the whole place seems like that. I've lived in similar places and hated each one.

Noah sets his bags down in his closet and I drop the water and bags of food that I was carrying in the same spot. I debate asking him for more details about his family or his home, but he seems agitated having me in his space.

"I'll be back to pick you up in a little bit. Make sure to let your mom know, okay?" I tell him, and he nods. He follows me back toward the front door and I pause. "You might want to lock the door when you're home," I warn him and he nods, not meeting my eyes.

"I will."

"I'll see you in a few hours," I tell him, and he nods again.

I wave before I head outside and then I wait to hear the turn of the lock on the front door before I head back to my truck.

It's a short drive over to my mom's old place, and I unload the rest of the groceries and head inside.

I hate this place so much. Everywhere I look, I see bad memories. I have most of the bedroom cleaned out. There was nothing worth saving in her room so it's mostly empty. I had Goodwill come and take the furniture that was worth anything a few days ago. The only thing left is sorting through some documents and old pictures. I doubt that I need to keep anything, but I should still double-check.

I put the groceries away and glance at the clock. It's too early to head over to Lucy's place, but I can't wait any longer. It's been too long since I've seen her.

I grab my keys and head back to my truck. Lucy lives on the other side of town and it takes me fifteen minutes to get to her place. Her car is the only one in the drive when I pull up, and I park on the street, not sure when her roommates will be getting back.

I head up to the front door and knock, waiting impatiently for Lucy to come and answer it.

“Um, you’re like two hours early,” she tells me as soon as she opens the door. I shrug.

“I missed you.”

She blushes, shifting on her bare feet. Her toes are painted a pale purple and they look adorable. Every part of her is adorable and perfect.

“Are you going to invite me in?” I ask her, and she nods, stepping out of the way.

I step inside, looking around. It’s pretty obvious that women live here. The place is bright and inviting with throw blankets tossed over the couch and colorful rugs covering the hardwood floor.

I follow Lucy into the kitchen where she’s making a cup of tea.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asks me.

“I’m good. What have you been up to?”

“I just finished up with a quick project for a client. I was going to relax for a bit before tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll join you.”

She side-eyes me, but I can see her smiling.

“Normally, people wait to be invited to things.”

“You love it when I take charge,” I say. She rolls her eyes, but she doesn’t deny it.

I lean against the doorway and watch her as she fixes her cup of tea. The front door opens behind me but I don’t pay it any attention. I can’t take my eyes off of my girl. Not until someone plows into me.

“Whoa!” a redhead says, and I reach out to steady her.

“Sorry,” I tell her, and she stares at me in shock.

“Um, who are you?” the redhead asks, taking another step away from me.

“Sorry! He’s with me,” Lucy says from behind me as she steps out of the pantry to see what all of the fuss is about.

“With you?” her roommate asks in surprise.

“Yeah, this is Remington,” Lucy introduces me.

The girl stares at me and she looks shocked that Lucy has a man. I can see Lucy getting flustered to explain this all away and she shifts anxiously.

“Sorry, Remington, this is my roommate and friend, Scarlett.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Remi is a Big Brother,” Lucy explains.

Remi?

My heart beats harder at the nickname. No one has ever called me that before and I love that it’s only Lucy.

“You have a big brother?” Scarlett asks.

“No,” I growl, giving Lucy a heated look. “I am definitely *not* her brother.”

Lucy blushes and she looks like she wants to be anywhere but here. Scarlett doesn’t seem to get that message, or maybe she does and just wants to enjoy Lucy’s torture a little longer.

“And how did you two meet?” Scarlett asks with a smile as I lean against the wall.

“At the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Our kids are best friends,” Lucy explains.

“Are the kids here?” Scarlett asks, looking around the empty house.

Lucy flushes a deeper shade of red.

“Well, no...”

“We’re going to drive there together,” I tell her, jumping in to try to rescue Lucy. She looks like she’s going to bolt, and I can’t have that happening.

“I told you that wasn’t needed,” Lucy grumbles, and I just give her a hard look.

“And I said that it was,” I tell her.

“Aren’t you late for work?” Lucy asks Scarlett, and she sighs.

“Yeah, I just came to grab this folder from the front table, but I’ve got to get going. I’ll see you two later,” Scarlett says before she turns and heads back over to the front door.

“It was nice to meet you, Remington!” she calls over her shoulder.

“You too!” I call back to her, but I never take my eyes off of Lucy.

We stare at each other for awhile after Scarlett is gone. I smile when I see it in Lucy’s eyes.

Excitement and lust. She wants me just as much as I want her.

Now I just need to get her to admit that.

SEVEN

Lucy

NOAH AND JUNE enjoyed the movie, and they especially enjoyed the snacks we loaded them up with. I noticed that Noah had a granola bar in his hand when we picked him up a few hours ago for the movie. I was right, Remi loaded him up with groceries before dropping him off earlier this afternoon. Can this man stop being so perfect? It's getting impossible to resist him.

We dropped the kids off at their respective homes about forty-five minutes ago, and then Remington took us to a hidden gem of a deli with artesian sandwiches and homemade soup. Now, we're in the car on the way to my house, and the air is thick with pent-up tension and need.

All during the movie, Remington found little ways to touch me and caress my skin, each delicate brush of his fingertips reverberating throughout my body. At one point, he turned my forearm on the armrest, exposing my palm, wrist, and inner arm. Remington circled his fingers around my palm, then drew patterns on the sensitive skin of my wrist, pausing to feel my pulse. He continued his torturous, tender touches, dragging his hand up my arm and pausing to tickle the inside of my elbow before reversing his path.

"What are you thinking about?" Remington asks, his eyes darting to mine before focusing back on the road.

“Oh, um, just...” I scramble to think of anything to say other than the truth. “Your fingertips on my skin,” I blurt out. *So much for playing it cool.*

“Jesus,” he grunts, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. “Do you like when I touch you?”

I nod, then realize he’s driving and might not see me. “Yes,” I whisper.

“Do you want me to touch you anywhere else?”

I notice the car accelerating, barreling toward my house. I’m nervous and excited and so beyond caring about my stupid no-boys rule. Remington isn’t a boy, after all. He’s all man, and he seems to want me as badly as I want him.

“I want you to touch me everywhere,” I murmur, my breath growing shallow as I imagine his hands gliding over my naked body.

We come to an abrupt halt, and I don’t even realize we’re parked outside of my house until Remington rips my door open. He loops his fingers around my wrist and pulls me up, his lips fusing with mine.

“So sexy, Lucy,” he breathes into my mouth. I’m so lost in the moment, lost in his scent, his taste, his warmth, that all I can do is nod. He smirks, as if loving the fact that my brain is scrambled, then kisses me all over again.

I’m vaguely aware of being lifted into Remington’s arms, but it’s hard to concentrate on anything when he’s kissing a line up my neck and nipping on my sensitive flesh.

“Keys?” he grunts, barely managing to tear himself away from me. I take a moment to catch my breath, then dig through my purse and produce my set of keys.

Remington turns so I can have better access to the lock, but he doesn’t set me down. In fact, he keeps distracting me with little bites and kisses on my collarbone and across my chest. I love that he can’t get enough of me.

He practically kicks open the door like a freaking alpha caveman, then shuts it with his foot. I cling to his massive,

muscled frame while he carries me further inside. I'm about to give him directions to my room, but he sets me down on the kitchen table, stepping between my legs.

Remington cups my face, tilting my head so we're eye to eye. "Tell me what you want, beautiful," he whispers softly. "I'll give you everything."

"I want you," I tell him truthfully. Speaking those words out loud has me feeling unbearably vulnerable. I have my heart in my hand, holding it out for this man to either heal me or ruin me.

"I want you more than my next breath," he instantly replies, resting his forehead on mine. "Need you, actually. But I need to hear you say it. What do you want me to do to your curvy, sexy as fuck body? Can I taste you? Make you come on my tongue? My fingers? Or maybe you're ready for something else?"

A moan escapes from my throat as I nod, and I tighten my thighs around him, drawing him closer while I angle my head to meet his lips. Before kissing him, I murmur, "I want you to do everything," I plead. "I just want to feel you. All of you."

"Fuck, baby. I want that, too. Tell me your mine, Lucy. Tell me you belong to me."

"I'm yours," I breathe out.

"Damn right you are," he says right before claiming my lips as his own. All other thoughts and worries about the future fall right out of my head. All I can focus on is Remington grinding his hard cock against my center.

"I feel your heat, beautiful. Do you need this?" He thrusts his hips, hitting my clit through the thin material of my yoga pants and panties.

"Yes, yes, I need you." The words just come pouring out of my mouth, almost without my permission.

Remington kisses me again and again, each swipe of his tongue wiping away my fears and doubts until all that's left is his taste, his smell, and his touch.

“Please,” I gasp, though I’m not even sure what I’m asking for.

Remington grunts and rubs his fingers against my pussy, over the fabric of my clothes. I grind down on his hand and bury my face in his shoulder to muffle my cries.

“Jesus, you’re so damn responsive. I’m hardly even touching you,” he grunts.

“So why don’t you touch me for real?”

His eyes go dark and his jaw tenses right before he crashes his lips on mine and kisses the breath right out of my lungs. When he tears himself away from me, it’s so he can kneel down and press his face into my core, inhaling my scent through the fabric of my clothes.

Remington growls and dips his thumbs into the waistband of my pants. I lift my hips up and watch as he peels my yoga pants and panties off in one swift move.

“This okay, Lucy?” he asks, pausing with his hands on my knees, looking me in the eyes to make sure I mean what I say.

I nod. “I want to feel you. I’ve always wondered what it would be like…” My face burns up at my words, knowing I just gave my inexperience away.

“You’ve never had anyone taste you, baby?”

His words are so filthy and so… hot. I shake my head no.

“Have you ever had anyone inside of you, Lucy?”

I close my eyes, not wanting to answer his question and admit just how innocent I really am.

“Tell me, love. Tell me I’m the only one. Tell me, Lucy,” he demands.

“Only you,” I whisper, finally opening my eyes.

“Jesus, you’re perfect.”

With that, he yanks my legs wide open so I’m spread out before him on the table. Remington flattens his tongue and

takes a long, slow lick up the seam of my pussy, stopping to flick my clit and suck on the swollen ball of nerves.

I moan and fall back on the table, allowing Remington to guide one of my legs over his shoulder, and then the other. I tilt my head up and watch as he stares at my pussy. Something about that is inexplicably hot. I feel myself clench up, and then more of my juices leak out of me.

“So wet...” Remington growls before shoving his face between my thighs and making me crazy with need.

He’s eating me out in desperate, forceful strokes. I feel his tongue plunge inside of my tight little hole, in and out, and then back up to circle my clit. I cry out and claw the table, seeking something to keep me grounded during this hurricane of pleasure.

Remington pulls back for a second, making me whine in frustration. He grabs my hands and puts them on his head. I instantly fist his hair, which causes him to grunt in approval.

“You need to hang on to something, you hang on to *me*.”

I nod and shove his head between my legs again, making him chuckle into my soaking-wet folds. I feel the vibrations every-fucking-where, putting me right on the edge.

Remington sucks on my clit and thrusts a finger inside of me without warning. I moan at the unexpected invasion and then wiggle my hips to get him to go deeper.

He leans back slightly so he can watch himself fuck me with his finger. The sloppy wet sounds fill the small room and make me tremble in anticipation. I can’t contain the whimper that spills out when he adds a second finger. I’m close, so, so close...

Remington’s eyes snap to mine. He looks at me like he’s going to rip me to shreds with his intense desire. I can’t wait to let him. I slam my eyes shut as a delicious wave of ecstasy sweeps through my body and rattles my bones.

“That’s it, sweetheart, goddamn,” he grunts before leaning down and sucking on my clit in time with the thrusts of his fingers.

I hold my breath as my muscles draw up tight. For a moment I'm suspended in empty space, hovering, flying. The hard, merciless rhythm of his tongue is almost painful on my clit, overwhelming in the most glorious way. He twists his fingers and curls them up, breaking the tension over my body as the first wave of my orgasm floods through me.

I bow my back off of the table and cry out, my legs slamming shut against his head, trapping him there. Remington slides his hands under my ass and squeezes the soft flesh. Hard. I buck against his mouth as my orgasm drips out of me. I grind against him again, nearly losing my mind when he growls and bites down on my clit.

The sting of his teeth followed by the smooth heat of his tongue has a second wave of pleasure rolling over me again. The orgasm rips through my body, leaving me breathless and unable to move once I come down.

Remington sets my legs down and then scoops me up, carrying me bridal style out of the dining room. I laugh softly and kick my legs out, peppering kisses along his jaw and neck until we get to my room.

He looks down at me with unbridled lust, which is only magnified when I see his mouth still glistening with my release. I don't stop to think about it, I just lean up and kiss him, tasting myself on his lips and moaning softly as he opens up for me.

One minute we're licking and kissing and devouring each other, and the next minute I'm falling through the air, only to land on the bed. Taking the hint, I sit up and whip my t-shirt over my head, so I'm only in my bra. Remington's eyes are wide, almost like a cartoon character. I giggle and then moan when Remington climbs on top of me and takes my lips in another wild kiss. I spread my legs for him, my bare pussy grinding against his jean-covered cock.

"Such a dirty girl, aren't you, Lucy?" Remington whispers as he drags his nose and lips down my throat and chest, placing a kiss between my breasts.

“Only for you,” I tell him truthfully. Remington looks up from between my breasts, his eyes soft this time. I can tell he likes that he’s my first everything. I like it too. “I want to see you too,” I pout, hoping to finally get a glimpse at all those tasty muscles I just know he’s hiding under his clothes.

Remington looks conflicted like he wants to be naked but also doesn’t want to leave me for a single second. “Let me help,” I offer, giving him what I hope is a sexy smile.

“That’s the best damn idea I’ve heard in a long time,” he says with a wink, leaning back when I push on his chest. Together, we stand and strip him out of everything until we’re face to face, Remington in just his boxer briefs and me in just my bra. He reaches out and cups my breasts, then slides his hands to my back to undo the clasp.

“Wait,” I whisper, my heart thudding uncontrollably in my chest. Remington freezes, his eyes searching mine to see what’s wrong. “You first,” I say with a grin, eyeing his barely contained erection.

Remington smiles deviously and hooks his thumbs in the waistband of his underwear, pulling them down to reveal his thick, throbbing cock. He’s hungry. For me. That thought has my thighs wet with my own hunger.

I feel Remington tap my chin with his finger, and I realize my mouth is literally hanging open at the sight of him. I snap my mouth closed and blush profusely. I’m sure I look like an idiot. Remington just chuckles and gives me a sweet kiss on my lips, my cheek, and my jaw, and then his mouth ghosts over my ear. “Your turn,” he murmurs, while his deft fingers pinch the clasp of my bra and undo it in one swift motion.

I step back and let my bra fall on the floor. I’ve never been naked in front of a man before, but the way Remington is looking at me doesn’t leave any room for doubt. He’s taking his time drinking all of me in, so I do the same.

Remington is gorgeous. Broad shoulders, strong arms roped in muscles, defined pecs, and abs that flex as my eyes roam over his tanned skin. I allow myself a few more seconds of open gawking before trailing my gaze back up to meet his.

He smiles so tenderly at me, making me feel completely seen, completely safe, and completely sexy. It's a heady combination, one that makes me bolder than I've ever been. I reach out and place the palm of my hand on his chest, loving the way he shudders at my touch.

Remington sighs and leans into me, then takes my other hand and places it on his chest as well, right over his heart. His hands cover mine, while we just stand and stare at each other. This is it. This is everything.

Remington leads me over to the bed and lays me down so gently before kissing his way up my body. I bite my lip and spread my legs wider for him, wanting more of his skin on my skin. Wanting to be connected to him in every single way. He settles his hips between my legs, his hot and heavy cock laying across my slit.

He begins thrusting his hips, gliding his massive dick along my folds and gathering up my honey. My nerves sizzle and pop each time the head of his cock taps my swollen clit. I swear I could cum just from this, but Remington has other ideas.

The tip of his cock nudges into my entrance, only going in a fraction of an inch. Even so, my opening stretches to accommodate his size, a burning sensation tearing through my core and making my muscles tight.

"Relax, baby," Remington whispers into my lips before kissing me slowly. "I'm a big man, but I promise I'll go slow. I want to share everything with you, including this. Will you let me?"

The tears in my eyes aren't from pain but from an overwhelming sense of gratitude. This big, stubborn, sexy, sweet man wants me in every single way. "Please," I whisper. "I want you to take me, Remington. All of me."

He presses his forehead to mine and eases in another inch.

"Let me in, Lucy. Open up for me and let me take care of you the way you deserve."

I feel myself relax at his words, my tight channel pulsing and sucking his huge length inside of me. Remington rubs his nose against mine and then thrusts forward, swallowing my cry by kissing the air out of my lungs. He breathes life into me as he sinks his thick dick into my body.

“Ohmygod, Remington, ohmygod...” I moan, crossing my ankles behind his back in an attempt to keep him there, so deep inside of me.

“Fuck,” he grits out, burying his face in my neck and biting me there as he slowly withdraws. Remington slides back inside of me, going even further this time, filling me up to the absolute limit and then backing out again.

He grunts and snaps his hips, slamming home in one hard thrust. I choke on the scream in my throat and bow my back off of the mattress, clawing at his skin as he hammers in and out of me. Each time he hits the end of me, my body jerks as if being electrocuted.

“Don’t... stop...” I breathe out as I cling to his trembling body.

“Not a fucking chance,” he growls, bending down to suck on one of my nipples. I’m shocked when the tingling sensation is mirrored in my clit, as if the two are connected by a string. Remington chuckles and bites my nipple, making me buck my hips and take him impossibly deeper. We both groan, getting lost in the way our bodies fit together. “Do you like that, Lucy? Like when I bite your nipples and fuck this tight little pussy?”

“Oh, god... yes,” I moan, barely recognizing my own voice.

“Good girl,” he grunts before sucking more of my breast into his mouth.

Remington’s thrusts become harder and faster, as he licks and nips his way up to my mouth. His lips are inches from mine. All I can think about is tasting him while he fucks me. Remington pounds into me and drags my bottom lip between his teeth, grinning when I whimper into his mouth.

He kisses me as he slams into me in long, powerful strokes. I'm stuffed so full of his cock that I can't take a full breath. I unhook my ankles from behind him and place my feet flat on the bed so I can meet him thrust for thrust.

"You feel incredible. Now come for me. Come for me, Lucy," he commands.

I shout as my orgasm burns through me, all of my muscles spasming at once in the most intense moment I've ever experienced. My blood feels like sharp razor blades coursing through my veins, the pain spiking my pleasure into heights unknown.

"So beautiful, coming for me like a goddess," he grunts, fucking me through my orgasm and then leaving me completely.

I almost cry at the loss of him, but Remington just grabs my hips and flips me over, tugging me back so I'm on all fours. I gasp as he enters me in one hard thrust, his thighs smacking against my ass as he bottoms out, hitting me so incredibly deep.

"Remington!" I moan, arching my back and wedging his thickness even deeper inside of me. He taps some super-sensitive spot, making my pussy convulse and my limbs shake.

"There it is," he grunts in satisfaction, gripping my hips and digging his fingers into my soft flesh. He bounces me off his cock, hitting that spot over and over, fucking me mercilessly until I'm coming again with his name on my lips. Remington holds still, his cock buried inside of me as my orgasm washes over me in violent waves. "Such a good girl. Give me one more, Lucy, I need you to come again for me."

I whimper and squeeze my walls around his hard cock, unable to give him any words at the moment. My body is deliciously sore and used, my pussy is swollen and sensitive, and I don't think I can take anything else, but I want to give Remington everything he wants.

One of his hands traces up my back and then tangles in my hair. He tugs my head to the side and then leans down to kiss

me as he slowly begins moving in and out of my tight channel. I feel his abs tense and flex against my ass as he works his fat cock in and out of me.

I press back against him as he surges forward, earning me a sexy growl from Remington. “That’s it, baby. Fuck me back, show me how much you want it.”

I fist the sheets in my hands and rock back into Remington, swallowing his hard shaft in my pussy again and again. He grabs my breasts, kneading them and holding on to me while rutting into me. Remington pinches my nipples and slams into me, each thrust pushing me closer and closer to the edge, his monster cock stretching me wider still.

“I’m... I’m...” I pant and gasp for air, barely hanging on to my sanity as he ravages my body and rips me open in powerful strokes.

“Let go, Lucy, let go for me,” he rumbles. “I’m right there with you, but I need you to come first. Come on, baby. Come with me,” he roars, shooting his hot cum deep inside of me.

My world erupts in pure bliss, my vision tunneling until I can’t see, I can only feel. Pure light and energy are wrung from my very core as I twist in on myself and then go completely limp.

When I come to, I’m wrapped up in Remington’s arms and he’s placing sweet kisses all over my face. I giggle and scrunch my nose up, trying to get away from him. He just holds me tighter and rubs his nose against mine.

“You okay, Lucy?” he whispers.

“I’m so good, Remington. That was...” I blow out a breath, unable to find the right word to describe it.

“For me too, Lucy. It was...” He pauses and then blows out a breath too.

“Exactly,” I agree, and then laugh softly.

We lay there, a mess of tangled limbs and drying sweat, breathing the same air and snuggling in the afterglow. If I

didn't know before, I definitely know now... I love Remington. I feel safe, wanted, beautiful, and fearless.

“Rest now,” Remington whispers. I nod and snuggle even further into his embrace. Comfort blankets me along with a deep, drugging sleep.

EIGHT

Remington

THE GODDESS in my arms stirs slightly, brushing her mouthwatering ass up against my morning wood. I swallow thickly, gritting my teeth against the need to plow into her right here, right fucking now. My girl has to be sore this morning after the way we got lost in our pleasure last night.

And yet, Lucy grinds down on me again, letting out a quiet little moan. I can tell she's still mostly asleep, but the fact that she still wants me in her foggy morning haze has my dick swelling up even more, begging to get inside her wet, warm heaven.

I slide my hand over her curves, following the dip of her waist and the swell of her hip, where I hold her tightly and help her rub against me. I can tell the moment she fully wakes up. Lucy's soft gasp and full-body shiver cause me to buck my hips and slide my cock up and down the slit in her perfectly round ass cheeks.

"Remi..." she rasps out, her voice scratchy and sexy as fuck.

I have no doubt her throat is sore from screaming my name over and over yesterday. My chest swells up with pride at the memory of my sweet, filthy little Lucy creaming all over my cock. I did that to her. I made her sob with pleasure until she damn near passed out on me.

Lucy pushes her ass against my raging dick eagerly, letting the head of my cock tease her little entrance. I growl when I feel how wet she is, her sweet, sticky honey practically dripping out of her.

“You need something from me, baby?” I grit out.

“You know that I do,” Lucy practically whines. I’d chuckle, but I’m needier than her at this point, and I feel her pain.

“Fuck,” I growl, sliding my hand around to her front and dipping my fingers into her cunt. I can’t deny my woman anything, especially when she wants exactly what I want.

Circling her hard, pulsing clit with my middle finger, I rock us back and forth, grinding my dick into her juicy ass and spurting precum all over those round cheeks. When her movements become jerky, I thrust two fingers inside of her tight little channel and press the heel of my palm against her bundle of nerves.

Lucy whimpers and comes so sweetly for me, filling up my hand with her release. Only when she’s nice and wet and relaxed for me do I grab her top leg and drape it over mine, opening her up for me. I tease her little entrance with the head of my cock, thrusting just inside of her and testing to see how ready she is for me.

“Jesus,” I mutter. Her pussy walls pulse around the tip of my dick, massaging me and making my balls draw up tight.

That’s it. My control snaps.

I thrust inside of her and groan into the back of her neck, sucking the soft skin I find there while pounding into the soft skin between her thighs. My senses are flooded with all things Lucy; her hot little pussy wrapped around my cock, her citrus scent mixed with her musky-sweet arousal, her salty sweat on my tongue, her jagged breaths, and broken moans filling the air around us.

But nothing compares to seeing her surrender to her pleasure, letting go of every-fucking-thing and allowing

herself to succumb to her orgasm. I fuck her through it, needing more. Needing everything.

She keeps coming, her pussy snapping around me as I bring her up and over again and again. Before her last orgasm is done, I pull out and roll her onto her back, again pounding into that pretty pink pussy over and over.

“Ohmygod, I can’t, I can’t...” She shakes and moans for me, her entire body like a damn livewire, sparking and jerking each time I hit the end of her.

Lucy wraps her legs around me, hooking her ankles behind my back and clinging to me while I tear into her savagely. “You can, baby girl, you can take it. Come for me again, one more time,” I demand.

I grip her ass in a punishing hold, stroking into her with more intent. Driving deeper. Hitting higher. Tilting her hips so I can scrape my cock high and hard, all the way up in the front. She moans and stretches as her head thrashes from side to side and her back arcs. Her toes curl, and her fingers scrape viciously down my back until they dig into my ass. She claws and convulses and rocks her hips against me, coming with a furious, frantic energy that mirrors my own.

I roar and bite down on the top of her left breast, leaving my mark as I explode inside of her. We come together for an eternity, clinging to each other and gasping for air as our pleasure crests and then drops us back down to earth.

Rolling onto my back, I drape Lucy over my chest and kiss her sweaty temple before tucking her head under my chin. My fingers glide along her spine in calming strokes, soothing her trembling body and covering her with my strength.

“That’s one way to wake up,” she says once she’s mostly caught her breath.

I chuckle and pull her closer, kissing her again on the head. “A good way, I hope?”

“An excellent way,” she confirms, her lips pulling into the most adorably sexy grin.

God, I want to taste her all over again, but my girl needs a break. Or, at the very least, some breakfast. Gotta keep up her strength if I want to keep her in bed all day.

“And just what are you thinking about, mister?” she asks, an eyebrow raised skeptically in my direction.

“Am I that obvious?”

Lucy nods, her grin turning into a full-on smile.

“Can you really blame me? You’re next to me, all warm and naked...” I trail off, my eyes caught on the edge of the sheet that’s slipping lower, lower, lower down her chest.

Lucy snaps her fingers, startling my attention back to her. She giggles, and I take the opportunity to tickle her.

“Okay, okay! I surrender!” she huffs out a few moments later.

“Perfect,” I say with a smirk, kissing her on the nose.

Lucy’s phone goes off, and she groans as she reaches for it. “Ugh. The real world is calling.” She frowns at her phone, then tosses it down next to her on the bed. “I have a client who can’t seem to decide what they want. They can tell me what they *don’t* want, but that’s not super helpful when I’m on the fifth iteration of their website.”

“That’s frustrating,” I tell her, sitting up slightly to look her in the eyes. “Is there anything I can do to help? I’m not much of a designer or web person, but I can use my military skills to break into their house and put hair dye in their shampoo bottles.”

Lucy giggles and pushes against my chest, her brown hair fanning out around her shoulders as she shakes her head. “That won’t be necessary. Yet.”

I shrug and then wrap my arms around my woman, pulling her against me and swaying slightly. “Just say the word, baby,” I murmur, kissing her forehead, nose, and cheeks.

“I should probably get to work on these new edits,” Lucy says, picking up her phone as she crawls out of bed.

“Whatever you need,” I assure her, though I’m a bit surprised she doesn’t want me to stay for breakfast. Maybe she’s just distracted by the frustrating client.

Honestly, it’s probably for the best. If I stick around any longer, I’m just going to keep distracting her with kisses and planning t our future together. First, I need to find a ring. And before that, I need to finish up shit at my mom’s house so I’m ready for whatever Lucy wants to do next.

“Right,” Lucy says, nodding her head. I pause and give her a once-over, making sure she’s okay. Her voice is a little off, but maybe she’s not a morning person. Or maybe she’s remembering everything we’ve already done this morning. I know I am.

I watch my girl throw on some leggings and a sweatshirt, and I gather my clothes as well, giving her a hug and a kiss before slipping out the front door and heading to my truck.

I can’t keep the huge-ass grin off my face as I drive through town. I’m sure I look like a lunatic, but I can’t help it. Waking up with my girl in my arms was the happiest I’ve been in a long, long time.

I didn’t realize how lonely I was until Lucy showed up in my life. I’ve always had friends and family in the military, though after my last mission, I lost contact with a lot of them. Nearly half of my SEAL team brothers didn’t make it back from our last mission, and the other half only serve as a reminder of those who didn’t survive.

The only person I’ve kept in consistent contact with over the years is Romeo. He’s supposed to be getting out and heading back home any day now. He lives in upstate New York, and I’m already planning a trip to head up there and see him.

Maybe I could bring Lucy with me.

Romeo is such an important person in my life. We went through boot camp together and managed to get stationed at a few bases together over the years. We were on my second and last deployment together. He knows me the best out of all of

my friends, probably because he can understand how I grew up. Romeo also had an alcoholic and absentee father. He at least had a good mom, but she was working so much to keep a roof over their heads that she was barely there.

It would mean the world to me to have the two most important people in my life meet. Maybe I can introduce Romeo to Noah and get him hooked up with the program so he can have his own Little Brother.

Thoughts about my friend and the future swirl around in my mind as I pull up in front of my mother's house. I'm dreading the work I have left to do. So far, I've emptied out the rooms upstairs and brought all the garbage outside. I need to do several trash runs today and a trip or ten to donate old clothes and furniture to a second-hand store. Then I have to clear out the kitchen and bathroom, fix the plumbing, and god, the basement...

My phone rings, jarring me out of my downward spiral. I hop out of my truck and smile when I see Romeo's name on the screen.

"Hey, I was just thinking about you! Are you back in the States yet?" I ask him.

"Hey, man," he says, and my stomach cramps as soon as he speaks.

Something is wrong. I can hear it in his voice. I shift on my feet, the anxiety rising when I realize that the beeping in the background has to be from a hospital heart monitor machine.

"Romeo," I start, and he clears his throat.

"I'm in Virginia, at the VA hospital by Langley Air Force Base."

"Are you okay?"

"Kind of..." he says, and I'm on high alert. The hairs stand up on my neck, and my heart thumps painfully in my chest.

"I can be there in a few hours. By tonight," I promise him.

His mom died two years ago, and he's always been single, like me, so I know that he has no one else to visit him. Plus, he's literally done the same thing for me. Of course, I'm going to drop everything to be with him in his hour of need.

"Thanks," he says, and I promise to see him soon before I run inside to pack a bag and then head back outside to hop in my truck and peel out of the driveway.

I pull up the directions and hit the gas when I see that it's a ten-hour drive. I can't wait that long so instead, I turn, heading toward the airport. It will be less than a two-hour flight, and I can rent a car when I land.

My only thought is to see my friend and making sure that he's okay. He didn't seem to want to tell me what happened or how bad it was on the phone. That only has my anxiety ticking higher and higher. Surely he's not dying. He'd have said something. Right?

Fuck. I wouldn't have told anyone if I was dying.

I can't lose him. Romeo is the only real family I have left.

Cursing at the confusing airport signs, I pull my truck into what I hope is long-term parking. At this rate, I don't give a fuck if my truck gets towed. I just need to get to my friend.

Getting a plane ticket on such short notice is expensive and hard. I find my gate and pace back and forth like a crazy man until a flight attendant takes mercy on me and upgrades my ticket just so I'll be seated sooner and out of her way.

It's not until the plane reaches its cruising altitude that I realize I left my phone in my truck. What a mess. As I flip through whatever sad replacement for the Sky Mall magazine they now offer, I try to do a few breathing exercises to calm down.

Four tense hours later, I'm fighting off traffic in the only available rental car in all of Virginia, apparently. The sad little Volkswagen chugs along, finally arriving at the hospital. By the time I walk into Romeo's hospital room, I'm tired, hungry, and stressed out.

“Hey, man,” Romeo says from the hospital bed as I walk in.

I collapse in the chair next to his bed and give him a weary smile.

“How’s it going, buddy?” I ask him, and he laughs.

“I’ve been better.”

I nod, and my eyes scan over his body as he lies in the bed. It’s then I notice something amiss. There’s only one bump under the blankets when there should be two. My stomach drops, and I look back at him.

“I lost my leg,” he says, and I feel tears sting my eyes as he starts to cry.

He’s probably been drugged out of his mind the last day or two ever since it happened, and I’m betting that this is the first he’s had a second to actually process everything.

“What happened?” I ask, leaning forward in my seat.

“We were on a routine patrol and headed back when we got intel that there was a high-level target holed up in this little town. So, we headed there.”

He looks off into the distance, and I know that he’s back there in the desert, reliving the whole thing again.

Even just hearing him talk about it is sending me back there. I can feel the sweat dripping down my spine and stinging my eyes, the sand blowing against my face and sinking beneath me with each step. That familiar level of awareness and adrenaline slams into me, and I’m instantly on guard.

“I don’t know how it happened. I didn’t even see it coming. One minute, I’m walking, following after Nell, and the next, a damn mortar is going off, and I’m lying in the dirt, bleeding out.”

“It’s going to be alright. You’re still here; you’re still alive,” I tell him, leaning forward and squeezing his shoulder.

“Nell isn’t,” he chokes out, and tears spill over onto my cheeks.

I know what he’s going through. I’ve watched more friends than I’d like to remember die right in front of me. It’s not something that you get over. Not completely.

We sit in silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts. I’ve been able to keep the flashbacks to a minimum since moving back to Tennessee, but I feel my mind slipping back there, back to the violence, the screams, the symphony of mortars and machine guns.

Reality blinks in and out of my vision. One minute I’m in the hospital with my friend and the next, I’m ducking for cover as another bomb explodes. Someone falls to the ground with a sickening thud next to me, and I watch blood trickle down their forehead as the life drains from their eyes.

A nurse knocks on the door, snapping me back into the bright, fluorescently-lit room. She walks in and gives Romeo some more pain medicine.

“Visiting hours are ending,” she tells me, an understanding smile on her face, and I nod.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” I promise Romeo. He pats my knee and nods slowly.

The pain medicine is already hitting him, and his eyes flutter closed before I’m even out of the room. I make my way to a hotel close by and check in, crashing onto the bed as soon as I can. My night is filled with nightmares and flashbacks from my time overseas, and I wake up multiple times covered in sweat and tears.

The next two days are filled with more of the same. I get to the hospital around six in the morning and make sure Romeo has enough food for breakfast. I know sometimes they’ll skimp out on portions, so I need to be there to sneak an extra cup of fruit and some extra bacon. Plus, Romeo needs his coffee. Not the watered-down shit they serve in the VA hospital. He needs the motor oil he’s used to.

I've taken my friend to several X-ray appointments and an MRI in the afternoons; then I try to encourage Romeo to take a nap. He's not used to resting so much. I get it. That was never part of our lives before, especially on a mission. Right now, though, my friend needs to sleep. He seems calmer when I'm around, so I've tried to stick by him as much as possible.

Today is the third day in the hospital, and Romeo and his team are starting to make plans to leave and head to a veteran's rehab facility about four hours away from here. He'll be there until he can get his new prosthetic and learn how to adjust to his new reality.

After all that, Romeo can go home, though I wonder where home is going to be for him. Now that his mother has passed, there's not much bringing him back to New York. I've been trying to convince him to move closer to me. I know that wherever he lands, he'll need to hire a caretaker until he's fully healed and can get around by himself, but then at least, I would be close by to help, and we could hang out more.

After a restless, frustrating, two-hour flight back to Tennessee, I return to my truck, groaning when I see my phone. I knew I had left it there, but between the long days at the hospital and catching sleep whenever I could, the impact of leaving my phone here for three days didn't hit me... until now.

Lucy. Noah. People I care about. People I haven't talked to in seventy-two hours.

Shit.

Digging through the glove compartment in my truck, I pull out an old charging cord. It's not the best, but it'll work. Plugging it into the dashboard, I stare at the blank phone, pleading for it to come back to life.

My heart bangs against my ribcage, my throat closing up as I try to suck down air. *I fucked up.* I was so worried about getting to Romeo and making sure that he was going to live... I never told Lucy or Noah that I was leaving town for a few days. I left them without a word.

The phone vibrates in my hand, lighting up as it beeps over and over with incoming messages and voicemails. Most of them are from Lucy, asking where I am and if I'm okay. My gut twists as her messages get less worried and more angry. Her last messages are particularly heartwrenching.

LUCY: Look, if we're done, just say so. Ghosting me after we slept together is a pretty shitty way to break up with someone.

LUCY: I honestly can't believe you right now. How could I have been so wrong about someone? It's one thing to ignore me, but abandoning Noah? I don't want anything to do with you, Remington.

IF THAT WEREN'T enough to rip me to shreds, the next batch of messages from Noah and the Big Brothers Big Sisters program certainly was.

I messed up. I abandoned two people whose biggest fear is being left behind. I was making such good progress, and then this unexpected tragedy happened, and I didn't handle it in a good way at all. I'm not just looking after myself and my best interests anymore. I have to make room for Lucy and Noah if I want to have a fighting chance at keeping them in my life.

I shake my head and then rest it on my steering wheel. I *really* fucking messed up. Now I need to figure out how to make it up to both of them and convince them to give me another chance.

NINE

Lucy

I GRIT my teeth and force a calming breath through my nostrils before pulling into the Big Brothers Big Sisters parking lot. The last three days have been an exercise in self-loathing as well as self-restraint. As much as I want to cry and punch Remington in the face for sleeping with me and then leaving me, I don't want June or Noah to see me like that.

Hence the clenched teeth and deep breaths.

Parking my car, I turn it off and rest my head on the steering wheel, gathering my thoughts and strength before going inside. I should have trusted my brain and never gotten involved with Remington. I've grown up seeing men use and leave women, and I never should have bought into the idea that Remington was different.

I can hear my foster sister's voice in the back of my mind. *See? All men are selfish deep down. They talk a good game, but once they get what they came for, their true colors come to the surface.*

I guess I had to experience the heartache and betrayal for myself for the lesson to stick. That does little to console my bitter, broken heart, however.

I mean, god, Remington could have at least stuck around for a month or even a week to put on a bit of a pretense, but oh

no. One night, a morning quickie, and that's all I get. That's all I'm worth.

My hands tighten around the steering wheel, my palms clammy as I squeeze my eyes shut.

The first day Remington didn't return my texts or calls; I tried to tell myself that he just got busy or maybe he lost his phone. He told me about all the work he was doing at his mom's house, and I just assumed... well, I assumed I wasn't as stupid as every other woman I've seen get hurt. I assumed Remington was different. I assumed a lot of things that I now regret.

The crazy thing is, I was actually kind of worried about him. What if he was hurt in his house or something? I didn't have his address or anything, which was the first red flag. The next day, my worry faded into anger. Then, when he didn't show up for his time with Noah, my anger moved straight to enraged. It's one thing to leave me on read, but his Little Brother? Remington knows how fragile Noah can be, and he was just starting to trust someone again.

Three days of no contact, and I'm more than happy to go back to staying far, far away from men. I tried dating, tried having fun, tried trusting someone, and... it was as much of a disaster as I always thought it would be. Now I can go back to being alone and safe.

That still doesn't help me with Noah, however. I can't exactly tell the kid to lock his heart away and never open up to anyone ever again. He has to wait until he's an adult, and then he can grow bitter and lonely on his own terms. It'll give him something to look forward to.

Shaking my head of my morose thoughts, I take a final breath to come back to center. *I won't encourage Noah to shut everyone out. That's not what a good Big Sister does.* After a few cycles of my new mantra, I force a smile onto my lips as I step out of my car and make my way inside the building.

I've been spending more time with June and Noah these last few days, taking them both out with me whenever I get a chance. They're both bummed about Remington; Noah more

than June. The kids both know I'm mad at Remington. I think Noah got it in his head that Remington and I had a fight, and that's the reason he didn't show up the other day. To be fair, I was hoping that Remington was just avoiding me, too, at least for the kid's sake. I didn't want him to be another person who abandoned Noah and gave up on him. My heart breaks for Noah, and I get pissed at Remington all over again.

June and Noah are both sitting by the front door, and I wave at them as I head to the front counter to sign them out.

"Hey there, Miss Lucy. Where are you all going today?" Sharon asks me.

"It's so nice outside, so I thought we would head over to the park," I tell her.

"Oh, the one on Maple?" she asks as I sign my name on the sheet.

"No, the bigger one, over on Second. Maybe stop and get some ice cream after."

"Good idea! You'll have to beat the heat somehow," she says with a friendly smile.

Sharon has been volunteering and working at the Big Brothers Big Sisters Center for most of her life. The woman is relentless in her efforts to coordinate and support the program, and she has such a kind heart and a gentle smile. Sharon seems to know everything about this place and this town. When I first got here, she was the first friendly face I saw and helped me learn my way around this small town.

"We'll see you later," I tell Sharon, and she smiles as I grab June and Noah and head back out to my car.

"Ready to head over to the park?" I ask them as I hold the back door open for them to climb in.

"Yes!" June says.

Noah nods. He's been a lot more subdued since Remington ghosted us, which is understandable. I haven't pushed him to talk about it yet, but I know it's something we'll get to eventually. The three of us make the short drive over to the

park, and the kids run over to the swing set while I take a seat on the park bench nearby.

I can see June talking to Noah, and it looks like she's trying to reassure him so I leave them alone for the moment.

That is until I spot a familiar truck pulling up next to my car.

My stomach drops as I watch Remington hop out and start to head my way.

He's tried to call and text me a few times, but I blocked him after the second text. I didn't want to hear a single word of his defense or excuses. Too little, too late, as the saying goes.

"Why is *he* here?" Noah asks. He sounds as upset as I am. "Did you invite him?"

He glares at me like I'm a traitor, and I shake my head as I head their way.

"No, I blocked him. I haven't talked to him in days." Noah rolls his eyes. "He's still technically your Big Brother. Sharon must have told him that we were here," I explain.

"Hey," Remington starts, and we all turn to glare at him.

I step in front of the kids slightly as if I could protect them from emotional damage caused by this asshole. My guard is up, the hairs on the back of my neck standing at attention as I look him over, trying to ignore the way my heart races at the sight of him. Remington looks tired, with dark circles under his eyes. His hair is mussed and sticking up in the back like he rolled out of bed and raced over here.

"I can explain. I wasn't abandoning you," he says, running a shaking hand through his hair. Those green eyes pierce right through me, but I resist, looking away from the man who broke my heart.

I don't want to listen to him. I can't. I need to get my emotions and my hormones in check before I talk to him. That way, I won't risk falling for his pretty lies and charming grin.

“Can we go?” Noah asks, glaring at Remington with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Absolutely,” I answer with delight.

We walk past Remington, the three of us holding hands. He opens his mouth, but I shoot him a warning look. The man wisely shuts his trap, which is the first good decision he’s made all week.

Still, he trails after us back to the cars, hanging around while I help the kids into the backseat.

“Lucy,” Remington starts, and I glare at him.

“We don’t need to do this. Certainly not here. I got your message loud and clear.”

“I wasn’t ignoring you, I swear. Just let me explain,” he pleads.

Part of me wants to give in and hear him out. My stupid heart is tripping all over itself and swooning with naive dreams of a happily ever after. My head, however, has decided to take over. No more life-altering decisions will be delegated to my heart. She’s put us through enough pain.

“I don’t want to hear it right now,” I snap at him. Maybe Remington has an amazing excuse. Or maybe he’s a shitty liar, and it took him several days to come up with a whopper big enough to ditch me and Noah. Either way, he hurt me, and I’m not ready to forgive him. I’m not ready to open myself up and let him hurt me again. Once was plenty, thank you very much.

“We’ll talk later, though,” he says, and it’s not really a question.

I give him one terse nod and climb into the car. We’re silent as we back out of the parking lot and head downtown. I glance in the rearview mirror, taking in Noah’s thunderous expression.

“Are we still getting ice cream?” June asks, and I know that she’s trying to lighten the mood.

“Of course!”

I pull my eyes away from Remington and focus on the road as we head to the ice cream shop. The mood is a bit dour, but June does her best to cheer us up as we sit outside and enjoy the warm weather.

“Maybe we could go back to the trampoline park or do ceramics,” June suggests.

“Maybe next time. It’s already getting kind of late,” I tell her.

The truth is that I want to go home and try to process everything I’m feeling. I’m not going to be much fun to hang around when all I can think about is Remington and how he hurt me. Now that I’ve seen him again, I have another intrusive thought. Is he okay? He looked... rough. I mean, he’s Remington, so he’s still annoyingly sexy and handsome, but something was missing. His light was gone. As much as I want to forget about Remington, I can’t get the picture of his sad eyes and hurt features in my rearview mirror out of my mind.

I glance at Noah and see that he’s just as preoccupied with his thoughts as I am.

“Why did he come to find us?” Noah asks. I swallow hard, the sweet taste of the ice cream souring on my tongue.

Noah still looks mad, but I can hear the tinge of hope in his voice. He didn’t know Remington for very long, but he was starting to grow attached to him, to let his guard down around him. Just like me.

“I don’t know,” I tell him quietly, wrapping my arm around his shoulders.

He’s quiet and tense, and I remove my arm from around him, letting him have his own space.

“Why don’t I take you guys home? We can try the ceramics place or the trampoline park in a few days,” I tell them.

They nod, and I drive them home in silence.

“See you later,” June tells me, giving me a quick hug.

“Let me know if you need anything before I see you next.”

She smiles and hurries to catch up to Noah.

“Want to come over to my house for a bit?” she asks him, and I watch as they head inside.

I wait until I know they’re safely inside her apartment before I drive off and head home. Scarlett should be at work, and Emilia is probably hanging out with Rex and Spencer so I should have the whole house to myself.

I park out front and head inside, letting out a sigh as I look around. I’m not sure what to do now. Take a shower or a bath and try to think things through? Or maybe I should get some work done and ignore all of my confusing thoughts about what’s going on with Remington.

“Hey! I was wondering if you were going to be home,” Emilia says as she comes in right behind me.

“Hey, is Spencer with you?” I ask, looking around for her little brother.

“No, he’s with Rex. They’re going on some overnight camping trip, so I thought I’d stop by,” she tells me.

“Sounds like fun.”

“I hope so. Rex is trying to bond more with Spencer. I need to finish up some paperwork for school.”

“Are you going to start during the summer semester?” I ask her.

Emilia dropped out of college to take care of Spencer when their mother ran off. She came into some money when her father passed away a few months ago, and now that she and Rex are engaged, she can finally go back to college to get her degree.

Scarlett and I are so happy for her. Emilia is such a sweet, strong person. She balanced work, bills, and taking care of Spencer and all of his medical appointments without complaint. No one deserves to get everything she wants out of life more than her.

“I’m thinking about it. It will depend on how quickly I can get everything together. The fall semester might be better since

Spencer would be in school all day too. What about you? What's new with you?" she asks as we head into the kitchen.

"Not much. I just got done hanging out with June and Noah."

"Yeah? How was that? Was your new man there?" she asks with a knowing smile.

"Um... no," I tell her.

Her smile fades, and she looks concerned.

"Is everything okay? Scarlett told me that you two were cute together."

"We went out a few times," I hedge.

"And?"

"And we slept together."

"Yay! Wait... was it terrible?" she asks.

"No, it was amazing."

"Then yay!"

"And then he ghosted me."

"He what?!" she shouts.

"He ghosted me. No calls, no texts, no smoke signals, or messages by carrier pigeon or anything. Then he showed up today like it was nothing."

"What was his reasoning? Did he lose or break his phone or something? Get arrested? Because Rex has the Mayson's phone number, we could always check his story out and see if their dad arrested him."

"No, I didn't give him a chance to explain. Why would I? It wasn't just me he hurt. Remington up and abandoned Noah too. When the asshole showed up, Noah was pissed. He asked to leave, and I was all too happy to oblige."

"Hmm," Emilia says, leaning against the kitchen counter.

"What?" I ask after she doesn't say anything for a solid minute. I don't like her tone. I have a feeling she's going to tell

me something I don't want to hear but need to hear anyway.

"I think it's worth at least giving him a chance to explain. He might have a good reason for disappearing."

I roll my eyes, taking a page from Noah's book of favorite facial expressions. "And if he doesn't?" I ask her.

"Well, then at least you'll know."

I scoff, not liking that prospect. Still, my friend has a point.

Maybe she's right. Not knowing is already driving me crazy. What could his reason possibly be? More importantly, is there any reason that makes this okay?

"I know it's hard to open up and let someone get close to you," my friend says softly. I shrug, looking away. "But part of being in a relationship is giving each other the benefit of the doubt. How do you know he's a terrible person if you haven't given him a chance to redeem himself?" I shrug again, not saying anything. "From what Scarlett told me, your man is completely gone over you."

Part of me knows she's right. Remington is not going to just let this go. He's never taken no for an answer from me. I doubt that this time is going to be any different. Which is confusing as hell because didn't *he* cease contact with *me*? I'm just taking the hint and reciprocating. Fair is fair.

Right?

My stomach clenches, and I wonder if I made a smart choice by blocking him and refusing to hear him out at the park, or if maybe it was the worst decision of my life.

"Come on, we can hang out tonight and talk through it," she says, wrapping me up in a hug. "Then you can go and hear him out. And if he has a shitty excuse, then you can come back here, and we'll get drunk and shit-talk him until you're feeling better."

I smile, squeezing her back. I know then that no matter what, as long as I have Emilia and Scarlett, I'm going to be just fine.

TEN

Remington

I SHOULD PROBABLY GIVE Lucy some more time to calm down before I try to talk to her again, but I can't wait any longer. I went to the store and picked up a few things to aid in my mission of winning Lucy and Noah back, but I might die if I don't talk to my girl again today. Time isn't on my side. I already went days without talking to her, days of letting her think I don't care.

It's not a want anymore; it's a need. I *need* to talk to her and explain what happened. Ten thousand apologies won't be enough, but if I can start right now, I can get a few hundred in before the end of the day.

Then I can get back to making her mine forever and ensuring I never disappoint her again.

I park behind Lucy's Jeep and pause, taking a few deep breaths before I get tongue-tied again. God, seeing the betrayal in her blue eyes hurt like a motherfucker. It's my fault. I'm the reason she's hurt. I promised her she could trust me, that I wouldn't let her down. And then I went and fucked everything up.

Not just with Lucy, either. I have a lot of making up to do with Noah, as well.

No time like the present to try and fix everything I messed up.

Gathering up all of my courage, I hop out, grabbing the flowers I bought for my girl before I stride over to the front door. I knock, waiting impatiently until I see her shadow coming to answer it.

She comes into view and freezes when she sees me standing on the other side of the door. Her silhouette is a bit blurry through the glass door, but everything in me aches when I see her. I want to fold her up in my arms and carry her away to somewhere private where we can talk and then make love for hours.

I don't think that day is going to be today, however.

I give Lucy a hesitant smile, and she crosses her arms over her chest. It's obvious my girl isn't happy to see me. She's not ready to talk, and I have a feeling that I should leave the flowers and back away like she's a wild animal. Instead, I press on.

"Just hear me out," I call through the door. She hasn't taken another step toward me and makes no move to open the door or move closer to me. I take a deep breath and continue. "Lucy, please. Just give me a chance. Just a few minutes to explain," I plead, and she shakes her head.

"I don't want to see you right now," she calls back.

I try to focus on the *right now* part of that sentence. At least she's starting to seem to warm up to me. She's not telling me she never wants to see me again, just not right now.

"I'll try again tomorrow," I call through the door. "I'm so sorry you're hurting, baby. I hate that I put you through any pain." No response, but I wasn't expecting one. "I'm not giving up on you," I tell her, setting the flowers down on the porch.

I hear the softest whisper from the other side of the door. "You already did."

Fuck me that hurts. I stumble a bit before regaining my balance. I did more damage than I thought, but I'm no less determined to win her back.

I trudge over to my truck and climb behind the wheel, glancing over at the three bags of Doritos that I bought at the store with the flowers. I swung out at the first house, talking to Lucy. Here's hoping that my talk with Noah goes at least a little bit better.

Noah is sitting outside on the front porch steps of his apartment building when I pull up. He's looking pissed; his jaw clenched tight as he stares down at his old shoes.

"Noah," I say as I park and climb out.

He glances up at me, and that's when I notice the black eye.

"What the hell happened?" I ask, rushing over to his side.

Anger and concern fill me as I take in the red and purple circling his right eye. It looks fresh, and I whip my head around to see if anyone is nearby.

"Who hit you?" I growl.

"What do you care?" he spits at me.

I sigh, dropping the bags of Doritos by his feet as I take a seat next to him. Tensing and releasing my fists, I try to calm the fuck down enough to talk with Noah. Clearly, someone is going to have to answer for abusing this kid, but right now, I have to get him to be comfortable around me again. He needs a safe place, and I know I can provide that for him; if only he'd let me.

Please, please let him trust me; I pray to anyone who will listen.

"I came here to apologize to you and explain where I was the last few days. I'm so sorry I didn't call or let you know. I lost track of time."

"For days?" he asks sarcastically. I nod. I get it. It sounds like a lame excuse. At least he's not running away or shutting me out like Lucy did.

"Yeah. I got a call on Tuesday from an old Navy buddy of mine. We went through boot camp together and were deployed

a few times together. He's supposed to be getting out soon, and he's really the only friend or family I have left," I start.

He shifts away from me, glaring out across the street.

"He was injured. He was in the hospital, and I caught the next available flight to see him. I was in such a rush I left my damn phone in my truck. I was worried, scared," I admit, and he glances at me. "He sounded rough on the phone, and all I was thinking about was getting to him. I've had a lot of loss in my life, and I couldn't stand the thought of one more person leaving me."

He shifts again, this time not closer or further away from me, and hope starts to blossom. I know I hit on a sensitive topic when I said I was scared to be left behind.

"I got there pretty late Tuesday night and got to see my friend for a few minutes."

"How was he?" Noah asks, turning every so slightly in my direction.

"Kind of out of it. He was on a lot of pain medicine. He lost his leg, from the knee down," I tell him as he scoots a little closer. "I wasn't even thinking about things back here. I left the hospital, found a hotel, and passed out for the night. I..."

Exhaling a deep breath, I rub the back of my neck before continuing.

"I don't really like to talk about it," I admit, "but seeing Romeo like that, well, it reminded me of all the people I've lost to war. All I could see when I closed my eyes were the bodies of the friends I left behind. Romeo was lucky that he just lost his leg, though I doubt he sees it that way right now."

"I'm sorry," Noah says quietly. I peer over at him and shake my head.

"No, *I'm* sorry. I should have called and told you what happened. I should have bought a burner phone and looked up your number. I should have... well, I should have done anything except for what I did. I haven't had to think about other people for...well, maybe I never have. The important

thing is that I have people to look after and care for now, and I promise to do better.”

“I get it,” Noah says. I reach out, squeezing his shoulder.

“I really am sorry for not reaching out sooner. I was busy fighting the demons in my head, but I swear I’m going to make it up to you. I won’t be another adult who lets you down.”

He nods, seeming to relax with me more, and I’m grateful that he’s willing to forgive me.

“No one has ever come back,” Noah whispers. I have to strain to hear him.

“What?”

“The other Big Brothers. They leave and never come back. You came back,” he explains.

Jesus, this kid.

“I’ll always be here for you. No coming back since I won’t be leaving.” Noah finally gives me a hint of a smile. “Now, who am I fucking up for punching you in the eye?” I ask him, and he tries to fight back a bigger smile.

“My mom is home... with her new boyfriend,” he says.

“Ah, and that’s why we’re outside?”

“Yeah, he told me to get lost, but it’s getting late. There’s nowhere else to go, and June is gone with her mom somewhere. I told him that, and he didn’t like it.”

“So, he hit you?” I snarl.

“Yep.”

He sounds so used to this type of behavior that it breaks my heart. There’s so much pain here, so many raw emotions and horrible memories. So much like my childhood. I’m determined to give Noah the safety and love I never had growing up. I don’t know how the logistics work; I just know this kid isn’t going to spend another night under the same roof as his abuser.

“What did your mom do?” I ask him, trying to rein in the fury that I’m feeling.

“What she always does. Nothing. She pretends like I’m invisible.”

My hands tighten into fists, and I grind my teeth together so hard that I’m surprised none of my teeth crack. I know that feeling all too well. If I had been here with Noah, maybe I would have noticed something before the situation escalated the way it did. I can’t think like that, however. I can’t change the past, and even though I handled everything wrong, I don’t regret being there for Romeo in his time of need.

With my mind made up, I pop my jaw and push to my feet.

“Let’s go pack a bag. You can stay with me until I have a talk with your mom and straighten a few things out.”

He stares up at me, weighing his options, and I start to head inside.

“They’re still in there,” Noah says softly, and I stare down at him.

“I can take them,” I say with a wink.

He smiles at that, nodding, and I return his grin when he pushes to his feet and follows after me. The front door is unlocked, and I stride inside, heading right for Noah’s room.

“Who the fuck are you?” a woman that I’m assuming is Noah’s mom screeches at me.

I ignore her, making sure that Noah is safely in his room before I turn to glare at her. By now, the boyfriend has lumbered out of the bedroom, stumbling around in nothing more than a pair of stained boxers and a silk robe that looks like it belongs to his girlfriend. Class act.

“What are you on about now?” he yells at Noah’s mom.

She points at me, and I glare at him, giving him a warning look to not fuck with me. I’ve got a few inches on the man and about fifty pounds of muscle, not to mention years of experience fighting in my favor. This bozo looks like he’s

already had several drinks. Even if he was able to physically overpower me, he's a sloppy drunk.

I look over my shoulder at Noah, glad to see he's busy stuffing some of his things into his backpack. I stand guard so that he doesn't have to be afraid of his mom or her boyfriend.

"What are you doing here?" the man yells at me, deciding to challenge me after all.

"I'm here to make sure that Noah is safe. Are you the one who hit him?" I snarl, stepping toward the man. Fury ripples throughout my body, making my muscles tense and flex as I think about sinking my fist into this fucker's nose.

He sways on his feet, and I can see him trying to decide if he should fight or run for the hills. He glances over at Noah's mom and must decide that she's not worth it. "Whatever. Useless trash," he snorts. "Come get me when dinner is ready," he shouts to his girlfriend before stumbling back into the bedroom.

Noah's mom glares at him, then turns her attention to me. I can see the track marks on her arms and notice her sunken eyes. She's jittery and sickly thin, and while I know the addiction isn't her fault, it's her responsibility to fight it and to keep her son out of harm's way.

"You want that little punk?" she shouts, waving her arm toward Noah's bedroom. "Take him! You think I care? He's nothing but a brat. Always wanting something."

"Yeah, like food," Noah grumbles, and I laugh.

"He's your problem. Now both of you get the fuck out of my house."

"Gladly," Noah yells at her, and I put my hand on his shoulder, protecting him as we head back outside. He's shaking slightly, but his little head is held high. I'm so damn proud of him.

His mom follows us out onto the front porch steps and continues yelling at us as we climb into my truck. We both tune her out, which is surprisingly easy. I think Noah and I

both have filters for screeching drug addicts. One of the benefits of growing up the way we did, I guess.

“Anything else you want from inside?” I ask him, and he shakes his head.

“It’s all junk.”

“Anything else you want to say to her?”

“Nope.”

I nod, smiling slightly as I back out and head toward my mom’s old place. I know I need to call Sheriff Mayson and report what happened. I’m sure that this is child abuse, not to mention everything else that Noah could tell them about living with his mom in that apartment.

Right now, though, I just want to get Noah settled and put some ice on his eye. Then we can make a plan for going forward.

One that includes making sure that Noah is safe and happy and one that involves making Lucy mine again. I want this little family with my whole being, and I won’t stop until everyone is together again.

ELEVEN

Lucy

I CAN'T LOCK *myself away forever*; I tell my reflection in the mirror.

It's Saturday, which means it's been a whole week since I've seen Remington. Completely unrelated, it's also the same amount of time I've been inside my house.

Fine. It's totally related. Every freaking time I opened the door, Remington had dropped off another gift, more flowers, or a mountain of candy. I've been piling everything on my dresser, aside from a few Sour Skittles that happened to fall out of the bag and into my mouth. I'm not sure what to do with everything yet. I don't want to toss it, which has to mean something.

Maybe it means I'm a stupid sap.

I replay the conversation Emelia and I had over margaritas as I sweep my hair up into a messy bun. We decided that I should hear him out and go from there when I esd ready. The problem now is that I'm not sure when I'll ever be ready to face him again.

I wanted to wait until he didn't have this strange hold over me anymore. Every time I so much as think about him, my heart starts to race. Remington still has this sway over me, and I need to figure out how to stop that before I can discuss things

with him. I don't want my reaction to influence what happens between us.

So, naturally, I've been avoiding Remington like the plague. I've gotten a ton of work done this past week, but I'm starting to get a little stir-crazy. Plus, I have to pick up June today for our session, which means that I need to walk past Remington to get to my car.

No time like the present, I think to myself as I gather up my things. Taking a deep breath, I open the door and walk out onto the porch, ready as I'm ever going to be.

"Lucy," Remington says, jumping to his feet.

I'm not surprised he's waiting out here for me. I *am* surprised at the way my body floods with warmth. *Stupid, stupid body*, I scold myself.

"I don't want to talk to you," I tell him as I hurry down the steps and over to my Jeep.

"I just need a minute," he tells me, and I can feel the butterflies taking flight in my stomach at the sound of his voice. *Dammit, woman!* This is why I stayed inside all week.

"I don't have time."

"We could ride together to get the kids," he tells me. "June's mom is bringing Noah for me."

I pause at his words, wondering how he knows that. He must have talked to Noah, and if he's meeting him today, then Noah must have forgiven him.

That has to be a good sign, then.

Right?

"No, thank you," I tell him.

He watches as I slide behind the wheel and start my car. I refuse to look at him. Logically, I know that I'm only going to be buying myself about ten minutes since he'll be right behind me. I plan on using my time to try to build my walls back up.

My thoughts are racing as I drive through downtown, and my heart is beating out of control. He left me. Abandoned me

right after we slept together. He knew it was my first time being with anyone, yet he still left me high and dry.

If I'm being honest with myself, those big, nasty emotions aren't as dominant anymore. I want to cling to them to justify my bitterness and reinforce the boundaries I've always had around my heart but with each passing day...

Gah. I don't even want to think it but the idea is already in my brain. With each passing day, my heart grows heavier and heavier. I miss Remington. I've grown used to having him in my life, and I miss getting his texts throughout the day. I miss him dropping by to try to convince me to go out to dinner with him or just humor him. I miss the way he held me and the sweet things he whispered. I miss feeling safe in his arms.

Dammit, dammit, dammit! I curse at myself as I turn into the Big Brothers Big Sisters parking lot. So much for using the drive over to build up my defenses. I'm tired of fighting, but I don't know if I can trust Remington again. I don't know if I can trust *myself*.

Parking the car, I paste a smile on my face when I see June and Noah waiting outside.

"Hey, guys!" I call as I hop out. Maybe I can grab June and bolt before Remi gets here.

"Lucy!" June says excitedly.

"Did you talk to Remington yet?" Noah asks me.

"Um, no, not yet," I admit.

"You should," he says. I frown when I notice that his eye looks a little bruised.

"What happened to you?" I ask him, cupping his cheek in my hand. I already have an idea, and my heart breaks even more for him. Can life just leave him alone for a bit? He's got enough to deal with.

"My mom's boyfriend," Noah says with a shrug. My stomach twists into a knot of white-hot rage. Noah must pick up on the tension. He pats my hand and smiles at me. "It's okay, though. I've been staying with Remington for the last

few days. He's working on getting me to stay with him permanently," Noah tells me.

I blinked a few times, not sure I understood him. "Does your eye hurt? Should we get you some ice?" I ask instead of diving into why he's been staying with Remington. I wave at June's mom before she jogs back to her car.

"No, it's fine. Remington has been taking care of me. It doesn't even hurt even more," he assures me.

"Good." I look him over again, checking for any more marks or bruises. June has her hand locked in his, and I smile at the two of them.

"You should hear Remington out," Noah continues, shrugging off my concern. "He came to talk to me and apologized last week. He—" Noah starts when Remington pulls up next to us.

We all watch as he turns his truck off and climbs out.

"He's really sorry, and he has a good reason," Noah tells me, and I nod.

"Lucy," Remi starts and I sigh.

"Yeah, let's get this over with. Kids, why don't you go inside and finish getting checked in? We'll be in to sign you out in just a second."

They nod and I watch them walk inside before I turn back to Remi.

"You have one minute," I tell him, and he nods, taking a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I should have told you that I was heading out of town and checked in while I was gone. It all just came up so suddenly, and then I forgot my phone, and..."

"So why did you go out of town? I take it this wasn't a planned trip?"

"I got a call on Tuesday that a good friend of mine had been hurt and was in the VA hospital in Virginia. I flew out and didn't realize I left my phone in my truck until it was too

late. When I got there, I just... I was with Romeo, reliving my own shit while taking care of him, and then at night, I was alone and bombarded with all of these terrible memories and nightmares.”

Remi tugs at his dark hair, and I can feel the frustration, the tension rippling off of him. I swallow hard. I want to comfort him, but I hold myself back. I need more of an explanation, even if my heart knows we’re going to forgive him.

“Is he okay?” I whisper.

Remington nods, his forest-green eyes latching onto mine. He looks absolutely miserable and yet grateful that I’m listening to him. “Romeo lost part of his leg and is a little banged up, but he’ll be okay. The hardest part wasn’t seeing his injuries; it was having him tell me what happened.” He stares off to the side, his brow furrowing before he shakes his head. “I started having these flashbacks to my time overseas,” he murmurs. “I started remembering everyone I ever lost. I saw their faces. Heard their screams.”

“Remi,” I start, and he clears his throat.

“It was all so sudden,” he says in a stronger voice. How many times has Remington had to “toughen up”? How many times has he had to swallow back tears and press forward? “I swear, I didn’t forget you,” he continues. “I wasn’t ghosting you. I was just focused on Romeo and on trying to fight off those memories. When I finally flew home and found my phone in the truck, I charged it and got all of the messages. I fucked up, Lucy. I’m so sorry.”

I’m not sure what to say back. “Remi, I... I should have listened to you when you first asked me,” I say softly, not trusting my voice at the moment. “I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. That first day, I did. I knew you were busy with your mom’s house, and I didn’t want to be clingy. But when you upset Noah, I...”

“I know,” he says, gently taking my hand in his. “I messed up with Noah, too. I felt terrible. Still do. I’m not used to having people I care about, people I need to update and plan a

life with. I took off when my friend needed me, but I should have communicated with you about it. Especially after everything we shared.”

I look down at our entwined hands, trying to breathe through the thousands of thoughts fighting for my attention. “After knowing everything you’ve been through, it feels stupid and shallow to be upset that you left the day after we... well, you know,” I mumble.

Remi takes a step closer, one hand cupping my cheek while the other lightly rests on my hip. “Nothing about you is stupid or shallow,” he whispers. “I loved every moment with you. It kills me to know I broke your trust after such an important, life-changing event. I know you don’t give your heart easily, or at all, and I screwed up the second I had you all to myself.”

“Well, the first thousand seconds were pretty good,” I tease. Remington’s green eyes flash with hope and god, he’s just so damn beautiful it’s not fair.

“If you give me a chance, I can do better than *pretty good*,” he says with a smirk. Remi’s eyes turn somber, his thumb brushing against my cheekbone as he holds me so tenderly. “Lucy, can you ever forgive me for breaking your trust? Can you forgive me for not communicating? I’d never abandon you, sweet girl. I’d never just disappear on you.”

The tears I had been holding back rush to the surface, falling down my face before I can stop them.

“Don’t cry,” Remi urges, his eyes wide with panic. “I’m fucking this all up,” he mutters to himself. “Lucy, I—”

I cover his mouth with my hand, giggling when his eyes grow comically wide.

“I forgive you,” I tell him, watching the way his features turn from shocked to overjoyed.

“You forgive me?” he mumbles against my hand.

I nod, then lean up on my tiptoes, my hand still covering his mouth. Our lips are inches apart, and his dark green eyes lock onto mine.

“I forgive you,” I whisper.

Remi loops his fingers around my wrist and pulls my hand away, crushing his mouth down on mine. He parts my lips with his tongue, making me moan as he deepens the kiss. Remington wraps his arms around my waist, walking us backward until I’m leaning against his truck.

I curl my arms around his neck, needing more of his kiss, more of his taste, more of his scent. Remi swallows down my desperate cry, muffling the sound and pulling my body closer to his. I can feel the tight muscles he has packed into his chest and stomach. Coupled with the way his strong arms are holding me tightly, I nearly whimper again as I melt into his embrace.

Remi tears his mouth from mine, only to continue undoing me with light, teasing kisses down my neck. “Remi,” I whisper, barely getting the word out before his lips find mine once more. He groans, the vibrations rattling through his body and into mine. His rough hands roam up and down my curves, leaving a trail of goosebumps as they go.

When we finally break apart for air, Remi rubs his nose against mine. “I missed you so damn much,” he whispers, brushing his lips against mine.

I nod, nibbling at his bottom lip. “I missed you too.”

A throat clears behind us, and we both jump, turning to see Sharon standing there, fighting back a smirk.

“Are you two taking June and Noah out today?” she asks, and I nod, my cheeks flushing bright red.

“Yep!” I say a little too shrilly.

“Let’s go,” Remington says as he takes my hand in his and leads me inside.

“I promised them ceramics and the trampoline park this week,” I tell him, and he grins.

“Can’t wait.”

TWELVE

Remington

NOAH YAWNS in the backseat as we drive down the dark roads toward Lucy's house. We're supposed to be having a movie night with her roommates. I'm just happy to be near my woman, no matter what we're doing.

We spent the first part of the day with the kids. We went to paint ceramics first and then grabbed some lunch before we went to the trampoline park. We had to drop June off at home, and now we're headed over to Lucy's.

"There's going to be pizza, and we usually get snacks and stuff," Lucy tells Noah.

He nods, looking tired but happy. He's been looking happy a lot more lately. His mom hasn't come looking for him at all, and I was worried that he would be upset by that, but he hasn't. Maybe deep down it was what he expected her to do. Good fucking riddance. She didn't deserve to have him in her life, and I'm determined to make up for the shitty way she treated her son his whole life.

I've got Noah all settled at my mom's house, although that will be temporary since I've almost got it completely cleaned out. I need to contact a realtor this week to get the listing process started. I should probably ask about other properties that are available in town while I'm at it. I'm thinking of a four-bedroom home to start, but we may need to expand to six or eight, depending on how many kids my girl wants.

One more thing to add to the to-do list for getting my life and priorities back in line. I already met up with Asher for a coffee yesterday and asked him to bring his dad. I ended up telling him everything that happened with Noah, with Noah's permission, of course.

I wanted to get my side of the story out there before I was arrested for kidnapping or something. Even if Noah's mom said she didn't want him in the heat of the moment, it wouldn't surprise me if she changed her mind and wanted to try and use him as a bargaining chip to get something from me.

I'm supposed to be bringing Noah into the station to talk to Sheriff Mayson tomorrow, and hopefully, we can get him removed from his mother's care permanently. I think that her not reporting him missing or looking for him is going to be a big strike against her.

Lucy threads her fingers through mine, squeezing lightly to bring me back to the present moment. I look over at her, smiling at my precious, gorgeous girl. It's like she knew I was starting to spiral about Noah's mom and gently calmed me down with nothing more than a simple touch.

I pull into the driveway of Lucy's house and park behind her car. We had dropped it off before going to the ceramics studio. I insisted. I had been missing her all week, and I didn't want to waste any more time that we could be spending together.

There's a boy who looks to be about a year or two older than Noah out on the front porch, and he waves as we climb out of the truck.

"That's Spencer. I think he's in the grade above you at school," Lucy tells him as we head his way.

"Yeah, I think I've seen him around. He seems nice," Noah says.

He seems excited to be making a new friend, and I remember how alone I was when I was his age. I couldn't ever invite friends over to my house. Not when I wasn't sure what mood or condition my mother would be in. Plus, there was

rarely any food in the house, and I definitely never had any electronics or gaming systems. What would we have done? I'm guessing it's the same for Noah. June is probably his only friend. I'm glad he's had at least one person in his corner. Now he has me as well. I'll always have his back.

We head inside, and I see that everyone is lounging around the living room.

"Pizza is in the kitchen!" Scarlett calls, and I wave at her before I follow Noah and June into the kitchen.

We pile our plates high with pizza and breadsticks before we make our way back to the living room. Noah takes a seat on the floor next to Spencer, and the two introduce themselves and start talking like old friends.

Lucy and I head over to the other side of the room and take a seat leaning against the loveseat. Our knees brush and tingles race up my spine.

God, I love this woman.

"Oh, right. Emilia, Rex, and Nash, this is Remington. Remi, this is my other roommate, Emilia, her boyfriend, Rex, and Scarlett's boyfriend, Nash. And you already met Scarlett."

"It's nice to meet you guys. And to see you again," I tell Scarlett.

"You too. Glad you two were able to work things out," Emilia says, and I see Lucy shoot her a look.

"Aw, you were talking about me?" I whisper to Lucy.

"It was hard not to. I had to explain who the strange man was on our porch all week," she quips back, and I laugh.

"What are we watching?" Lucy asks her friends.

"We're thinking about Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse," Emilia tells her.

"Yay!" Noah and Spencer shout.

Scarlett cues up the movie, and everyone digs into their meal. I look over at Lucy, who is already smiling at me. I know we're thinking the same thing. *This is perfect.*

An hour and a half later, Noah and Spencer are asleep in the blanket fort they made after they finished their pizza. Scarlett and Nash skipped out a little bit ago, and I have a feeling Emilia and Rex want to do the same.

“We can watch the kids tonight,” I tell Rex, nodding at Spencer snoring soundly next to Noah.

“Are you sure?” Emilia asks, leaning over Rex.

“Yeah,” Lucy says, smiling at her friend. “You can return the favor sometime.” She winks at Emilia, who rolls her eyes.

We wish our friends a good evening, then look at each other once they’ve pulled out of the driveway.

“I thought we’d never be alone again,” Lucy says with a dramatic sigh.

I grin and scoop her up, kissing away her surprised sounds. “I think Noah and Spencer are down for the count, but we should try to be quiet, just in case.”

“Oh? And what kind of activity were you thinking about participating in?” She raises an eyebrow at me, giving me a sassy little smirk.

“The naked kind,” I nearly growl as I take the stairs two at a time with my Lucy in my arms.

I head straight to Lucy’s room, setting her down and closing the door behind us. As soon as the door clicks shut, I press her back against the wall with the weight of my body and slam my mouth over hers, thrusting my tongue in between her lips so I can finally have another taste. She moans softly for me and then more urgently as I tangle my fingers in her long hair and angle her head to deepen the kiss. A sharp thread of desire slices through me when I feel her teeth sink into my bottom lip.

“God, Lucy,” I groan, kissing down her neck and nipping at her pulse point.

Her deft little fingers are already working on my shirt, which is soon discarded on the floor behind me. Then she attacks my belt, followed by the button and zipper of my

pants. She shoves her hand into my boxer briefs and pulls out my angry cock, giving it a rough stroke that nearly brings me to my knees.

I cage her in with one of my hands on the wall behind her on either side of her head as she pumps my massive erection with both of her hands. I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate on the way the soft skin of her hands glides up and down my shaft, teasing me with each stroke. I thrust my hips and shove my dick deeper into her hands. Again and again, we work together to jerk me off. I should probably be upset that I'm going to come so soon, but I know I'll be hard for her all fucking night, no matter what.

My balls draw up tight as she swirls the pad of her thumb over the tip of my cock while her other hand squeezes the base. The fucker jumps in her hands and swells up, almost ready to go off...

And then she's not touching me.

My eyes snap open, and I look down to see Lucy on her knees for me, tugging my pants and boxer briefs all the way down so they pool at my ankles.

"Jesus," I grunt, unable to stop the first spurts of cum from leaking out of me.

Lucy licks the drops off of the tip of my dick, massaging the little slit there and making my knees shake. I watch in awe as her pink tongue darts out of her mouth and tickles the underside of my cock from tip to base. I ball my hands into fists on the wall and hold on to my release as long as I can.

She licks me up and down and then presses a kiss to my balls, making me growl. Lucy pulls back and stares up at me, her blue irises practically swallowed whole by her dilated pupils.

"Fuck. You like that?"

She nods enthusiastically and bites her bottom lip.

"Show me, baby," I grunt, barely hanging on.

Her nostrils flare, and her eyes go wide with the challenge. Goddamn, what that does to me. Lucy unhinges her jaw and takes me into her hot, wet, little mouth, sucking me down with the same frenzied need I feel building deep inside me.

She sets a relentless pace, bobbing her head up and down my thick dick, taking more of me with each downward stroke. I pound my balled-up fist on the wall when she swirls her tongue over a particularly sensitive vein. The little siren does it again and again, making me shake with the need for release.

I slide one hand down the wall and grip her hair, holding her head in place. My hips snap as I shove my cock down her throat, stretching her pouty pink lips around my girth. Her nails rake down the back of my thighs, and I almost collapse from the sudden urgent need to come.

Lucy whimpers and digs her nails into my ass, holding me against her as I fight off the urge to fall over the edge into bliss.

I rip her off my painfully hard cock and pull her up toward me, tilting her head back with the hand I still have in her hair. My lips claim hers in a wild kiss. She's wet and sloppy, and I love it. I crave it.

I growl and nip at her lips, chin, and neck, then rest my forehead on hers, panting for air. Lucy looks all disheveled, her hair sticking out, her cheeks stained red, and her lips swollen. She closes her eyes and leans back against the wall while I just stare at her.

One word echoes in my head, beats in my heart, and swims in my veins.

More. More. More.

I strip out of what little clothes I have left and then practically tear Lucy's clothes off of her.

"Hey!" she whisper-shouts and then giggles. "Be careful!"

I kiss her neck, needing my lips to be on some part of her body right this second. "I'll buy you a whole new wardrobe," I grunt, biting and kissing her again.

She gasps when I lift her up into my arms, her legs automatically wrapping around my waist as I carry her over to the bed.

Lucy tilts her head back down and kisses me with such fire and fury I think we might just burn this whole room down. Her pussy grinds down against my abs, which instinctively flex as she rubs her juices into my skin. My dick is rock hard, and Jesus, I really don't think I'm going to make it the two steps to the bed.

I lift Lucy up and reposition my hips slightly before sinking into that tight, perfect little pussy.

“Oh my god! Remi—”

I cut her off with a kiss, needing to taste her while I fuck her mid-air. My hands wrap around her thighs as I lift and drop her body on my cock again and again.

“Just gotta take the edge off, Lucy. Just a little longer,” I grunt.

She whimpers and buries her face into the side of my neck, rocking her hips in rhythm with my thrusts. I feel her tighten around me, her cunt soaking me and pulling me deeper inside of her. Right before she reaches her climax, I toss her down on the bed and climb on top of her, entering that tight little hole in one hard thrust.

“Remington!” she moans, her back bowing off the bed.

I hold myself up on one forearm, pressed against the mattress beside her head. My other hand slides down the dips and curves of her body, squeezing her breast, massaging the swell of her hip, and finally gripping her ass and angling her hips so that my rough strokes hit her g-spot every time.

“Shh, baby. Gotta be quiet,” I remind her, chuckling darkly when she pouts.

I lick the sweat from between those beautiful tits of hers and then suck on her nipples until Lucy comes so perfectly for me, trembling and gasping my name over and over. She's still writhing beneath me as I roll us over and flip our positions, my dick still deep inside her pussy.

“Beautiful. Mine,” I whisper to myself. Just seeing her like this has me on edge.

She pushes herself up on shaky arms and tosses her head back as she groans and adjusts to our new position. Her hips move slightly to the side, which makes her pussy flutter and suck me in. Lucy gasps and does it again, completely unaware of the exquisite torture she’s putting me through.

Then she opens her eyes and looks down at me. I swear to Christ, I’ve never seen anything as sexy as the way Lucy is looking at me right now. Like she wants to bounce on my dick till it breaks, I’d like to see her try.

“Ride me, Lucy. And tell me how much you love it,” I growl before smacking her ass.

Her eyes grow dark as she lifts herself up on her knees slowly, so slowly, dragging her quivering pussy up my shaft one agonizing inch at a time. When just the tip is inside of her, she flashes me a devious smirk and then drops down on me, swiveling her hips and grinding into the base of my cock. I choke down a roar as her nails tear into my skin, bucking my hips up to meet her thrust for thrust.

“Rem... Remington, you feel so good,” she rasps. “You’re so deep like this. I love it. I love your cock.”

“Damn, Lucy,” I grunt, flexing my hips as she continues to ride me. “So good for me, baby.”

She lets out a throaty moan that has me ready to come right this second. Then, Lucy sits up and grabs her tits, squeezing them hard. Jesus, I feel her pussy walls contract each time she pinches her berry-pink nipples.

This goddess rolls her body and kneads her breasts, giving me the hottest show of my goddamn life. I hold her hips in place and fuck up into her so hard she falls forward onto my chest, catching herself with a hand on either side of my head. Those delicious tits are dangling in front of me, so I take the opportunity to suck on them while gripping her ass, continuing my hard thrusts into her tight, hot cunt.

Lucy lets out these soft, sexy as fuck whimpers each time I hit the end of her. I feel her muscles tighten, her skin dripping with sweat, and her entire body shaking with the effort of holding back her orgasm.

“Don’t come yet, baby,” I whisper into the side of her neck before kissing her there.

“Please, I need to...” she moans.

I spank her, making us both cry out with the sensation. Another swift smack to the ass has her pussy pulsing around me, almost setting me off.

“Not yet,” I warn.

“Oh god, oh my god, please, please, fuck, please...”

I thrust into her, holding her in place and spearing her with my cock. I can feel my own orgasm crawling down my spine with each stroke. Lucy gasps for air, her eyes shining with tears as she pushes her climax back, fighting off every instinct in her tight little body. It’s so fucking beautiful the way she’s controlling herself for me.

I lift her all the way off me and then slam her down one last time. “Come for me, Lucy. Let go of everything and come,” I grit out.

She moans out her release as her arms give out. Lucy rests her forehead on mine, muffling her cries of pleasure while I hold her tightly against me, my ridged cock buried to the hilt. I can fucking feel the wild throbbing of her orgasm traveling along the length of my shaft, and I swear I nearly pass out.

I empty myself inside of her as Lucy keeps coming around me, our joined climax wringing out every ounce of pleasure from both of our bodies. She holds her breath as deep spasms tremor through her muscles again and again, milking me completely dry.

I kiss her softly as each shudder passes through her, pressing my lips to her chin, her cheek, her nose, and her forehead.

Lucy rolls onto her back next to me, her heavy breaths mixing with mine as we come down from our high.

THIRTEEN

Lucy

“SO, I WAS THINKING...” Remington starts as soon as I’ve caught my breath.

“Oh, god,” I groan, and he laughs.

“It’s a good idea. I promise,” he assures me.

“Uh-huh.”

I roll over onto my side, propping my head up on my hand, and Remington does the same. The sheet pools down at his waist, and my eyes stray to his chest, my mouth watering at the sight of all of his bare skin on display. His muscles shift, bunching and retracting as he moves closer to me.

I reach out, running my hands over his pecs, and I can feel his heart racing underneath my palm. I glance up at him, wondering why he seems so nervous all of a sudden.

“Lucy, I love you,” Remington says, and my stomach drops like I’m on a rollercoaster.

“I...” I open my mouth and freeze.

I love him too, I realize.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. I never wanted a girlfriend or anything, but then I saw you.”

“Isn’t this happening a little fast?” I blurt out.

That's the only thought in my head. Sure, I've never felt this way about anyone before either, but... isn't this happening too quickly?

"Aren't we moving too fast?" I ask again, pulling my hand away from his chest.

"No," he says simply, and I roll my eyes.

"You would say that. You're crazy."

"Crazy about you," he retorts, and I laugh.

"You're smooth; I'll give you that."

"I know what I want," Remi says more seriously. "And I want you. I have since I saw you. I don't have anything else in my life figured out. I don't know where I'm going to live after I sell my mom's house. I don't know what I want to do as a career. I don't know anything, but I do know that I want you. I *need* you," he corrects.

My heart is beating out of control, and my tongue is all tied up. This is a pretty big leap of faith. This is me putting my heart into his hands and praying that he doesn't break it.

Do I trust him enough to do that?

"I want you to move in with me," Remington says, and my mouth drops open.

"We've been together for like a week! We can't move in together. That's way too soon!" I argue, and he just smiles.

"Let's try this again," he starts, and I'm reminded of the first time he asked me out. "We're going to be moving in together."

"Remi," I start, and he shakes his head.

"I can't imagine my life without you, and I don't want to. I want to spend every moment I can with the woman I love, and I know that deep down, she wants that too."

I shake my head, but I'm smiling like a loon at him.

"What if we break up?"

"We won't. Ever," he promises me.

“You can’t know that.”

“I do. I’m psychic.”

I laugh and relax against his side.

“I love you, Lucy,” he murmurs, his deep, gravelly voice blanketing me in warmth and safety. “I’m sure about our future. Just trust me, and I promise that everything is going to work out. I’m never going to hurt you or let you down. I promise.”

“I love you, too, Remi,” I whisper, my eyes prickling with unshed tears. “I feel like I’m falling off of a cliff just saying those words out loud, but I know you’ll be right there to catch me.”

“Always,” Remi confirms. “Now, tell me again.”

I cup his cheek, smiling at my ridiculously handsome, sweet, and protective man.

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” I tell him over and over as I pepper kisses all over his cheeks and nose.

Remington rolls over and hops out of bed, taking me by surprise when he lifts me out of bed as well.

“What are you—”

“Shower time!” he announces, carrying me across the hall and into the bathroom.

As soon as he sets me down, Remington turns the water in the shower on, testing the heat level. Water pours out from the rainfall showerhead, and I smile.

“What are you thinking about?” Remington asks from behind me as he grazes his fingers over my shoulders, kissing my pulse point.

“Just imagining all the fun we’re going to have in here,” I say with what I hope is a seductive smile. Remington groans, kissing my neck again and nipping the tender flesh.

He helps me into the shower and positions me right under the stream of warm water. Remington’s fingertips follow the streams of water as they pour over my shoulders, breasts, hips,

and finally, my throbbing pussy. I moan as his knuckles barely graze my mound before continuing down my inner thighs.

Remington's other hand wraps around the back of my neck, pulling me in for a punishing kiss. I open up for him, needing to taste, touch, and feel him everywhere. He tugs my hair, pulling my head back so he can deepen the kiss. I feel two fingers dip into my slit and start circling my little bundle of nerves in slow, steady strokes.

I grip his biceps, digging my nails in as one finger pushes into my entrance, then two. Remington thrusts his large digits in and out of me, slowly at first, and then faster, faster, faster, grinding his heel down on my clit, all while devouring my lips.

Breaking the kiss, I bury my face between his neck and shoulder as I cry out. I'm *right* there, so close to my much-needed release. He keeps pumping his fingers, twisting and curling them to rub against my most sensitive spot. Again, again, one more time...

Suddenly, his hand is gone. I nearly fall over at the loss of him, but I regain my composure and glare right at his stupidly handsome face. Remington just grins, which makes my pussy clench. God, this man.

“Not yet, baby girl. Patience.”

With that, he spins me around, my back to his front, and starts massaging me everywhere. I feel his large, calloused hands squeezing my breasts, hips, and thighs. His hands trail lower, once again teasing my pussy lips. My clit throbs in time with my heartbeat, begging him to do something about the unbearable ache he's created.

“Remington...” I moan, wiggling my hips in an attempt to get him to touch me where I need him most.

“Not yet,” he murmurs again, licking the shell of my ear before trailing kisses down my neck and shoulder.

I feel his hard cock dig into my ass, so I wiggle a bit more until I feel his length nestle between my cheeks. Remington groans and rotates his hips, grinding his thick shaft against my ass.

“God, please, Remington,” I beg. My legs start shaking, and I have to lean forward and brace myself against the wall.

A low growl rises up from deep in Remington’s chest, the sound vibrating through me, nearly making me come on the spot. He grips my left leg just under my knee and lifts it so my foot is resting on the bench in the corner of the shower.

“That’s it, fuck, love when you’re spread out for me, Lucy.” He continues touching every inch of me, caressing my thighs and widening my stance a bit.

He slides his thickness into my slit, not entering me, just sawing his cock along my slick folds. He taps my clit, nearly sending me over the edge. I’m so damn sensitive and ready to come. I think I might die if he doesn’t get inside of me this second.

“I’ve got you, Lucy,” he murmurs, lining himself up with my entrance.

I’m expecting him to thrust inside of me and fuck me hard. I know he’s as desperate for me as I am for him. But Remington slowly inches inside of me, prolonging the sweet pain deep in my core. He grips my hips, holding me in place as he stretches me open. I hold my breath as he slides home, hitting the very end of me.

“Every time with you is incredible,” he murmurs, holding himself inside of me and letting me feel our connection.

Remington pulls out just as slowly, making me whine. I open my mouth to tell him to fuck me already, but then Remington slams his thick dick all the way inside, making me come instantly.

He wraps his arms around me, holding me up as I spasm around his cock. He fucks me through it, hammering into me over and over as I continue to convulse and cry out his name. I feel Remington grip the inner thigh of my leg that’s propped up, spreading me wider and angling my hips so he’s hitting my G-spot with every thrust.

“Y-y-yesss...” I managed to hiss out as I flatten my hand against the wall and throw my head back against his shoulder.

Remington wraps his hand around my throat, keeping my head tilted back as he splits me open with his dick.

“So tight for me, love,” he grits out.

I whimper in response, already feeling another orgasm rushing to the surface. He must sense it, too. Remington keeps a firm grip on my neck, which is hot as fuck, and then trails his other hand down my body, circling my clit and then pinching it.

My orgasm slams into me, hard and fast, and I open my mouth in a silent scream. Remington growls and ruts into me, rubbing furious circles over my swollen, pulsing clit. A painful, delicious pleasure takes over every part of my body as I keep coming, sobbing his name.

Remington pulls out and spins me around, crashing his lips down on mine as he lifts me up and spears me with his cock. I wrap my legs around his hips and hang on for dear life as he pins me to the wall and fucks me like a man possessed.

“Mine, mine, fucking *mine*. Say it, Lucy. Tell me, baby girl.”

“Y-yours,” I whisper, staring into those fierce green eyes.

Remington roars and bites my shoulder as he comes, marking me, claiming me, fucking me raw. I gasp as my entire body pulses, tenses, stretches... and then collapses in on itself as my orgasm ravishes me from the inside out. I swear I feel Remington come again, shooting his cum deep inside of me in forceful bursts.

I drag air into my lungs in short breaths, trembling in Remington’s arms as he keeps me pinned to the wall. I comb my fingers through his hair while he nuzzles into my shoulder, kissing over the spot where he bit me.

“Fuck, are you okay? I bit you,” he says in shock.

“You did,” I confirm, a smirk pulling at my lips. “And I liked it.”

Remington looks up at me, his eyes going dark as a deep growl rumbles through him. I think he might take me again,

but then his eyes turn soft, and he kisses my forehead.

“Let’s get you washed up so you can rest. Then I’ll do it all over again.”

My pussy clenches around his half-hard cock, making Remington groan. “Or we could do it again right now...”

Remington sucks in a breath and lets it out slowly, resting his forehead on mine. “Do you trust me?”

I nod automatically, and his eyes grow soft.

“Then let me take care of you.”

I nod again as he gently sets me down and begins washing me. Remington’s touch is achingly tender, like I’m precious to him and he wants to savor every moment of being with me like this. I can’t stop the tears stinging my eyes. Remington doesn’t say anything; he just kisses them away and continues washing my body before moving on to my hair.

Remington dries me off with a fluffy towel and then scoops me up in his arms again, making me giggle. “I can walk, you know.” Even as I say it, though, I snuggle deeper into his arms.

“I know, baby. You can do anything you want. And I think you want me to hold you as much as possible.”

I don’t bother arguing with him. He’s right. I want as much of him as I can get.

FOURTEEN

Remington

“I’m glad you’re getting used to the prosthetic,” I tell Romeo over the phone. “Do you know when you’ll be released yet?”

“At least a week, maybe two or three, depending on physical therapy,” he replies.

My friend has had his ups and downs during the recovery process, which is to be expected. Some days, Romeo talks about having a fresh start and settling down somewhere near me. Other days, he doesn’t even want to get out of bed, let alone put on a prosthetic leg.

“Then we can plan your trip out here, right?”

“Yeah, if that’s what’ll make you happy,” he sighs.

“I won’t claim to understand what you’re going through with your leg, but I can relate to having your military career cut short unexpectedly. I struggled most days to feel anything at all, and when I did finally have some emotion, it was mostly rage and despair.”

Romeo grunts, and I know I’ve hit a nerve.

“Those emotions are totally valid,” I continue. “So stop trying to avoid them. Feel it all. Let it hurt. Let it burn. Then, when you’re ready, take a step back and decide to let good things back into your life.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It’s not,” I assure him. “But nothing about this situation is easy. You can either wallow for the rest of your life and blame everyone and everything for how you got to be where you are or find a way to heal and make this *part* of your story instead of the entire plot.”

“Well, damn,” Romeo says after a few moments of silence.

I chuckle. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get on my soapbox.”

“No, you’re right. I think I’m just afraid that if I feel the anger and grief, I won’t be strong enough to make it through to the other side,” he confesses.

“That’s why you have me,” I remind him. “We’ll get through this, Romeo. I’m not abandoning you.”

He’s silent for another moment before changing the subject.

“Your woman has you getting all sappy on me, huh?” Romeo jokes. I let him have this out. I’m sure we’ll have this conversation again soon.

“You have to come meet her,” I insist. “We have a built-in community here, between Lucy and her two closest friends and their boyfriends.”

“Sounds like I’d be the third wheel. Or, the seventh wheel, as the case may be,” he muses.

“Nah. We’ll find you a woman when you’re ready.”

“Yeah, right,” Romeo scoffs.

Lucy comes sauntering into the bedroom where I’ve been sitting up in the bed, waiting for her to get done with one last project for a client before going to sleep. We put Noah to bed a while ago now, and I can’t wait for some alone time with my woman. My eyes are immediately drawn to her curves, nearly popping out of my head when she strips down in front of me.

“Uh, hey, I gotta go,” I tell my friend.

“Tell Lucy hey from me,” he teases before hanging up.

I toss the phone aside and pull the covers back, patting the spot next to me.

“Hi there, gorgeous,” I murmur, leaning over to kiss my woman as she joins me in bed.

“Hi,” she says with a smile, snuggling into my side. Completely nude.

I also happen to be sans clothes, but I don’t usually sleep in anything.

“Did you need something from me, baby?” I whisper, nuzzling into the side of her neck.

She nods, moaning softly. I guide her so she’s on her back, and I’m holding myself above her, staring into her brilliant blue eyes. I’m about to devour my sexy as hell woman when her eyes blink slowly and she yawns.

I grin at her, noticing her uneven blinking. My girl is exhausted from the frustrating client she just dealt with all day, and while I very much want to give her a few orgasms as a reward, right now, she needs sleep.

Pressing a kiss to her stomach, between her breasts, her neck, cheek, and finally her lips, I whisper, “Let’s get some rest, love.”

“But I’m horny,” she whines, even as another yawn escapes. She can barely keep her eyes open, and I laugh softly.

“I’ll be right here the whole night,” I reassure her. “I’m sure I’ll be ready to go at the drop of a hat, so you just get some sleep for now.”

Lucy pouts, even as she snuggles deeper into the blankets. I kiss the top of her nose and carefully turn her onto her side, curling up behind my woman and holding her close. I rock us ever so gently back and forth, thanking every god I can think of that this woman is mine.

Sometime later, I stir awake in the dark, unsure of what woke me up. Then I hear it. The sweetest, softest moan. I’m spooned around Lucy’s curvy body, one hand on her side as she rocks her hips slowly, brushing her ass against my hard as fuck dick.

“Baby,” I groan, tightening my hold on her hip to help her grind against me.

“Mmm,” is all she says.

“Are you awake?” I ask, sliding my hand around to her front and cupping her pussy. Fucking hell, she’s *soaked* for me. My baby really was horny. Still is. She must be aching. Lucy moans my name under her breath and pushes back against me. My sleepy, sexy girl is going to get quite the wake-up call.

I settle my throbbing cock between her cheeks, rubbing the sore fucker up and down to find relief. Dipping two fingers inside her tight little hole, I drag her arousal up her slit and circle her little bundle of nerves. Lucy jerks forward, gasping as her cunt pulses for me and releases more of her sweetness.

“Remington?” she asks, her voice scratchy from sleep.

“Yeah, baby,” I grunt, thrusting two fingers inside of her while grinding my heel down on her clit.

“Oh God, ohmygod, don’t stop,” she whimpers.

I growl and lean forward, scraping my teeth along the side of her neck, sucking on her pulse point. My cock is leaking precum, getting her ass all slick and wet. Jesus, what that does to me.

“Need you, Lucy. Need you so bad,” I murmur into the shell of her ear. Lucy looks at me over her shoulder and nods. Moonlight streams through the half-open curtains, highlighting her blue eyes and full lips. She’s so beautiful that my chest aches. My balls ache. Every fucking part of me yearns for more of her.

I flip Lucy on her stomach in one swift motion, making her gasp and then giggle. Her laughter quickly turns into a moan as I pull her hips up and back, massaging her perfectly round ass. I spread her cheeks wide and drag my thickness through her slick folds, groaning as her pussy flutters around me and coats my cock with her juices.

“Please,” she begs, pushing back against me. “It hurts. I ache for you.”

“I can take that pain away, love.”

Without warning, I thrust into her sweet cunt, hitting the very end of her. Lucy cries out and jolts forward, clawing at the bed. I stay still inside of her, taking a moment to feel how perfectly we fit together.

Lucy starts to tremble, and I grip her hips, steadying her as I pull out and stroke back in, shoving my dick so deep inside of her.

“Remington, I’m... I think...”

“Fuck,” I groan, feeling her tight little channel squeeze me so damn hard. “Don’t come yet, baby. Hold it.”

Lucy whimpers and drops her head forward, every muscle tensing as she tries to push her orgasm back. I slide my hand up her back, loving the way she shivers at my touch. Wrapping her silky brown hair around my hand, I tug her head back as I lean forward to kiss her, driving my dick into her pussy over and over.

“R-Remington, God, I’m...I’m...”

Her words break off into a jagged moan as a shiver works its way through her body. I crush my lips down on hers, swallowing every desperate sound that pours from her mouth. Leaning back a bit, I lift two fingers to her mouth, nudging them against the seam of her lips.

“Suck on me, baby. Get me nice and wet,” I grunt. Lucy looks at me over her shoulder, questions swimming in her brilliant blue eyes. “You’ll like it. I promise.” I stroke inside of her slowly, tapping her G-spot, keeping her right on the edge of sweet ecstasy.

Lucy obeys, parting her pink lips and wrapping them around my fingers. She swirls her tongue against my skin and sucks on me. I withdraw my hand, bringing it to her tight little ass hole. Circling my wet fingers there, I nearly lose my shit when she pushes back against my hand, urging me to keep going. I pull almost all the way out of her dripping pussy, then slam back into her as I shove one finger into her ass.

“Oh god, oh god, oh *fuck*,” she cries out. I grip the soft flesh of her hip in a punishing hold, keeping her still as I split her open with my cock and fingers. “I can’t hold on... Remington, I c-can’t...”

Lucy sucks in a huge breath and holds it. Her back bows, causing her ass to lift and push back into me. “Hold it,” I growl, right before easing a second finger inside her tight ring of muscles. I scissor my fingers, stretching her wide open. Lucy lets out an agonizing cry as she gushes for me.

“Please,” she whimpers over and over, trembling uncontrollably. Shit, she’s strung so damn tight. She’s barely hanging on, barely even breathing, trying so damn hard to obey me. I love that she’s letting me command her body. Own her orgasms. Keep her all to myself.

My dick jerks and swells as my aching balls draw up tight. I feel my release claw up my spine and fill me up, drowning me in ecstasy. Right before it hits, I shove my dick so fucking deep into her cunt and hold it there.

“Come for me, Lucy. Come so damn hard for me,” I growl, slipping my fingers into her wet heat and pinching her clit as I continue to fingerfuck her ass with my other hand.

Her broken cries fill the room as she falls apart so beautifully for me. I feel her orgasm ripple up and down my cock as she shakes violently and then squirts all over me. I groan and slide my arm under her hips right as she collapses.

I withdraw my fingers from her ass and massage her soft, tender skin. Lucy’s moans are muffled by the sheets where she has her face buried.

I rut into her again and again, shredding her to pieces until she’s limp in my arms. With one final thrust, I explode inside of her, ropes of my cum shooting out of me as I hold still.

Finally, Jesus, *finally*, the last of my release spurts out of me, taking all of my strength with it. I collapse on top of Lucy, both of us sweaty and trembling with the aftershocks of our explosive climaxes.

When I've gained a bit of my strength back, I roll over, taking Lucy with me. I drape my woman over my chest, and she snuggles up against me, burying her face into the side of my neck. We're both panting as we cling to each other.

After a few quiet moments to soak in the afterglow of what we just did, I peel Lucy off of me, brushing a soft kiss on her lips. She sighs so sweetly for me, another shiver running up her spine.

"Are you okay, baby girl?" I whisper.

She smiles sleepily, and all the tension in my body is released. "I'm so good," she slurs, resting her head on my shoulder and tracing patterns on my chest. "I never thought I could be this happy."

My heart grows impossibly larger at her words. "That's all I've ever wanted for you," I whisper. "To feel safe, loved, and happy."

Lucy tilts her head forward, resting her forehead on mine. "Mission accomplished."

I laugh quietly, then press a kiss to the top of her head before getting her settled back down into my side. I hold my woman in my arms until she falls back to sleep, and then I count her breaths, thankful for each one.

FIFTEEN

Lucy

FIVE YEARS LATER...

I SMILE as I turn my computer on and see the Sweet Thing Designs logo as my computer background.

Emilia, Scarlett, and I started our company, Sweet Thing Designs, close to a year ago. We waited until Emilia had graduated college and settled back in town before we started brainstorming ideas. We knew that we wanted to work together, but we weren't sure what our company should be.

Since I was already doing freelance web design, we incorporated that and came up with our own design firm.

I'm in charge of web design, Emilia does the graphic design and marketing plans for our clients, and Scarlett is in charge of customer service and all of the other admin tasks. It's been a blast working with my best friends, and the company is already a success.

I hear the front door open, and I know that Scarlett must be here. She married and moved in with Nash four years ago, and she is usually the last to get here.

We're still working out of our house. Everyone moved out and in with their husbands over the years, and I'm the only one who still lives here. Though maybe not for long.

Remington and I are looking for our own place. We need more room now that we're expecting.

"Hey, did you finish Amy's website yet? I'm sending her an email, and I wanted to give her an update," Emilia says as she pokes her head into my office.

"I'm just double-checking everything right now. It should be all good to go within the hour," I tell her.

"Perfect!"

"What's perfect?" Scarlett asks, coming upstairs slowly.

She's five months pregnant and just starting to show. She had her doctor's appointment this morning, and I bounce in my seat.

"Did you learn the gender?" I ask her.

"Yep," she says, a wide grin stretching across her face.

"And?" Emilia asks, just as excited as I am.

"It's a boy!" Scarlett tells us.

We cheer, both getting up to hug her.

"That means that I can start buying clothes! Have you guys picked a name yet? I could get it embroidered on a few things," I tell her.

"Not yet, but I promise to tell you as soon as we have one picked out."

"Do you guys have a registry yet? When are we going to have a baby shower?" Emilia asks, and I'm suddenly grateful that our workload today is light because I doubt we'll be getting much done.

Two sets of footsteps come running up the stairs, and I smile when June and Noah come around the corner.

"Why's everyone yelling?" June asks.

"I'm having a boy," Scarlett tells them, and they both grin, reaching over to hug her.

"Can I see the ultrasound pictures?" June asks and I smile as Scarlett pulls them out.

Noah leans against my side, and I smile. He's come a long way from the moody, mistrustful kid he was five years ago. He was permanently removed from his mother's care about three months after Remington moved him to his house.

His mom ended up being arrested for drug possession, and by then, Noah had already told Sheriff Mayson all about what his life had been like up until that point. I think the Sheriff must have pulled a few strings to have Noah placed in our care so quickly.

Remington and I got married four and a half years ago, and we legally adopted Noah about five months after that. We had sold Remington's mother's house a few years ago, and they both moved into this house with me. It can get a little crazy during the summer when Noah is here, and we're trying to work, but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

June and Noah are still best friends, and with the way that they both look at each other sometimes, I think they're close to being something more. Even right now, Noah is staring at June with a certain longing look in his eyes.

Remington started his own foundation with his friend, Romeo. He ended up moving to Murfreesboro a few years ago after he got out of the hospital and finished rehab. They formed Veterans Build Up together then and have been working hard to fundraise and find new ways to help out struggling veterans.

I'm so proud of him. He's making a difference in the world and doing something that he loves.

"Hey, are you ready to go?" Remington calls from downstairs.

I hear him heading up the stairs, and I squeeze Noah's shoulder as he turns to Remington.

"Where are you going?" I ask him.

"I'm taking Noah and June out for a fun day," he says, leaning over and giving me a quick kiss.

"Lucky."

“Blow off work and come with us. I’m sure your boss won’t mind,” he jokes, and I grin.

“I wish. I need to finish up a few things. You guys have fun, though.”

“We will!” June calls as she runs downstairs with Noah.

“Are we still meeting the realtor at four?” Remington asks me.

“Yeah, she’s going to show us two new places that are about to be listed.”

“I’ll text you. We might just meet you there if I have to drop June off at home.”

“Sounds good. I’ll talk to you later.”

He kisses me goodbye, and I watch him and the kids leave. My hands rest on my stomach, and I smile.

I never thought that I would have this. I was prepared to be single all my life, but then Remington came barreling into my life and changed all of that. Now I’m happily married with one kid and another on the way.

I’m happy and settled. I have a family, one who would do anything for me, one who would never abandon me.

I never thought that I would have any of that. I never thought I would get my own happily ever after, and I’m just so glad that I met Remington and that he didn’t give up on me.

The phone starts to ring, and Scarlett sighs, giving me a smile as she heads to her office to answer it.

“Back to work,” Emilia sighs, and I smile as I head back to my office.

I never imagined I could be this happy, and I owe all of that to my friends and Remington.

SIXTEEN

Remington

ANOTHER FIVE YEARS AFTER THAT...

“I THINK that it needs to be just a little bit higher and maybe over a tad to the left,” Lucy tells me, and I move the shelf up a little bit more.

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Perfect!”

I make a mark on the wall where to put the screws and set the shelf to the side. We’re in the nursery, putting the finishing touches on the room before our little one arrives.

Lucy is eight and a half months pregnant with our second baby. She groans as she pushes herself up from the chair, and I reach out to help her.

“I’m huge,” she complains.

“You’re gorgeous,” I correct.

“Yeah, you’re pretty, Mommy!” Our son, Rocco, tells her, and I smile.

“Thank you, baby,” she coos down at him.

Rocco is about to start preschool in a few weeks, just half days and I know that Lucy is nervous about being away from

him for even that long. They've been attached at the hip since he was born. Rocco goes to work with Lucy now and plays in her office with her while she works. The girls take turns watching all of the kids throughout the day, and it's worked out well for them.

"Hey, I let myself in. Hope that you don't mind," Romeo says as he comes into the nursery. "I thought I would stop by and see if you guys needed help with anything in here."

"Uncle Romeo!" Rocco shouts, throwing himself into Romeo's arms.

"Hey, little dude," Romeo says with a grin.

The two whisper to each other for a second, and I smile. They're close; Romeo even babysits for us sometimes when Lucy and I need a date night.

"I'm about to hang up that shelf," I tell my friend, and he nods, setting Rocco back on his feet."

Romeo has come a long way in the last ten years. He actually just settled down in a house a few doors down from us. He went through rehab and therapy. He worked hard to move past the depression and anger at losing his leg. I'm proud of him.

I actually joined him for a few therapy sessions. It was helpful. I didn't realize how much I had buried from my time spent deployed overseas. I ended up finding my own therapist and spent a year working through everything. It was hard to remember everything that I had seen over there, but I wanted to be the best version of myself for Lucy and our kids.

Romeo, Lucy, and Noah were so supportive during that time. They've been there for me through everything, including Romeo and I starting our own charity. Our charity has been growing every year, and I love being able to give back to the veteran community.

"I'm going to go start on dinner," Lucy says, and I give her a quick kiss. "Romeo, are you staying?"

"Yes!" Rocco says right away, and Romeo and I laugh.

“Sure, that would be great.”

I watch my wife go, taking Rocco with her, and I’m left wondering how I ever got so lucky.

“Is Noah all set for this semester?” Romeo asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah, he’s living with June this year. They have a little apartment right off campus.”

“Do you think they’ll get married soon?” He asks.

“I think they’re both waiting until after they graduate. Though, Noah seems like he’s getting more and more impatient.”

“Well, he’s been in love with her for like twenty years,” Romeo says with a laugh.

Romeo holds up one end of the shelf, and I grab the drill, screwing in my end before I pass the drill over to Romeo.

Lucy is still working with Emilia and Scarlett. Their business, Sweet Things Designs, is thriving, and they’ve found a family with each other that they couldn’t get from their own parents.

All of our kids are also friends. Rex and Emilia have two daughters, Mia and Carly, plus Spencer, while Scarlett has two boys, Liam and Ryan. They’re all close in age, and I’m glad that I was able to give my kids a big, stable family.

I never imagined this life for myself. When I was younger, I never thought I would want a family or a wife. Then I was in the military, and I was too focused on surviving to worry about dating or settling down.

Then I met Lucy, and all of that changed. She has given me a life better than anything I could have dreamed of.

She’s the woman that I love more than anyone or anything else. I can’t imagine my life without her, and God willing, I’ll never have to.

“Dinner is done!” Lucy calls up to us, and I smile at Romeo.

“Ready to eat?”

“Always,” he jokes, and I laugh, throwing my arm around his shoulders as we head downstairs.

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