

Use Your Words



allie



marie

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To those who are still trying to find their words:

“It’s not about finding your voice. It’s about giving yourself permission to use it.”

—Kris Carr

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content warning

Use Your Words is a contemporary romance novel that deals with the topic of emotional and manipulative domestic violence. The heroine, Lucy, has several flashbacks of gaslighting, and verbal and emotional abuse, as well as a few instances where her abuser returns to her present-day. If Lucy and Aaron's story is not for you, above all, protect your hearts, friends. This is not a subject I write about lightly, and my wish is that in Lucy's journey away from her abuser, hope can be found.

The National Abuse Hotline is available 24/7 through call, text, or online chat to help those experiencing domestic violence.

<https://www.thehotline.org/get-help/>

1 (800) 799-SAFE (7233)

TTY 1 (800) 787-3224

one

aaron

“I JUST. WANT. A WIFE.”

I sound desperate. I know that I do. At this point, I have fully embraced *desperation* as one of my character traits. When my only life goal after becoming a teacher was to wife up the girl of my dreams, get married, and have a bunch of babies and I *still* have yet to have one positive, long-term relationship into my thirty-second year, I get to be at least a *little* whiny.

“Why don’t we start with all of the women you’ve *ghosted* on that little app of yours?” Sam Ford, my already-married friend, says with a smirk. I glare at him, ripping my phone from his grasp before he can lift the FaceID and hack into my dating apps.

“I *unmatched* them because they aren’t *wife material*,” I insist.

It’s my own fault. You don’t go on Tinder if you’re looking for a wife. You go on Tinder to hook up—which would be great! If that’s what I was looking to do.

“Didn’t you meet that chick who collected her toenails on Tinder?” Drake asks.

He, Sam, and I all coach the baseball team at River Valley Middle School where we teach, so they’ve heard more of my dating horror stories than anyone else. At the mention of my most prevalent dating mistake, I shiver. My head tilts and my neck twitches.

“Can we *not*?” I insist. “We get one more night of freedom before back-to-school hell. I don’t want to spend it talking about my *failures*.”

Tonight is our traditional “drink away the summer” event before beginning of the year teacher in-services officially begin, and I’d like to keep it celebratory.

“Can we spend it rewriting your bio instead?” Drake asks. “You need to

take down the Disney quotes. Sam said that Juliet almost matched with you once—”

“*Oh-kay*, new subject,” Sam interjects, his expression pinching at the thought of his now-wife swiping right on me. “To wrangling teenagers.”

He lifts his glass between us, and Drake and I mimic the gesture, repeating the toast as we all *clink* and down our beers.

I absolutely love my job. Teaching gym and getting to coach two different sports throughout the year is the God’s honest dream. I essentially get paid to work out and goof around with kids all day. Plus, not having to put in time off for holidays and the summer is a definite perk.

“And to mentoring newbies!”

Sam smirks and wraps his arm around my shoulder, clapping me there with a loud *pop*.

“I signed up to be a new-teacher mentor this year,” I explain to Drake. “We have a new counselor starting since Kristie left.”

Our long-time counselor moved this summer to be closer to her family. She was involved in so many aspects of our school that it’s going to be a weird adjustment for both our staff and our students.

“Do we even have one hired yet?” Drake asks. “I didn’t see one in the new hires email.”

“I think Don said it’s just pending board approval,” Sam says. “Hopefully the position is filled before the first day. I don’t think we’ll do well without a counselor.”

I nod. Middle schoolers have it the toughest, in my opinion. A new school, going through puberty, *and* trying to do math with letters? It’s a lot to handle *without* all of the baggage that they carry in from home these days. We need someone qualified to assess and guide their needs.

We chat casually about the upcoming school year and coaching this spring’s baseball team, but Sam seems a little more reserved, peeking down at his phone and looking toward the exit.

“What’s up, my guy?” I ask.

He rubs the back of his neck and shrugs.

“It’s just going to be weird without Mason on the team.”

Drake and I nod.

Mason, Sam and his wife Juliet’s son, was born on the short end of the stick. When he moved into our district in sixth grade, he formed a tight bond with Sam. Eventually, after both his mom and stepdad were deemed unfit,

Sam and Juliet were Mason's foster parents until this past summer when the adoption was finalized.

I had Mason in my gym class for his three years at RVMS. Watching him transform from someone who didn't think he deserved oxygen to a confident young man was something special to be a part of. But I can see the reluctance in Sam's eyes. If I know my boy well enough, I have to wonder...

"He and Juliet are at Cabot's right now for a little 'last night of summer' celebration. I *may* sneak out early..."

He doesn't punctuate his sentence, like he doesn't want to ask if he can bug out of our tradition, but also would one-hundred-percent rather be with his family right now.

I sigh, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Be with your fam bam, bro. I know I would be if I had one to go home to."

Drake nods, so we finish our first round together, let Sam clear his system, and then send our boy off—not without ensuring that he's the one who has to make the Dunkin' run in the morning before we report for duty.

"See?" I say, pointing at the door of the bar that swings shut with Sam's departure. "I want *that*."

"*Sam?*" Drake says, wide eyed with sarcasm laced around his words. "Dude, I feel like going through Juliet to get at her man might be more painful than staying single for life."

I smile widely, chuckling as I shove him in the chest.

"Nah, man. I want to cut out early on plans because I've got someone waiting for me at home. Hell, I want her *here* with me to tell me we have to head out early because she wants to be alone. I want the kids waiting for me. The Danny Tanner house of love. The whole nine yards."

I sigh, resting my elbows on the table as I cup my chin.

Red Sox baseball echoes on the TV, the floor sticks to my shoes like day old bubble gum, and the smell of hops twines its way around my senses. This tradition with my boys is great. It's *fun*. But I want what my parents have: four kids at home who are all best friends. Family vacations twice a year with monthly meetings to plan. Matching Christmas pajamas even though we're all well into adulthood.

I don't want to be on apps anymore. I don't want to find meaningless hookups in the local bar, and have a near stranger as my plus one for every wedding. Hell, I want to stop going to weddings as a single guy who has to

endure that stupid garter toss, only to then be bridesmaid bait for all of the girls who want the opposite of what I'm looking for.

At this late in the game, I'm beginning to wonder if she's actually out there.

Drake offers to grab us another round, and I decide that this will be my last; we have seven hours of meetings tomorrow, followed by another day of classroom prep, and back to school night later in the week. The last thing I need is for my body to remind me that I'm no longer in my twenties with a three-day hangover.

I'm eyeing the front door aimlessly, the theme song to *Full House* now stuck in my head, when it creaks open.

And all of a sudden, there she is. Like all of my whining has finally manifested my dreams into reality.

A spotlight illuminates a wide circle around her feet, following her with precision as she enters the bar. Her head turns from side to side with grace as she takes in the room, scanning for her next steps. The light brown of her soft, straight ponytail emits a halo that tilts with the simple move of her index finger as it slides up the bridge of her nose to push her wide-framed glasses into place. Angels start singing "I See The Light" from *Tangled* from up in the rafters.

Dramatic?

Hell no. This woman was either dropped from Heaven as my own personal angel, or I'm going to need to get my head checked before they allow me to teach gym to teenagers. I've experienced a lot of *She's pretty* at first sight, but the way my breathing stuttered when she walked into the room is totally new.

"Dude. Gross. Don't drool," Drake says as he returns from the bar—*when did he get back? How long have I been unconscious?*—and taps under my chin so that it closes.

"I'm sorry, do you not see the sweet, sweet *angel* that just graced us with her presence?"

He points to his refilled beer like it's the love of his life, kissing the sweaty glass before chugging it three quarters of the way gone. He smiles, but I shake my head. I point with my whole hand, in the direction of the piece of Heaven that just landed on earth, but she's gone.

Oh hell.

I turn on a swivel, searching in a desperate sweeping panic, when

suddenly, I don't have to look much farther.

Because after he mopped up my drool puddle, Drake had *actually gone out fishing*. He has returned, and with him is my sweet angel on his arm. I almost see red, until I realize that he hasn't nabbed her for himself. He's... introducing us?

"...this is Aaron Russo. Aaron—this is Lucy. Please stop pointing at her from across the bar. It's weird."

Red crowds my cheeks in the same seconds that the Sahara Desert takes up residence in my throat.

My *Hi?* comes out in a sandpapery question.

She doesn't speak. Doesn't blink. Doesn't unfurl her lips from the thin, straight line she'd been wearing when my good ol' pal Drake oh so rudely dragged her over here from her—

What even *had* he interrupted? Was she here to meet friends? A boyfriend? A *husband*? I've barely been in her presence for a full minute, and I'm already internally passing away at the thought that this gorgeous, sweet angel—*Lucy. Her name is Lucy*—is already taken—

"Are you okay? You're... sweating. Kind of a lot."

I am. Right now, there is a bead rolling down my forehead. It's a good thing I'm wearing a black T-shirt, because the way my back sweat is bleeding through is *not* the way to win over a woman who I believe reached into my chest, turned a key, and started up cogs that have never cranked before. I try to hype myself up.

Alright, Aaron. This is it. This is her. Now's the time to go balls out.

"I... *you're just very pretty.*"

Ugh. Balls back in.

"*Dude. Slick.*"

Drake giggles. Actually giggles. My face is on fire, and I'm about ten seconds away from diving behind the bar into the ice bucket to cool off when Lucy interrupts.

"Oh. God, you're nervous? That's adorable."

And then, the Earth rights itself again. Because when Lucy smiles, I swear the sun could rise in the west and the globe could be flat and she could tell me that the sky is green and I would nod and say, *Yes ma'am*.

It isn't a big, toothy grin. That thin line of her lips quirks up along her left cheek, just enough so that it's like her smile is winking at me, and my insides liquify.

Oh, God. She's beautiful. She's funny. I am falling way too fast for a woman who I've known for all of thirty seconds. I can see her sitting on our front porch swing with a baby in her lap and a toddler riding a tricycle around the driveway. I can't let her get away.

"I'll leave you two to it. Remember kids: no glove, no love."

Drake butts in, kind of stepping on the moment, to let me know that he's disappearing for the night. Before he heads to the bar, he leans down to whisper in my ear, *Don't fuck this up, buddy! She's hot.*

I feel possessive for the second time, as if Drake actually poses a threat. I have to remind myself that, despite the signs I feel like God or fate or Taylor Swift have been tossing me in the past ten minutes, Lucy isn't actually mine. But before I can ask her if she'd prefer a wedding in the summer or the fall, she beats me to the punch.

"Celebrating?"

She indicates the graveyard of glasses on the table that is now population me and her.

"The opposite, actually." My voice shudders just a touch, and I clear my throat. "Mourning the end to our summer."

"I'll drink to that."

Before she can escape, I hop-step to join her at the bar. We push through a dense crowd, and I stand behind her once we get there. As she places her order, declining my offer to pay for her drink, I take a peek in the grody mirror behind the bar. My tousled, dark brown hair is looking a little flat, so I run my fingers through it, tugging to give myself a *just rolled out of bed* look. The sharp lines of my jaw are peppered with fresh five o'clock shadow. Nothing to do about that now. With her beverage in hand, Lucy's elbow presses into the abs I worked over at the gym today and tilts her head, and as if we're tethered by an invisible string, I follow blindly.

"To summer ending?" she asks, long lashes batting behind her thick, square frames.

"And maybe to a new beginning?"

I don't miss the blush that creeps its way from nowhere to color her cheeks. We clink our glasses, take swigs of our beers, and rest the pints on the table. Her eyes train on the table, her hand loosely wrapped around the glass. She bites her bottom lip lightly, and a softness washes over her. She inhales, exhales, and finally meets my stare, blushing when she finds me looking at her.

“Okay, so, we’re having a funeral for the summer,” I say, my eyes thinning.

“Good thing I wore black.”

She matches my gaze, flicks her index finger to the tight black V-neck she’s wearing, and I chuckle.

“Would you like to commemorate first?”

She shakes her head, lifting her beer to me, then to her lips, pressing, “You do the honors,” to the rim of her glass before tilting it for a slow sip.

“Okay. Well...” I lift my beer, and press a closed fist to my chest. “To a summer filled with beachside bonfires, Red Sox home runs on the Green Monster, and that one time I forgot to put on sunscreen and then had to spend the next three days couch-bound and covered in lotion.”

In quite possibly *the* most adorable move known to man, Lucy laughs. It’s not your typical teeth-showing, big-wide-smile-inducing, tinkling-bell-sounding giggle. Her shoulders scrunch up toward her ears, her cheeks puff and make her eyes crinkle. Hell, I only know that she laughs because I’m so dead set on watching every tick of her skin that it’s like I catch the breath expelling from her nose and the way her chest hitches just slightly in the deep V of her shirt.

“What did you do to pass the time?”

“Oh, I own the entire Pixar collection on DVD,” I deadpan, punctuating that thought with a sly tilt of my lips. “I was all set.”

“And just how many times *did* you watch *Frozen*?”

“*Frozen* isn’t actually Pixar, but I *may* have snuck in a watch or two.”

“Good thing you used your time productively.”

She lifts one brow slowly, but breaks the charade as her lips scrunch into a button of a smile that she’s clearly trying not to let break through.

I shake my head, smiling around a chuckle.

“What about you? What are you mourning the loss of tonight?”

A ghost seems to enter the bar as the answer to that question, stealing in through her ears and worming throughout her body. She glances toward the exit, a faraway look in her eyes, and for a moment in time, she is suspended somewhere else. But she shakes it out, that same ghost expelling from her with a shudder from the base of her spine outward. When her gaze settles back on mine, the hazel in her eyes is a deep forest of green, the gold sitting on the outskirts.

“The loss of my old life. But I’m not exactly mourning it.”

Shit.

The weight of her voice sits low in my abdomen; it haunts me as much as it stirs my cock, the tilt of her lips suggestively as she dodges every question I have waiting for her on the tip of my tongue.

How did you spend your summer?

What's your favorite holiday?

How do I convince you that we're two halves of the same whole?

“So, are we getting out of here or what?”

My jaw, currently prepped to probably say something stupid, snaps shut, and I nod.

It was probably for the better.

I have a feeling I was about to ask her to marry me.

two

aaron

LUCY ASKS to follow me back to my place, and I do five under the speed limit the whole way.

That is, until she flashes her lights at me, and I fear that if I don't speed up, she'll drive back to the bar and find someone else.

I don't know why I'm so nervous.

My palms are sweating. My knees are weak. My arms are heavy.

Oh no. I am an Eminem song.

The leg that isn't working the accelerator bounces like I chugged a HyperFreeze and there isn't a bathroom nearby, and I can feel my heart beating against my rib cage like it's a frenzied bird flapping its wings.

Something about Lucy has my body shifting into overdrive, has my insides flipped upside down.

I'm trying not to make a big deal out of this, but she just...

She seems like a *big deal*.

I know that my family will rip me a new one, because almost every woman I fall for is a big deal to me, but I can't explain it. There aren't enough metaphors to describe how my body flipped on its axis when I saw her walk into that bar.

So when I pull into my driveway and park the car, I unbuckle at double time so I can rush to meet her before she's able to open her door.

Surprise lights up her wide eyes when she sees me hovering, so I point enthusiastically at the door handle. She eyes me skeptically, like I'm trying to kidnap her or something. I don't hear the locks pop until I take a step back, away from her car.

When she slides out of her car and closes the door behind her, she leans her butt against the handle, crossing her arms.

“I just wanted to open the door for you,” I say, noting the way it comes out breathily. “You know... Just the gentlemanly thing to do...”

My cheeks fill with fire as my heart rattles again, like it’s trying to reach over to this gorgeous—albeit confused and slightly guarded—woman and bury itself inside her.

“Oh. Well. I think I got that figured out on my own.”

I nod, taking a subtle deep breath, willing my heart rate to lessen.

We stand in awkward silence as passing cars and the buzzing of late summer mosquitos fills the quiet air.

“So should we...”

She unfolds her crossed arms and points to my front door.

“Oh! Yes! Yeah, let’s...”

I turn, leading her to the front door while at the same time shaking my head to try to dissipate these nerves. If my body keeps vibrating like this, I might have to bypass my bedroom and make her drive me to the hospital to find out if I’m having a heart attack.

Once we’re inside, the reality of the situation comes crashing down on me.

This girl is here to have sex with me, and I don’t even know her last name.

I’ve never done this dance before.

Hell, I typically try to *avoid* this dance, but...

My nerves quadruple, my eyes widening as I realize that, even without the lights on, there’s an ethereal glow around Lucy, like she was sent here to save me. Just the sight of her makes me want to drop to my knees in adoration and slow down this racetrack we’ve suddenly merged onto. I gulp, watching as Lucy tilts her head and narrows her eyes slowly, the silent question written on her face as we stand there in my living room, staring at one another, trying to decide how to start this thing. I haven’t gotten her number yet, her last name, much more than surface details. *That’s* what makes me hesitate. The thought that this could be temporary for her. If this turns into a one night stand, it very well might kill me.

Because if that’s all she’s looking for—and if I let her know that on the car ride over, I was already planning our wedding colors based on the shades of golden green in her eyes—she might be gone before I can so much as put my hands on her.

Instead of panicking, I take a deep breath. Nod slowly. Close the distance

between us with purposeful steps. A sly curve of her lip reveals that same smile I'd seen at the bar, the small inkling that is already so much more than an array of shiny white teeth. My breaths come heavy, so slow I can hear the crinkle of my lungs stretching with each inhale. When her hands land on my shoulders, my body shudders with an electrical current that rips through me, my breath stuttering out my nostrils. I wonder if she just shocked my heart back to life.

I lick my lips and immediately cup her waist, feeling a *click*, like a lock turning somewhere deep inside me. I trace the features of her face with my eyes, trying to take in every detail like I'll carve a sculpture of her after. Her light, full eyelashes, the freckle at the corner of her eyebrow, the faint lines at the corners of her lips, subtle like they're almost brand new.

"Are you going to kiss me?"

It's like I've been waiting for permission. With those words, I slide one hand to the back of her ponytail, cup her jaw with the other, and tilt her head to look at me.

Time stops. That's the only way to describe the way that the world around us stands in suspension when I have Lucy cradled in my hands like this, a breath apart, my lips hovering just far enough away so that I can see the swirling cosmos in her eyes.

I stroke my thumb along her soft skin, trying my best not to blink away this moment before the entire universe shifts on its axis like I know in my core that it's about to.

"Yeah. Just... give me a second."

Give me a second to memorize the moment that my life finally began.

"I don't have all night," she says, in that same sticky, saccharine way that she'd teased me with over stale beers at the bar. The corners of her lips turn up just slightly enough for me to need to know their taste. She tilts her hips like she's trying to get closer. They connect with mine, and when she swivels against the hardness behind my zipper, I have to swallow a groan.

Desperate to not let her slip out of my grasp, I pull her to me and press my lips gently to hers.

She tastes like sunshine. Sweet, light, and free. Her lips are a soft pillow beneath mine, like the safest landing I'll ever make. This is heaven. Absolutely and positively so. I have never been more sure of anything than the moment I saw her walk into the bar and knew that I needed her in my life.

I kiss her again, tasting her softly, slowly, wanting to savor every single

bit.

Lucy, however, doesn't quite get the memo that forever starts in this moment, and puts her foot on the gas.

Her tongue presses at the seam of my lips, and she swallows my moan as I part my lips and let her tongue slide across mine. Her hands on my shoulders slide down my arms to the front of my shirt, and when she hooks both of her index fingers into my belt loops and tugs forward, I know I'm a goner.

I shift the hand on her cheek to her back, steadying her against me as we stand in the middle of my living room, making out like teenagers—Lucy racing against the clock; me trying to slow it down. I stroke my tongue into her mouth in soft pulls, and then she tilts her hips against mine and grinds again and I lose the upper hand; she nibbles on my bottom lip and I feel my cock punch at the zipper of my jeans.

“You can be rougher than this.” She says it at the same moment that her teeth clamp lightly enough on my earlobe for the sensation to shoot down to my dick, accelerating the rate that it thickens for her. “I promise you won't break me.”

I grunt *Okay*, place both hands under her ass, and lift. She follows eagerly, wrapping her legs around my waist as I back her against the nearest wall.

“Is this ok—”

The rest of my question tails into a groan, because the second Lucy's back hits the wall, she presses her snug center against my cock and grinds. *Hard. Rough.* She sets the pace, and despite the fact that I'm holding her up against the wall, she's the one who grounds me.

Her fingers dig beneath my shirt, and the feel of her hands on my skin has me pressing a groan into her throat where I start trailing my lips, nipping and kissing and sucking any bare patch of skin I find.

“Take this off,” she gasps, my shirt already halfway up my abdomen. I help her shuck it the rest of the way, and I'm barely resituating myself before I realize she's got her shirt up and off too.

I groan at the sight of her lacy white bra, her small but perky tits swelling over the top.

“Can I—”

“Please, yes.”

We fight to remove her bra; Lucy reaches for the clasp while I pull down

one of the cups, sighing as I touch my tongue to her taut nipple.

“*Fuck*, these sweet tits, Lucy.”

She whimpers, threading one hand through my short, dark hair and tugging roughly while the other finishes removing the offending lace and lets it fall to the floor.

“Your hand too,” she pants.

I don’t have to be told twice. My tongue and mouth devour one of her breasts while I cup the other, rubbing my thumb back and forth over her nipple. All the while, Lucy pants, whines, tugs at my hair and grinds against my cock. I don’t think I’ve been this hard in my life.

“You have to stop,” I plead, barring one arm over her abdomen to halt her movements. Even still, I can’t stop myself from diving back in, from fluttering my tongue over her other nipple before widening my mouth and taking in as much as I can. I moan, and the vibration clearly gets to her, because she thrusts against my arm, whining when she can’t get the friction she wants.

“Why?” she fights, tugging at my hair and directing my lips back to her tits where I let myself get lost again. My tongue and her nipples are now best friends.

“Because if you don’t stop,” I say between French kisses to her breasts, “I’m going to come in my jeans like a friggen teenager.”

“That’s hot,” she pants. And before I can fight it, one of her hands palms me through my jeans and begins to rub.

“Oh, *shit*, that’s good. *Sweet* girl.”

My shaft throbs insistently. I press my open mouthed groan between her tits and tilt my hips in time with her touch. The minute she squeezes, I push away, letting her legs fall to the floor so she’s standing again.

“Bed?” she asks, her half lidded eyes and that sly little smirk looking less like an angel and more like a devil I’d like to tangle with.

“Mhm,” I nod quickly, licking my lips as I lace her hand in mine and guide her to my bedroom.

It shouldn’t surprise me when, as soon as Lucy knows which door we’re aiming for, she pushes inside like the rest of the place is on fire.

If I wasn’t trying to worship at her feet, I’d be dying at the fact that she’s waltzing around my home like she owns it, leaving the rest of her clothes in a trail like breadcrumbs for me to follow. She is down to nothing but her underwear by the time my eyes catch up.

There's something about a woman's body that makes my legs turn to straight up gelatin. But the way they give out, the way I fall right to my knees when I see Lucy standing like an angelic wonder against the moonlight, makes me question just who I've been giving my time to. Her subtle curves, the tone of her muscle, the lithe shape of her body all wrapped in slightly summer-kissed skin, is my Christmas gift.

"It's going to be hard to fuck me from the floor."

Annnnnnd I need to get out of these jeans.

This girl, quippy and sweet with a subtle bite of dirty? How did she just so happen to walk into the same bar as me tonight?

After that request, my cock is punching at its denim cage. I fumble with the button and zipper, nearly tripping on the cuffs as I stumble out of my pants and over to my bed where Lucy is now splayed over my pillows like every dream and nightmare I've ever had rolled into one.

This cannot be my reality. Can it?

She has one leg straight, the other bent, with her toes pointed as they swim in shallow streaks up and down my comforter, like she's making slow sweet love to my sheets instead of me. The simple motion gives a slow, teasing open and close of her legs that makes me groan.

I snag the ankle of her tented leg and flatten it, holding her open. She makes this sound, part giggle part sigh. Like the *finally* that's been the steady cadence of my heartbeat since I laid eyes on her.

Sliding my index finger between her hip and the waistband of her underwear, I hiss at the contact of my fingers on her bare skin. She's so soft, so warm.

And she's asking me to give her pleasure?

She nearly kicks it off once I've got it all the way to her ankles. Her pussy smells like desperation, and I absolutely cannot help myself from bending for a taste.

"You are *soaked*, Lucy," I say, blowing on her pussy. She moans and writhes in my sheets. The second my tongue touches her, I see the blinding lights.

She tastes like *want*. There's no other way to describe it. I lick from her opening to her clit, fluttering my tongue against her swollen bud until her hand is in my hair, and then I suck.

"Oh, *oh fuck*, right there."

I don't need to be told twice.

I link my arms beneath her thighs and hoist her closer while spreading her wide at the same time. I slip my tongue inside, fucking her with it a few times before I focus on her clit again. She's riding my face, and I don't have enough words in the English language to describe the euphoria of having her pussy use me like this.

"That's it," I say, getting a better grip on her. "Come for me so I slip inside you nice and easy, Lucy. That's it, sweet girl, come for me."

Her breathy little pants crescendo into a moan that will hopefully echo off my ceiling as my morning alarm.

The aftershocks of her release twitch through her, and as I slowly let her settle on my bed, I watch. I memorize the way she's panting, her eyes fluttering, her head tilting. Her tits heave with each failed attempt to get her breathing back under control. It isn't until her wandering hands begin to play with her hard nipples that my cock remembers that there's still a second half to this show, and he's ready to suit up.

"Will you fuck me?" she asks, her voice husky as one of her hands starts to slide down her body. I stop her before she can reach her pussy and comply. I have no choice. I straddle my knees on either side of Lucy's waist, my torso twisting as I reach into the bedside table for a condom.

As I'm tearing the wrapper, Lucy traces the divots of my abs, her fingers sizzling as they leave fires in their wake. She runs her nails at the base of my cock, through the neatly trimmed hair there, and I hiss. She's about to take me in her fist again when I finally get the damn thing out of the wrapper and roll it on. When I look at Lucy, I feel my heart inflate to triple its size.

She's staring up at me through her frames with the earth in her wide, cartoony eyes; her bottom lip is clutched softly between her teeth, like she's a mixture of nervous and anxious and heady with want. I see it all zipping up her skin in a warm wash of blush.

For a moment, the sly, witty woman from the bar is gone, replaced by the woman behind the curtain. She is soft and vulnerable and wide open, splayed out on my pillows just for me.

I want to stop. I want to introduce myself to *her*.

Despite the screaming of my raging hard-on to plow forward, I have this intense pull to lay her down, press my forehead to hers, and Osmosis everything about her until we meet the sun again.

The crazy thing is, I can see that want in her, too.

As the planets in her eyes rotate slowly, I catch a flicker—so small that I

wonder if I'm making things up again, imagining signs that aren't there—one that tells me she'd like to stop time and just be still.

Her body tells me otherwise, snaps me from that moment when I'm sure the universe stopped spinning and the moon and the sun were neighbors and the ocean floor was at our feet and we were the only two beings to exist. It's like I watch her make the choice for us; she severs it with the sharp press of her bottom teeth, which elicits a moan breathy enough to make my cock spring back into the moment.

She reaches for me, and I know that I'll do anything this woman says. She is the hare and I am the tortoise. And while I'm not going to torture her, I *am* going to take my sweet, sweet time getting her to the end. Getting *myself* there.

I press my tip against her wet opening, and before even *that* much is snugly enveloped inside of her, a Disney-Parks-quality fireworks show is beginning on the backs of my eyelids. The sad sappy music and everything. *All your wishes will come true!* It's this that makes me realize I don't want my eyes closed for a second more of this.

I watch.

I watch Lucy's head tilt back against my pillow as I press, inch by torturous inch, into her. She fits me like a glove, just tight enough to spread sweet euphoria to all of my nerve endings the closer I get to home. She presses up into me, her chest lifting as her back arcs, and I press my thumbs against her pointed nipples, rubbing in opposing circles as I ease my way in.

"That's a good girl, Lucy," I say, sandpaper gripping my voice. "You can take all of me."

I pinch her nipples the moment I hit bottom, and our moans tangle like the clashing crescendo of that fireworks show. I move into a push-up position, resting over her, and press my forehead to hers. She's panting, trying to swivel her hips, to gain that friction and momentum. But I have to, *have to* take this slow. The opposite of my every instinct.

I kiss her lips, the softest peck, before I pull almost all the way out.

With just the head inside her snug walls, I press in slowly, shifting the base of my cock against her clit. She squirms beneath me, but I don't let her out of my sight, her forehead bound by mine as I do it again. Pull out to the tip. Push in slow enough for her to feel every inch of me that aches for her. Swivel against that swollen bundle of nerves. Her gaze glazes over as I repeat that again and again, her breaths warm and stuttering in little pants that soon

turn into desperation.

She claws both hands against my back, gripping my shoulders for leverage as she meets my next thrust with a hard punctuation of her hips. She uses that moment, that slight second where *I* stutter, to toss her head back, letting a moan rip from her. I bury my own groan against her throat, and the moment her legs wind around my back, the moment that her pussy begins to cinch around my cock in a death grip, I lose all control.

As I pick up speed, our panting breaths mixing with the slapping of skin that seems to crescendo with each beat, I get it. I get exactly why she wanted to start this as a race. Because as soon as I see a finish line with Lucy, my heart wants nothing more than to hold her hand as we both cross the checkered tape.

three

lucy

I DON'T RECOGNIZE the girl in the mirror.

I haven't for a long, *long* time, but in the face of what I just did, she has become even more of a distant stranger than she has been lately.

And here, I thought, I was going to get myself back.

How silly of me to even think that way.

I wasn't looking for this tonight.

What I *was* looking for in that bar was a man named Jack, maybe his friend José, and a few hours to myself to calm my nerves over the wave of new that has been steadily rising with the tide.

A new state. A new city. A new job.

Clutching the sink in this guy's—Andrew? I think his friend called him Andrew—bathroom after we had sex, staring at the foreign face in the mirror, I wonder if this was actually the better option.

At least I won't feel like throwing up in the morning.

He's a nice guy. Was maybe a little *too* nice in bed, but in the end, regardless of how I got there, I *did* find what I was looking for.

A distraction.

Something to purge him from my system. To wipe the feeling of him away.

But in the same breath, this isn't me. I am *not* this girl.

Direct. Up front. Going home with men in bars that I've barely known for the better part of an hour?

A man whose name I can't even remember.

Maybe I will puke after all.

It was all supposed to be part of the distraction, part of the façade that I painted on tonight to get myself over the hump of starting fresh, leaving the past in the past.

I slipped myself into a role, stepped onto a stage, and put on a performance. The words that came out of my mouth were all lines, written by someone else.

I feel icky. Despite the fact that the man who took me to bed was quite possibly the kindest person I've been with in a long, long time, despite his well-placed intentions, I can still feel a thin layer of scum resting on top of the grime that followed me across state lines, no matter how hard I tried to keep it out of my baggage.

I take a deep breath, trying to quell the churn in my gut, the nausea that starts to roll in like the impending doom of a tsunami wave.

Despite the fact that the girl in the mirror is almost unrecognizable, is still wearing a mask from her late-night performance, I repeat my affirmation to that reflection, quiet enough that he can't hear me.

"I am strong. I am brave. I made the right choice."

I say each with its own inhale, exhaling those truths that I'm still trying to convince myself of so that they hopefully manifest into reality. They come out of slightly chapped lips, on a face that barely looks like me.

The instant gratification of my mantra is fleeting, and as quickly as the charred edges of my heart felt fuzzy, I feel like I've been singed again.

That slow wave of nausea rolls like a barrel in my stomach.

That girl I can't recognize? She's turning a little pale green.

I've never done this before. And I'm not quite sure what to do next.

What's the protocol after you sleep with someone at the bar who you only know for certain has a name that most likely starts with the letter A? I'm a complete stranger to the girl in the mirror, and a complete stranger to one night stands.

And a complete stranger to the guy on the other side of this door.

I haven't heard a peep from him yet. I decide to snoop a little, to deep dive into this guy by digging around in his bathroom cabinets instead of making pillow talk. It seems like the safer choice.

Behind door number one, I am pleasantly surprised by the organization. Product bottles are lined up according to height, and from the looks of it, in order of how he uses them. I'm impressed by the fact that I find both a morning and an evening moisturizer, as well as a pack of floss picks that is half empty. Proof of use.

Each drawer that I silently slide open is impeccably organized. It soothes me, puts a halt to the barrel rolling of my gut.

For a moment, I wonder if a woman did all of this. Before I can shake that thought, I am greeted by my answer behind door number two.

This guy has a basket full of lady products in his bathroom. Crinkly wrappers in an array of colors, like opening up a package of Skittles. There are multiple sizes and choices, a buffet of liners and tampons, and even an overnight choice. It can only mean one of two things: Either he *does* have a woman who organized this space for him, or this bedroom is a revolving door for his nightly conquests.

Am I the other woman?

Hell, it wouldn't be the first time I was gaslit by a man.

That thought is the tipping point that makes me sick to my stomach, the barrel shifting from a casual roll to tumbling down a set of cellar stairs. The mask from my evening performance falls to the floor. I have to get out of here. He has to be wondering what's taking me so long anyway. As I press my hands to my clammy cheeks, the demon I tried to leave on the other side of the state line sneaks its way through the back door.

You're gonna run out on him, Lucy? Such a slut. Fuck him and leave him like the whore you are.

I wince, the blow landing as freshly as if he was standing right in front of me instead of across the state line.

Couldn't make me happy so you're mattress hopping across New England? Fuckin' pathetic.

It is the final nail in the coffin.

Suddenly, it's too warm in here. The walls close in, the air seems too thin, but I have no way to escape.

I've cornered myself.

I *have* to get out of here, before I let the ghost that is slowly swirling up through the drains wrap around me and strangle me like a snake. But I also *have* to use the bathroom door to leave this stranger's home, where either an already taken man or a renowned player sits waiting for me on the other side.

Rip off the Band-Aid, Lucy. Just go. Three, two...

I push through the door, only mildly surprised that Andrew is waiting on the other side of it. I'm more surprised by the fact that, in my blind haze to escape, he is...offering me clothes?

"I thought you might like to sleep in—"

"I have to go."

"...something more comfortable?"

I barely take stock of the profound sadness that overtakes his sparkling blue eyes, the same ones that had bored into me intensely when we'd been together in his bed. I'm on a mission, a mission to leave and find my peace and my safety and my security, but those eyes snag me, holding on for one last stolen second of my time. So I barely notice it, but I see the sadness long enough for it to register.

He's standing there, in the middle of his bedroom, holding a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. Offering me something to sleep in.

He swallows a lump that I barely see, before he says, "I can sleep on the couch. You can have my bed."

He shrugs, and because I can't stand to see that hint of desperation that braids with his sadness, I stare at the sweats bunched in his tight fist.

Don't bother putting anything on tonight, sugar. It'll just get in my way...

I swallow down the rising bile that washes away the *Sorry* I suddenly want to offer him but can't, and dash out the door as fast as my feet can carry me.

four

aaron

“I JUST DON’T KNOW where I went wrong.”

I cup my head in my hands, shaking it between my palms.

“Roll back the tape.”

I lift my head, and Sam’s pointer finger is doing circles, the universal signal for *roll it back*. I’ve spent the last ten minutes unloading the entire night onto my boys before our first teacher in-service of the year begins, but despite getting it all out onto the table, I’ve made no headway.

I exhale forcefully, then begin.

“Okay. So, *you left*,” I start, pointing at Sam. “Then, Drake and I start talking about—”

“How you’re a single sad sack and you want a wife and kids; yeah, yeah, we *know* this part of the story.”

I narrow my gaze at Sam, bunching my lips together into a cinched button.

“Anyway. The front door opens. The—”

“*Heavens opened up and an angel appeared*. Russo. *Get to the part about how you fucked up in the bedroom.*”

“Babe!”

Juliet Ford, Sam’s wife, cuts in, slapping him on the bicep. He instantly looks sheepish, his shoulders pushing up to his ears.

“Be *nice*. He had a rough night. We are here to *help him*.”

“I can’t *help him* when he’s so dead set on giving me every unimportant detail of the evening. *Sheesh*. It’s like grading some of the essays you bring home.”

Sam shakes his head. Juliet, our seventh grade English teacher, laughs.

“Go ahead, Aaron,” Juliet says, covering my clasped hands that lay on the

table. "Tell us what happened."

I sigh, recounting surface level details of my evening with Lucy.

We had a nice time together at the bar.

She followed me back to my place.

I tried to take things slow.

I took my time with her.

She finished first! I promise! Don't give me that look, Ford!

And when we were done, before I could even attempt to cuddle, she was up and in the bathroom.

"When she came out..." A chill races up my spine at the memory of Lucy, pale faced and frightened when she'd come out of my bathroom. "She looked like she'd seen a ghost or something."

Lucy had looked like an angel sent from Heaven's gate when she'd walked into that bar. But somewhere from creating our own heaven between the sheets to facing me again, some sort of nightmare had engulfed her. I'm not sure what worries me more: The fact that she was so haunted, or the thought of never seeing her again.

"Well, what did you say to her when she came out?" Juliet asks patiently.

"I offered her a pair of old sweats. Before I could so much as ask if she wanted to wear them to bed, she was already in the living room and putting on her shoes."

"Maybe your bathroom scared her away," Sam shrugs, picking at his school-admin-sponsored muffin.

"Bro," I exclaim. "You *know* I pride myself on keeping a tidy home."

"Yes, Danny Tanner, we *know* that one."

"Simmer down, gentlemen," Juliet interrupts. "Circle back: you're sure you didn't say *anything* that could have given her pause?"

Juliet refocuses us, and I'm back to square one.

"Aside from essentially pulling my soul from my body and offering it to her? No."

"Oh, dude, you *didn't*." Sam is wearing a grimace that I've seen too often before.

"No," I promise. "Not this time."

He exhales in relief, and I shudder at the way I've handled women in the past.

"Remind me to tell you about the time that he proposed before he knew the girl's last name," Sam mutters to his wife, whose eyes widen as a chuckle

enters the chat.

“*Wouldn’t have mattered if she would have been taking mine anyway,*” I mutter under my breath. “Stop bullying me and help me *fix this.*”

“Oh no. Did Russo name his first date’s future children again?”

Penelope Barker, the eighth grade math teacher, saunters up to our table, her mane of shiny red hair swaying as she plops into a chair on the other side of me, putting me in a Penny-and-Sam-sandwich.

“How many of Aaron’s dating stories haven’t I heard yet?” Juliet asks, giving me side eye.

Sam and Penelope trade knowing glances before zooming in for the kill.

“Our little Aaron is what we like to call a serial dater,” Penelope starts, putting her arm around my shoulder.

“But not in the typical sense,” Sam continues. “He jumps from woman to woman because he *scares them off too quickly.*”

His hand comes down on my other shoulder, and I cover my face with my palms.

“He once took a girl past a jewelry store on their second date.”

“His mom called him in the middle of a date one time, and he said he would call her back because he was out ‘with her future daughter in law.’”

“A ‘serious relationship’ to Aaron is approximately two weeks—”

“*If* he can make it that far—”

“Oh-KAY.”

I push both hands out like a stop sign and wiggle out of their little mom-and-dad, tough-love embrace, my nose and lips scrunched in annoyance. I know they’re just heckling me, but none of their stories are exactly *wrong*.

“Oh. Aaron. Sweetie.” Juliet reaches across the table and pats my hand. “I didn’t realize it was *this* bad.”

I sigh, exhaling for five long counts before I shake my head.

“But she’s—”

“*Different,*” Sam and Penelope say together. Juliet’s shoulders scrunch in a silent laugh, but then sympathy washes over her.

“Okay. *What* makes her different?” she tries.

“She’s just...”

It’s a good question. How do you describe the way that the earth shifted on its axis when she walked into the room? How can I convince my friends that it was a pure, guttural instinct that made me want to lasso Lucy to me and never let her go? At this point, I’m the Boy Who Cried Wife. They aren’t

going to believe me anyway.

“I hate to be the guy to break it to you, but sometimes, dude, I feel like you want to be married for the sake of being married.”

That thought is a sucker punch to my jugular.

“I just need to talk to her again,” I say, more to the table than to my friends, rubbing at my throat where the invisible wound still stings.

Sam shakes his head at my misery because he’s seen this too often in the past. Penelope pats me on the head and ruffles my hair. Juliet is the only one who offers me sympathy, and I can tell that encouragement is about to roll off her tongue.

“Sweetie, if she didn’t even give you her last name, let alone her number, I don’t know how we’re going to find her again.”

And then, as if on cue, the door to the cafeteria opens. I feel a shift in the atmosphere. The fluorescent lighting seems to soften, directed as if by a stage hand, to the open door, where the other half of my soul calls out to me.

“Am I dead?” The question comes as a breath.

“No. Why?”

“Oh, thank God.”

five

aaron

SHE IS soft and fresh and glowing and just as wonderful as I'd thought last night. Utter perfection in human form. Someone I will never be able to impress, but who I already know I will dedicate every hour of my days giving my hundred-and-ten-percent effort.

"Lucy?"

It's like all of my words are simply extensions of my breathing. Somehow, those two syllables reach her.

I'm attuned to her, so closely that I barely hear Sam's *Woah*, or Juliet's *Oh my God*, or Penelope's *No shit*, before I'm standing and damn near floating across the floor until I'm feet from her.

I barely miss their exclamations. But I *do* see the shift in Lucy's face. The widening of her eyes behind her glasses, the stiffening of her back, and the way her face pales just slightly before the softness of *Oh no* sails to me.

I can feel my heart on its descending elevator drop, traveling from my chest to my stomach like the Tower of Terror.

"I thought I'd never see you again," escapes, my heart doing the talking around my choked up vocal cords.

"Yeah. Me too."

I can't tell if she has desperate hope like mine, or if she was actually hoping that would be the case. I'm too afraid to ask.

I'm about to though. Because I have to know. Have to find out why she dashed out of my home like it was on fire—if it was something I said, or something I did—when our principal approaches and slaps me on the shoulder in a passing greeting, halting any words I had on the tip of my tongue. They stand on the edge of the cliff, teetering.

"I think I have to go."

Her words are stiff, curt, quiet. Her gaze lacks color. The way she nods once, like she's accepting a military command, sends a chill up my spine. I have so many things to say—*What happened last night? Did you feel the shift in the universe, or do you still have some catching up to do? I'm thinking a June wedding would complement the pretty green in your eyes, but whatever you want, darling. Whatever you want*—but just as soon as my saving grace was delivered to me, she is being taken away again.

As if on cue, an announcement crackles over the intercom—new hires are attending a separate meeting for the morning, and everyone else can report to their classrooms—and suddenly, she's gone.

I watch as she joins a throng of brand new faces, just in case she looks back at me.

It kills me when she doesn't.

I return to the table, where Drake has now joined the group. My emotions swirl like a washing machine, mixing the whites with the colors and blending together into an awful Pepto-pink. The high of seeing her clashes with the sting of rejection that I've fought all my life to avoid. I feel nauseous.

I rub at my chest with a closed fist to quell the heartburn that races up my throat.

“Dude. Is that the girl you took home last night?” Drake asks, combing one hand through his hair and popping a muffin into his mouth with the other.

“Yeah,” I say, licking my lips. “Yeah, she's...”

Here.

Overwhelming joy shoves its way past all of the fear and doubt, and I feel like sunshine is pushing its way out of my body. My smile widens, tracing the swing of the door that just closed behind her.

We'll have time. We will.

Juliet's eyes widen, and before I can even unveil my twelve-step plan, she lifts a hand to stop me.

“Put the credit card down, Aaron. Do not, I repeat *do. Not*. Buy that girl a ring.”

I side-eye her husband.

“You just *had* to tell her that story, didn't you?”

“What cut did you have in mind?”

I drop my head, mutter *princess*, and slump into my seat, only for that joy to overwhelm me again.

She's here. This is our second chance.

My entire day will be filled with meetings and classroom prep, trainings on how to handle bloodborne pathogens, and probably a lot of wasting time and shit-talking with my coworkers.

But I cannot wipe the smile off my face.

six

lucy

I WOULDN'T NECESSARILY CALL this the *worst* day of my life—it doesn't even crack the top ten.

But seeing Andrew from last night *at my brand new place of employment; my brand new fresh start???*

Let's just say it was a tad unexpected.

If I continue following this Meredith Grey path, I'm going to end up with my panties stapled in the staff lunch room.

I stare at the cork board now, listening to the new hires tour guide explain to us that the *good microwave is the black one* and to *always label your food, or Joe the IT guy can and will claim your lunch.*

I couldn't care less about Joe the IT guy when I can't get the look of Andrew's face out of my head.

It's the same one he gave me from across the high top table at the bar when his friend all but led me straight to him.

Bright eyes. Hope cascading out of him like sunshine. Looking at me like I'd dropped down from the sky.

It shouldn't have fazed me in the slightest. Especially since I've seen that look before, and it led me straight into Satan's hands.

My, my, my, Lucy. What did I do to deserve you in my life?

I shudder at the memory, closing my eyes as my entire body releases it from my head down to my toes. One of the other new hires looks at me in concern, but I ignore her and turn to face our tour guide, pretending I'm super enthralled by how the vending machines work.

As soon as the tour ends, I have some time to prep my office until lunch—at which point, all of us new people are being lumped together again and treated by the district. I can't complain, especially because being with others

will keep me distracted. But I am in dire need of this respite, five minutes to untangle the web of *starting over* and *Him* from the fact that I'm now *working with my one night stand*. This really is straight out of a nightmare. I am within reach of my new office, can see the door I left locked coming into view, when I'm cut off.

Does he have a homing beacon on me or something?

He looks just as stunned as I do, telling me that he probably wasn't just wandering around looking for me. It doesn't exactly ease the churn of my stomach. That impending sense of *he will always find you* is still deeply woven into me.

"Lucy."

Why does he have to say my name like that? Like the two syllables of my name are the cadence his breaths follow. I can't like him. Cannot let myself fall down the well of the way that his eyes light up and he says my name like that *every single time he says it*.

I can't afford to. My *heart* can't afford to.

The last time my heart thought it could afford a deceiving smile and a promise to hold me up like the world itself, I'd been cashed out and so far in the red that I'm still crawling my way out of debt.

I stiffen, wholly intent on pretending I have to go to the bathroom instead of to my office because *if he knows where my office is, then he can find me again*, when a booming voice interrupts that plan.

"Russo! Come meet our new Assistant Principal."

Don, the middle school principal, approaches him with a tall, broody looking blonde, tagging along. The blonde pushes his square glasses up his nose before extending his hand.

"This is Nate Hawkins. He'll be shadowing me to take over as AP next year. Nate, this is Aaron Russo, our gym teacher."

Aaron. His name is Aaron?

I watch *Aaron* shake Nate's hand while still keeping one eye on me like he's afraid I'll disappear again—which is exactly what I'm doing, as I back slowly toward my office, feet away from getting out of this awkward exchange, when the squeak of my shoe gives me away.

"Oh! Excellent timing!" Don waves his arm. "Lucy, come on over. I'm glad you two found each other. Now I don't have to hunt you down."

"Huh?" Aaron asks, tilting his head toward Don.

Don claps a hand onto Aaron's shoulder and uses the other to point to me.

“This is Lucy, our new school counselor. You’ll be her mentor this year.”

The ground beneath my feet, that I’d thought was newly paved over, crumbles.

This cannot be happening.

“No way?” he asks, licking his lips. I think I see fireworks spark in the blue of his eyes, and I want nothing more than to run.

God, he looks so happy.

“We couldn’t release her name to you until the board approved the hire. Welcome aboard *officially*, Lucy. We’re glad to have you as part of the River Valley family. You’ll be in good hands with Aaron showing you the ropes.”

“Thank you.”

My grace is stilted, robotic.

As Don and Nate leave us alone in the empty hallways that still have that back to school smell, I get a true, head-on glimpse of my new mentor.

Aaron. Not Andrew. Can I be even more of an idiot?

He absolutely has explosions bursting and raining down in his eyes. Without a doubt, there are happy dances going on inside his head.

I’ve used the movie *Inside Out* as part of my curriculum enough times to infer that his Joy is bouncing off the walls, doing cartwheels, near to bursting from his body.

On my insides, Fear and Sadness are clinging to one another in desperation.

I cannot let this man, the one with the sparklers for pupils, have hope.

Because what he wants from me, he can never have.

My heart is still in disheveled grains of sand at the bottom of my ribcage, and he has no idea that whatever he wants from me will simply slip through his fingers.

seven

aaron

I HAVE WON THE LOTTERY. Died and gone to heaven. Have finally found the end of the rainbow.

Plot twist: the pot of gold at the end is actually the love of my life.

My eyes spin like a slot machine set to all sevens, and I feel the delicious tug as my grin splits as widely as my lips will allow.

Lucy is my mentee.

Never in a million years would I have guessed that signing up to be a new teacher mentor would land my future in my lap. I won't lie, I was mostly in it for the extra compensation. Having some cushion in my bank account is now the *last* thing on my mind.

"Wow," I breathe, hoping my smile isn't too intimidatingly goofy.

"Yeah."

Just like earlier in the cafeteria, when I'd seen Lucy walk in through the doors, I'm not sure if her sentiment is more, *I can't believe it's you!* or *Oh, God, I can't believe it's you...*

Nevertheless, I proceed with optimism.

"I can't believe we got this lucky. I mean I was..."

I catch myself. Something wavers in her eyes, just subtle enough that I tilt in the direction of *Maybe she's not as excited to see you as you are to see her.*

I think of Sam. About how he teased me at the bar—and this morning over breakfast—about my tendency to do things too fast one-hundred-and-ten percent of the time.

I was about to go into detail—probably *too* much detail, given my track record. I was about to tell Lucy how sad I was that she ran out on me last night. How I'd unloaded on my friends, wondering how I could possibly find

her again, when she walked in through the cafeteria doors.

Something tugs on the strings of my vocal cords, lassoing the words back and holding on for dear life. It reminds me of that movie *Inside Out* that my niece and nephew have made me watch a thousand times—the one where you see the emotions inside the kid’s brain. I wonder if that’s my anxious one or my angry one. Hell, they’re probably working together.

Because even that small, small hint of hesitation reminds me of a threatened animal.

She may not have backed up, may not have run off in a different direction. But that small shift in her eyes is enough for me to rein it in. Enough to remind me of the way I’d asked what she had done this summer, and she made it sound like she’d spent June and July setting her world on fire.

Instead, I clear my throat. Exhale shortly.

Actually think about what I say before I let the waterfall pour out.

“Excited that we don’t have to do awkward introductions,” I improvise. “I already know you!”

Her gaze narrows, just slightly enough that I can tell she’s contemplating.

“I guess so.”

She doesn’t take a step back. Doesn’t reach immediately for her office door behind her. And that’s enough for me.

“Well, I should get back to my—”

“Would you want to maybe have lunch together so we can go over the start of our checklist?”

My words barrel roll over hers, kind of like last night when she’d told me she was leaving in the middle of me offering her my pajamas and my bed and *all of my love and devotion*. This time, I *do* notice her defenses rising.

First, her cheeks pink. The softest cotton candy color that lights up beneath her wide square glasses, illuminating the forest of her eyes. Next, her lips thin. The lush, kissable mouth she wore last night reels back in like bait in the summertime. Last—and the most painful blow to my chest—is the way she steps backward, just slightly enough that the tip of her toe dragging half and inch toward her office squeaks as loudly as an echo in a cavern.

I swallow.

The last thing I *ever* want to do is make her feel uncomfortable.

I also know that asking how I can fix it might make things worse.

She obviously wanted our one-night stand to be as singular as that title

implies.

She wants nothing to do with me right now, and I have to give her that. Maybe my presence is a bit of a barreling train to her first day.

“I um...we have lunch with all the new hires, and I only have a little bit of time in my office before then, so...”

“Not a problem.”

I shrug, smile, and take a step back, all in the next few beats. I don't know what exactly has gone through her head from our instant spark at the bar to running out of my bathroom like a phantom had chased her, but I don't want to keep putting that look on her face.

As she opens her office door, I spot a pad of sticky notes on top of her desk. Only, they aren't your typical, square, yellow deals. They're funky. Fun.

Like the pearl hidden deep inside Lucy that I am determined to keep uncovering.

One pad is shaped like a lightbulb in bright yellow, another like a neon hand giving you a high five. There is a pad of speech bubbles, and one of hearts.

“Oh my God, where did you get these?”

As I reach for the pad of hearts, some invisible force—maybe the Aaron with half a brain and a pinch of common sense?—tugs my hand in the direction of the neon high fives instead.

“Internet,” she says, a cross between startle and intrigue dotting her eyes as I flip through the pad of high fives.

“These are *way cooler* than the ones I have. I thought they only made squares!”

A puckered smile forms, like she's trying to hold it in.

“Nope. They have quite the array of stickies. The espresso shaped ones are my favorite.”

“The *espresso shaped ones*? That's it. I'm going Amazon shopping when I get home.”

It's then that I remember why we're even standing here smiling over sticky paper to begin with. Clicking the pen that I have attached to my lanyard, I jot down my cell.

“This is my number. Feel free to call or text.” Sensing hesitation in her eyes, I quickly add, “Or, my office extension is on the directory under Russo. Ring me if you need anything.”

I lift my hand in a half-wave, half Shaka, and pivot on my toe to head back toward my wing of the building.

'Ring me if you need anything?' God, you are pathetic, bro.

eight

lucy

NOT A PROBLEM.

Not a problem. Not a problem. Not a problem.

He—Aaron, not Andrew—left me alone in my office like I'd asked, but I haven't gotten a single productive thing done because the simplicity of his *not a problem* is booming in my veins along with my heartbeat.

Not a problem.

There was no argument.

Not a problem.

No challenge in his words or command in his voice.

Not a problem.

He didn't insist that I cater to *his* lunch plans and ignore my own responsibilities.

Not a problem.

I'm surrounded by unpacked boxes and blank white walls and unfinished cork boards—all of the things that should be occupying my brain space. Instead, inside, the slow spin of a tornado begins, hot air—*Not a problem*—circling around the chill of, *Are you talkin' back to me, Lucy? Try that again.*

It cycles, tightening with every pass, strangling my lungs and my mind so that no matter how tightly I squeeze my eyes, no matter how loudly I inhale and exhale, I cannot, *cannot purge it away.*

My saving grace comes in a knock at my door.

Thank God it isn't him.

A woman with a wave of red hair pokes her head inside, just as I'm peeling my eyes open.

"You're Lucy, right?" I'm in the process of nodding when realization dawns on her face. She can tell I was just in the middle of *a moment*. "I can

come back, if now isn't a good time."

"No, it's okay. I'm not really making any progress in here anyway."

I shrug, offering her a small smile as she steps further into my hot mess of an office. My nerves settle, like the dying fizz of an opened soda bottle.

"I'm Penelope Barker. I teach eighth grade math."

"Lucy."

Thankfully she misses the hesitation to offer her my last name.

My door says "Ms. Lucy" for a reason.

"I know that all of the new hires have lunch with the district, but I just wanted to drop by and welcome you. If you need anything, my room isn't too far from here. I know how overwhelming a new job can be. Feel free to stop by if you need a friendly face. Although, you kind of hit the jackpot having Aaron as a mentor. He's our middle school gym teacher and coaches like, seven sports. He knows absolutely everything there is to know about every student in this building, so he'll be your go-to this year. And, he's pretty easy on the eyes."

I catch the suggestive smile and the not-so-subtle waggle in her eyebrows that scrunches the freckles on her cheeks. I've been here for all of one day; I have zero posters on my office walls, but I already have one teacher interested in me, and a gossip train chugging down the tracks.

She's not exactly wrong though.

If it hadn't been for his friend pointing me in Aaron's direction last night, I have a feeling he would have caught my eye anyway. Tousled, just-out-of-bed, thick, dark hair; muscles cut and defined as a testimony to the "seven sports" that he coaches; bright blue eyes that remind me of the ocean on a sunny summer day? He's the kind of man that women *hope* approach them in a bar.

Too bad I'm nowhere near wanting something like that anymore.

"Anyway," Penelope says, interrupting the flashes of my one night stand and my new mentor, "if you need a hand unpacking your office, or have questions about a student, or just want to ignore work for an hour and gossip, I'm your girl!"

Penelope excuses herself with a friendly wave, and I wait until she's around the corner before I shut my door. Resting my back against it, I tilt my head and stare at the too-bright lights on my ceiling.

He's interested in me. To a point where other teachers that I barely know are already trying to play matchmaker. This is going to be harder than I

thought.

Sinking into my chair, I prop my elbows on my desk, rest my head in my hands, and exhale until my lungs give out.

It's an exercise my therapist suggested.

Let it all out. Everything weighing on you. Sometimes, by the time you're done, that'll be the end of it. Sometimes, you'll have to inhale and start again. Sometimes, it will trigger a rush of more emotions. Don't stop yourself from crying. That's your body's way of telling you that you need the release.

But I can't cry. Not today. Not at my desk, surrounded by boxes of unpacked office supplies.

With thirty minutes left until lunch, I set to work. One place in my life needs to be unpacked and in order.

Work seems like a good place to start.

I have two boxes unpacked and their supplies organized by the time the group of new hires heads to lunch. I swear I see the glint of his smile coming from the cafeteria as I exit.

nine

aaron

I TAP my foot nervously against the side of my desk. The metal clangs dully in a sporadic rhythm, and I wonder which sound is louder: that, or the pounding of my heart against my ribcage.

To start the second day of in-services, all new hires are meeting with their building mentor. Our district has a great mentorship program to acclimate new teachers to the district; it's typically someone on your grade level team, or for us specialists, it's someone close enough. Lucy is the new middle school counselor, and as the gym slash health teacher, we were partnered together. It'll be my job to show her the ropes of day to day life—how to use the copier, how to use our student online database, the layout of the building—as well as all of the *not in the handbook* things—you know, like where the good vending machines are.

I signed up for the mentorship program at the thought of a little extra compensation, but also because I love getting to know people, and am always willing to offer a helping hand. And, if I'm being honest, because I can't say no to people. With the staff turnover in the building this year, Don was kind of desperate after no one replied to the summer email looking for mentors. He called me personally because I really don't have negation in my vocabulary. But I can't complain when it brought me a second chance with Lucy.

Now, minutes before I'm slated to meet her in her office to go over the welcome packet, I'm just hoping that I don't send her running like I did the other night.

We still haven't gotten to the bottom of what happened, and though I know this isn't necessarily the best place to bring it up, it's all that has been on my mind since I thought I lost her and fate dropped her right back into my

life again.

How do I talk with Lucy about how she ran out my front door without scaring her away or making the rest of the year awkward between us?

Hopefully, what I have planned is crystal clear enough.

With five minutes to make it across the building, I grab my clipboard and take the walk from the gym over to Lucy's office. As I round the corner and see her working in the hall, I set the surprise I have down on the floor carefully, tucked behind a garbage can so that she can't see it. When I stand again, I'm still not prepared for the sight of her.

Her hair is up in that straight, high ponytail; her simple three quarter sleeve shirt accentuates the definition of muscle in her arms, and is tucked into straight slacks that hug slim but toned thighs. I watch in silence as she slides her square-framed glasses back up the bridge of her nose with her index finger. The simple motion has me mesmerized.

She's decorating a bulletin board, stapling large construction paper letters against black butcher paper. The left side of the display shows half of a brain in black and white, while the right side of the brain is streaming in color. Black and white lettering spells out *CHANGE YOUR WORDS*, and she's adding the last few rainbow letters to the right side that says *CHANGE YOUR MINDSET*.

A little growth mindset pep talk is just what I need right now.

I take a short, sweet breath in and out, and use the phrases that she has waiting on a table next to her to staple up on the board as my motivation.

Everything is hard before it's easy!

Mistakes help us grow!

The more I do it, the better I'll get!

"Lucy!" I exclaim, extending my arm.

She shrieks.

The stapler clatters to the floor as both of her arms bend, fists drawn up on either side of her face like she just saw a mouse.

Alright. Lesson one: Mistakes help us grow! No loud noises.

I grimace, letting the arm that I'd swept to the side in exclamation gently float back to my side as Lucy catches her breath. She rests both hands over her heart, and pinches her eyes closed as she reclaims her breath.

"It's just me. Sorry. I get very excited sometimes."

"I can tell," she says. Eyes still closed. Hands still on her chest.

Setting my things down on the table, I bend to pick up the stapler and the

row of staples that flung out in the collision with the ground. After putting it back together, I offer it to her.

“I like your bulletin board. Mine is usually just newspaper articles of athletes.”

“Thanks,” she says quietly.

I realize then that she’s still working to calm herself down. Still taking in slow, steadying breaths. My stomach knots, and I have to rein in every muscle in my body so that I don’t reach out and comfort her. Instead, I do the opposite. I take a step back, then another, and give her space. The second hand makes a full pass of the clock before she finally peels her eyes open.

I offer her a shy smile, scratching beneath my ear.

“Sorry.”

My smile crunches as I turn into an awkward turtle, my shoulders scrunching up to my ears. All the while, she watches. Oh so slowly, her features shift. Her eyes narrow, her head tilts, one brow raises. Her lips part, but she pauses, almost as if she’s halfway to formulating her response but isn’t quite there yet. They part and close twice, so subtly that I can see the way they stick together. The focus it takes for me to not imagine the way her lips stuck like that when they parted from mine the other night is almost unbearable.

“Thank you for the apology.”

She reaches for the stapler, and when she takes it, her fingertips graze my palm. I’m surprised the fire alarms don’t go off from the sparks that sizzle off my skin.

“So, you’re here to meet with me about...”

She breaks me from the spell I’ve fallen prey to.

“Oh! We have to meet today. Mentor to mentee. Did you want to do that now, or do you have time in your schedule later?”

She glances from her half-finished bulletin board to her office that’s still buried under stacks of unpacked boxes, then drags her wary gaze slowly back to me.

“We can always chat while you hang up your bulletin board. I’ll help! Stop me if you need to take notes or anything?”

Relief crosses her expression and she nods, disappearing into her office for another stapler and a clipboard of her own.

“Hey! Clipboard buddies!”

I lift my own hunk of plastic that is essentially my traveling work bible to

show her, pointing between the matching models that we have with a wide smile. She chuckles awkwardly and sets hers down on the table, opening the attached note pad to a fresh sheet of paper.

“Why don’t you give me the spiel while I finish figuring all of this out?”

I nod, and she picks up a jar full of thumbtacks and begins to organize the posters, tacking them to the board, shifting them when they don’t quite align correctly.

“So uh... the first thing I’m supposed to do is introduce myself. Pretty sure we got that out of the way a few nights ago, but...”

I swallow when she tenses at the mention of that night, then backtrack after mentally berating myself.

“I’m Aaron Russo. Which, um, you already knew. I love Fruity Pebbles, Disney movies, and any Boston sports team. I’m an Aries, and in my humble opinion, Christmas and Thanksgiving are the best holidays. I teach middle school gym. I coach basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring, but I kind of help out everywhere. This is my tenth year at River Valley. I grew up in the area, so it just kind of worked out that I got this job right after my student teaching placement.”

“Did you go here?” she asks, assessing the arrangement of her posters before indicating that I can begin stapling them permanently into place.

“Yep! My picture is still up in the trophy case from when our baseball team won the conference championship.”

A quiet laugh huffs out her nose.

“Anyway. That’s enough about me. Your turn.”

She tenses, a full body freeze with her arm extended at a ninety-degree angle, a pushpin midway to the second half of the bulletin board. Her answer comes out mechanically.

“My name is Lucy. Originally from Rhode Island, where I got my degree in school counseling. Also my tenth year in the middle school setting.”

Annnnnnnnd that’s all I get.

No fun facts, which I guess is fair.

She resumes push-pinning posters to the board and I bite the inside of my cheek to quell my embarrassment.

I just shared my star sign, for crying out loud.

“Annnnyyyyyyway...” I shift on the balls of my feet, checking *Introductions* off of my list before pulling tacks out of the stapled posters as she goes. “Since we’re on the specialists staff, our checklist is a little

different. I can give you a more thorough tour of the building once your stuff is all unpacked, but I'll get through as much of the boring stuff as possible now."

I go over all of the rudimentary information on the checklist. She's already familiar with our student online interface, where we track behaviors and such, since she used it at her last school. I go over some of our policies and procedures, like our bell schedule and dismissal times, explain the different incentives systems that we use, as well as the end of semester "fun-tivities." Once we've finished hanging all the posters on the bulletin board, I help her login to our interface and explore all of the handy tools. By the time I've gone through the list of some of our high flier students and given her a breakdown of the biggest behavior issues where she'll likely be needed, our hour is almost up.

"It sounds like you guys need a bit of an overhaul with social-emotional regulation," she says, to which I nod.

"Something about that middle school mindset shifts kids into thinking they're *too cool to feel*, when it's really the opposite. Middle school has some big feelings, and they don't know how to compartmentalize them or cope at all, so they just come out as..."

"Anger. Rudeness. Bullying."

"Exactly."

I nod, my hands clasped between parted knees as Lucy twists her chair back to facing her computer. She's logged into our discipline interface, and with administrator access, is able to dig to the log of last year's data. The bar chart spikes the highest in areas like *Defiance* and *Disrespect*.

"Well, I already spoke with Don about SEL in my interview. I have a few things I'd like to implement this year, with a five year plan to shift the way that we handle social and emotional learning."

My head skips right over the way she's going to improve our school, because my heart only heard *five year plan*, and I can't help but blurt out, "You're sticking around?"

She nods once. "That's the plan."

My heart sprouts wings, and I can't pull back my smile.

I stand to leave, satisfied with the parts of the checklist that we've covered. Satisfied with the parts we've left untouched, because they mean more time later with Lucy. Satisfied with the *next five years* that I have to look forward to, with her just down the hall from me.

I'm barely out her door when my heart leaps into my chest, the verbal diarrhea spewing all over Lucy's words.

At the same time that she tries to ask, "What time works best for you to finish up this afternoon?" my dumb self is asking her on a date.

Kind of loudly.

Definitely out of place.

It comes out in one rushed slur of, "Do you maybe wanna get dinner with me tonight or something?"

Before she can respond, I duck into the hall, grabbing the vase of flowers I'd stowed away behind the garbage can, the ones I picked up at Stop & Shop on the way to school this morning. Blue and green daisies to match our school colors.

But suddenly, standing there sweating with my vase of flowers, I want to swallow it all back up immediately. With each stuttered *I, um...* that follows, I can see the color visibly drain from Lucy's face, like a thermometer plunged into the freezer.

I know I've messed up.

She's pale, her eyes wide, alert pinging all over her face. She swallows, twice, and I wish for a rewind button. Then, finally, her lips part, her words a whisper that I can barely hear over the ancient air conditioning system that kicks in at the most inopportune moment.

"Aaron, I'm so sorry, but I don't... I don't date coworkers."

My heart inflates to a bruising pressure, like it's going to burst.

"I didn't...think we were going to see each other again. After that night."

Strike two.

"We were...a one-time thing."

Batter's out.

"Oh."

I can *feel* the pop of my heart, the sputter like a balloon before it sinks to the ground, right there on the floor with the discarded staples.

"Uh... right. Yeah. Sorry, that makes... that makes sense."

I pivot, scratching the back of my head with the hand that isn't holding the vase, trying not to dash down the hall at a sprint.

She shrugs. That's that.

I mumble something about emailing her with further details so that we can finish the checklist, then turn so I can head anywhere but here as soon as I possibly can.

ten

lucy

“DID YOU TELL HIM?”

“About which part?” I ask, fidgeting with the hair tie on my wrist while I stare into my lap. “The fact that I’ve never actually had a one-night stand so the other night was a total whim, or the fact that I’m still too unstable for anything resembling any form of a romantic relationship, or that the sight of flowers triggers me because my ex-husband used them as an apology every time he verbally berated me?”

My therapist, Samantha, hums knowingly through my computer speakers. A state line away, she is the one thing I refused to give up from my old life. She knows me better than I know myself. Starting over once I got to Massachusetts would have meant reliving my trauma all over again to someone new.

I often joke that she just knows too much. In reality, she is the person I trust the most.

When I lift my heavy head, she offers me a warm smile, one that reminds me of a mom, like she’s got a plate of chocolate chip cookies waiting for me after the hard stuff is over.

“Any of it.”

I sigh, letting my gaze linger on hers as I tell her what she already knows. “No.”

“Which would be the easiest?”

Obviously not the fact that I moved here to get away from my emotional manipulator of an ex.

“I don’t know.” I pluck at the hair tie, but in its coiled plastic state, it snaps back almost in slow motion. I resort to rolling it up and down my wrist instead. “Maybe...”

Opening up to him about Scott is simply out of the question. Flowers opens up the door to more questions. *Why flowers, Lucy?* I guess I have my answer.

“I have to draw a line in the sand. Tell him I can’t date him. Don’t I?”

Samantha offers me that mom smile, and for a moment, the task doesn’t sound as hard as it does in my head.

“From the bit of information that you’ve shared, this man is head over heels for you. I think that, if you aren’t ready to explore dating yet, it’s best if you cut things off sooner rather than later. It will cut down on interactions with him that might cross a line he doesn’t know you’ve drawn. You can keep the working relationship without him assuming more. This will also be a good exercise for you in setting boundaries. Learning to say no. Using your ___”

“Using my words,” I finish, as if this hasn’t been the topic of many a session since I started seeing her. “I know.”

As soon as I fit my index finger beneath my hair tie, as soon as my gaze hits my lap again, Samantha says, “Why don’t we try writing a script?”

Scripts, I know.

I fell in love with theater at a young age because having a million different ways to interpret written lines in a script was like playing on an imaginary playground. Samantha has taken that little kernel about me and run with it since the beginning. She has helped me write scripts about what I would have said to Scott in different situations as a way of taking those moments of pain and regret and both releasing them from me, and transforming them into a power that I’ve been slowly working to regain as I find my voice.

My favorites are the times I tell him to go fuck himself, but like the good mom-therapist she is, Samantha always makes me pick better words.

We go over on our session time—something that was more common in the beginning, when I would need the first half hour to ground myself in the plush teal chair in Samantha’s Rhode Island office, and remind myself that she was my safe space before I was even able to word vomit everything I’d been keeping inside between sessions. Normally, this would be something I’d finish as my “therapy homework,” but Samantha sits with me until we’ve perfected the words and I’ve rehearsed them with her twice. Three simple sentences that weigh heavily in my gut, like a cage ready to be opened. My first steps in trying out this voice of mine on my own.

That evening, I find myself seated on my bathroom counter in front of the mirror, practicing the words that I know will crush Aaron's heart.

eleven

lucy

“...THOUGHT that he was really going to pull a fast one on *me* on the first day of school, like I haven’t had *all* of his siblings before, and like I don’t have his momma on speed dial.”

Penelope Barker has not stopped talking since she cornered me in my office. Which was approximately fifteen minutes ago. On the second day of school, my second in a brand new building. At least when she promised that she would always be there for gossip, she wasn’t lying.

I don’t know whether I should be shooing her away or kissing her feet.

To be fair, she came to me with concerns about a student.

Additionally, she is currently standing between me and any sort of interaction with Aaron—whom I have been avoiding since the flowers incident.

Can I actually chalk this up to a win-win?

“Anyway. What I’m trying to say is, Isaac is going to put up a tough-guy, doesn’t-care front with you from the moment that he so much as crosses the threshold of your office. But just know that, as the youngest of five in a single-parent household where his dad is in jail and his mom is barely home, he needs all of the adult love and support he can get. He just has a hard time asking for it.”

God, don’t I know it.

“Thanks,” I say, then tack on, “For sharing. Getting to know all of these new students can be a little overwhelming.”

“I guess it’s a good thing you have such a great mentor then.”

The look on her face—as her eyebrows wag up and then press into a relaxed but suggestive line; as her lips curve into a knowing smile, making her freckles dance—tells me she wants to run her mouth just a little bit more.

“Aaron has been great,” is about as much as I can muster, the simple motion of rolling those four words off my tongue making it feel thick and heavy.

I busy myself by writing down that student’s name and homeroom teacher on one of my sticky notes—the high five as a reminder that this is something I should get to in the next five days—and pray that she drops Aaron’s name from the conversation.

“He’s definitely a fan favorite. The kids all love him. He may or may not be a favorite of the moms, too.”

What is it with this woman and wanting to get with the gym teacher?

It isn’t until she laughs—full and with a wide smile—that I realize I said that out loud.

“Oh, no, don’t get me wrong, we all *love* Aaron, but he’s a flirt. I’m glad he was in a relationship when I first started here, or I would have spent all of my free time suddenly interested in basketball.”

I nod, letting her harmless gossip sting me further.

Flirt probably means he’s a player—which I could have deduced from the pharmacy in his bathroom alone. He was in a relationship when Penelope started at River Valley, and yet here he is, taking me home from the bar and promising me sweet nothings and a pair of sweats.

It’s too much information, and I realize that my anxiety has taken over and started to spider-web one simple English word into about seventeen different directions. By the time Penelope leaves me with her classroom extension and cell phone number on one of my speech bubble stickies—*One in case you need help with any of the students; the other in case you’d like to get a drink and gossip some more*—I haven’t even begun to untangle the new mess of threads.

There’s a part of me, buried so far deep down that I wonder if I’m making it up, that is disappointed about this new Aaron news. If I wasn’t still healing, if I wasn’t set on focusing on myself, I might have followed that thread. Aaron is nice. He’s kind. He’s definitely cute. And, unfortunately for the parts of me that are trying to forget we exist together, his body knows exactly how to get mine to sing.

Too bad though—that I can’t let myself think those things.

Suddenly, as if I’ve manifested him, Aaron is standing where Penelope just vacated. I gulp down a ball of nerves and realize that if I don’t do this now, I’m probably going to put it off until I’ve created another mess for

myself.

Because that's what I do. The messes I find myself in are self-imposed.

You walked into my office on your own, Lucy. You knew exactly what you were asking for, dirty girl.

I shiver as his voice slithers through me, and focus on the task at hand, wishing I'd had time to go over my script once more.

"Hey, Ms. Lucy! I see you survived day two."

I don't miss the way that he plants his feet two full floor tiles before my door, like he's giving me space to escape if I need to. Something about that single move cinches around my heart and tugs.

"I did," I nod, distracting myself from this tall puppy dog who, despite the way I'd taken his flowers the other day and metaphorically tossed them into the trash, is still standing here with a soft—albeit hesitant—smile on his face.

"Do you need anything from me? Copier code, new schedule, the low down on any kids who are already giving you a run for your money?"

"I think I'm good for right now. I'm still just trying to get my bearings."

He nods, that warm, soft, gooey smile not faltering in the slightest.

"Okay. Well, if you need anything, you know how to reach me."

And that's that?

He doesn't try to ask me out on another date, or stay and help me hang up my bulletin board, or ask me to open the can of worms that was our night at the bar.

He simply sees my boundary, accepts it, and moves on, turning on his toe to leave. I could take this out. Let him walk away with a smile and some pep in his step, like all of our missteps never happened.

But Samantha would be so disappointed in me.

And, I'm beginning to realize, I'd be disappointed in me too.

For not speaking up. Not setting my own boundaries. I have to start somewhere, and for some reason, Aaron seems like a safe, easy option.

"Hey, Aaron?"

The effort it takes to call after him nearly saps me of all the willing energy I have left, but when he hums and turns back around on his toe, his brows raised up in question, I can feel the soft smoothness of his cheeks beneath my hands from that night. Somehow, it's the zap that I need—along with a deep inhale for five and exhale for five—to make the scripted words in my head come to life.

“I appreciate your interest in wanting to date me.”

I cannot believe you're actually interested in me.

“Right now, I don't have time to commit to a relationship.”

I honestly don't think my heart could take being handed off to someone else again, maybe ever.

“I hope that we can still remain cordial as coworkers.”

God, I sound like a robot. But by the time Samantha and I had worked out what to say, I had decided that the more businesslike I could make it, the easier these words would be to say. No room for error. No room for misinterpretation. Cut and dry.

I don't miss the way that his brows slide up in this tiny fraction of hope, only to slide back down in a pinch of sadness. And as he takes one step closer to my doorway, sliding his hand into the pocket of his joggers and letting his despair lift into an easy smile, something inside of me reaches out, like all the time I've been drowning, I only needed to ask for a life raft.

And Aaron is shining like a beacon in the middle of the sea.

I do something I've never done before.

I go off-book.

Off-script.

I'm *improvising* when the words on the page have always been my crutch, because I've never been strong enough to find my own.

“But, if you'd be interested in...”

He slides his sneakered foot closer.

“...being...friends?”

His open palm gently rests against my door frame, and my insides somersault.

I had wandered into that bar a week ago looking for a distraction. Aaron Russo fit the bill. And with the way that Scott has been subtly simmering in my veins despite the time and distance I've put between us, I could use a little bit more. Maybe being friends with Aaron is the ticket I've been waiting for.

His hand slides up to rub the back of his neck, just like it had when I'd turned down his date and his flowers. That somersault takes another turn, but in a way that means if he keeps looking at me with those sad eyes, I'm going to throw up.

“I...” He swallows, and I brace myself for the impact, for the wave of disappointment that completely snuck up to crush me. “Friends.”

He struggles to say that words, and I see the glimpse of a shiver run up his spine, like the thought disgusts him.

Wouldn't be the first time you disgusted someone, Lucy. It's why I never took you out in public.

An apology climbs my throat like acid. A force of habit from my previous marriage, whenever I tried to voice my needs and they were shot down because it wasn't what Scott wanted and I had to backtrack before things got bad.

But suddenly, Aaron is nodding. Extending his hand. Blinking out the disappointment and... Wow, that smile should not be tickling my gut right now.

"Friends! I can do friends."

His hand waits between us, and as I tentatively slip mine into it, my heart palpates between the weight of his smile and the strong warmth of him holding me again.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I just gave in. Wiped away some of his sadness...

The want to people please starts to form a *Sorry* on my lips, but he interrupts me with a gentle squeeze of my hand before he lets it go, giving me space I didn't know I needed until it was granted to me.

"No! No need to apologize. Thank you for being honest with me."

There is no need to apologize when explaining your feelings. Samantha has told me this on more than one occasion. Still, it's a force of habit.

Scott always expected an apology, *especially* when the tears I cried were because of him.

"Right. Well..." Aaron's hand drifts up from his neck to scratch in the short, dark hair, and my fingertips tingle with that memory, jealous that I only got to shake his hand this time. "I guess I'll get out of your hair. Catch you later, friend?"

He passes an awkward smile, his lips pressed together and lifted in a straight line toward his nose; it makes him kind of look like a turtle.

I don't have time to appreciate the silliness of that thought, because as he walks away, my counselor brain is already overthinking every minute facial expression and wondering if he's really okay with only being my friend.

twelve

aaron

“SHE FRIEND ZONED YOU?”

I blow out a breath at that nasty F-word as my baby sister Sophia rolls her eyes *hard*.

“I hate that. It’s like, the *worst* sort of consolation prize. She might as well have just left you hanging,” she jeers, finishing the ribbon she’d been tying with a hard knot. Whichever wedding shower guests receives this particular favor is going to have a hard time getting to the body scrub inside.

“To be fair, she *had* already turned him down,” Maria, the oldest Russo sibling, says from the opposite end of the table, where she is in charge of affixing small cards that say *Cheers to the Future Missus!* to tiny bottles of wine.

“Okay, but it sounds like they really hit it off at the bar,” Daniela, third in line, chimes in. Despite the fact that this is *her* wedding shower we’re preparing for, she insists on being in the middle of the chaos, ruining every surprise my sisters and I have meticulously planned. Dani steals a thin breadstick from the cup that Mom had out as appetizers when we all arrived at my parents’ place and bites it in half, pointing the other half at me.

“Listen, Aaron, I say go for it. She’s clearly fighting feelings. I think she realized how into it you were and got spooked. She just needs a little coaxing.”

“Absolutely the fuck she does not, Daniela Marie,” Maria interjects.

“Maria! Watch your language in my house!”

My dad swoops in with my mom following closely behind.

“We just want to see how everything’s going,” she says before *ooing* and *ahhing* at our progress. Dad comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and cinching his hands together above her belt.

“Do you remember when it was us, *amore mio*?”

“Like it was yesterday,” Mom says dreamily, tilting her head back to look over her shoulder at my dad.

“Remember when we couldn’t make it to the reception before we—”

“*Ohkay, that’s enough! PDA parents, leave!*”

At Dani’s insistence, they head back to the kitchen, snickering as they go. I’m pretty sure my dad smacks my mom’s butt before he ushers her out of sight. Dani and Soph gag, and Maria and I shake our heads and laugh before she dives right back in.

“Listen, Aaron. The girl said no. A few times. I think you’ve gotta let this one go. Respect her no for what it is. If it’s meant to be—”

“*It’ll always find its way back.*”

My sisters and I all finish our mother’s mantra. She and Dad were high school sweethearts, but when he left for the army at eighteen, she had absolute faith that waiting for his tour to be over was the right move. Now, here they are, four kids and almost too much PDA after forty-ish years of marriage.

Who am I kidding? I want to still be grabbing my wife’s butt and sneaking off for quickies when all of our kids are visiting at sixty-four.

I want *exactly* what my parents have.

A house full of kids and a marriage full of love. Just like the Disney movies we grew up watching. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. When my teachers asked what we wanted to be when I grew up at kindergarten graduation, I walked up to that microphone and proudly proclaimed, *A daddy*. I can’t wait for the day when I’m finally able to upgrade my fun-uncle card.

I just wish Lucy could see the end of the red carpet that rolled out between us the minute she walked into that bar.

“She *did* come back,” I say after a bit of tulle-shuffling and ribbon tying. “I thought I lost her, and the next day, she showed up, *at my job, as my mentee*. That’s *gotta* mean something.”

My sisters eye me with a mix of caution, pity, and a hint of annoyance.

“Not everything happens for a reason, Aaron,” Sophia says gently.

“So you’re telling me that Flynn Rider just *happened* to stumble upon Rapunzel’s tower—”

“It’s a movie!” Dani throws her hands up in the air. “Half of those movies start with the parents dying! Is that what you want?”

Dani shrugs, mumbles something about it being *her loss*, and we all

return to our jobs.

Gossip about my nonexistent love life is tabled as we each resume tying ribbon around various party favors. With Dani's wedding in just a few months, and Maria due with her third rugrat soon, we're trying to get ahead of schedule on all of the piddly little tasks that make up a wedding.

This will be the third Russo sibling wedding—Maria married *her* high school sweetheart straight out of college; Sophia married her husband before he was deployed; and now Dani, my buddy in the middle, is next in line—marrying the latest in a line of deadbeats because, after he got her pregnant two years ago, my father insisted that she *stop messing around*. Which leaves me. The lone male, left to carry on the last name that oh so quickly went from four down to one in the past decade.

And *boy* does that pressure suck.

Oddly, out of all four siblings, I think I'm the *biggest* hopeless romantic of us all.

I let my thoughts bubble at a light simmer, the pressure and the guilt and the feelings that I'm simply never going to be enough somewhat constant in me at this point. Like I somehow haven't done enough to deserve the white picket fence.

I'm happy for my sisters—so happy that they all found guys to take care of them and my nieces and nephews. But damnit, I want what they have so badly it hurts. And it's not for a lack of trying.

My dating history has become a sort of joke around our family—so much so that, when we take our annual Christmas photo in our matching pajamas, my mom slyly positions us so that whoever I'm dating is on the far edge of the photo. Optimal for cropping her out when she doesn't make it into the new year.

Mom's words after one too many glasses of wine, not mine.

I must sigh loudly enough to attract the attention of my sister, because as I'm finishing up my tenth little baggie of sugar scrub with the card inside that says, *Thank you for showering Daniela with us!*, my big sister sidles up next to me.

“You know you're a total catch, right? Your future wife is going to be so lucky, Aaron.”

I shake my head, pushing a breath out of my nostrils. It's nothing I haven't heard before.

You can't rush love. Be patient. She'll come when the timing is right.

“I just wish she’d get here sooner.”

“I know *you’re* ready, but that doesn’t mean *she* is. Give her time. Be patient.”

I don’t mean to dismiss her advice, but it’s the same stuff I’ve been hearing since I broke down at eighteen when my high school girlfriend didn’t want to go to college together and ended it with me a week before she moved out of state.

“Do you really think this girl is the one?”

“Depends,” I say, finishing a knot. “Are you going to make fun of me for ‘filling ten spots on my The One punch card?’”

She huffs a laugh.

“No, but that’s a good one.”

“Thanks. Thought of it myself.”

“Come on, I’m being serious.”

She wraps her hand around my wrist, stopping me from beginning another ribbon.

Something about motherhood has etched wisdom into my sister’s eyes. It’s a good look on her.

“Fine.” I give in. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

She nods, and I believe her.

“The minute she walked in that bar, I knew something was different. And before you say anything,” I interrupt the slight part of her lips before she can poke fun at me. I take a deep breath, and know without a doubt that the words on my exhale are my truth. “Something snapped into place inside me. Like the cogs of my heart have been stuttering until she came in and made the clock tick in time to her.”

I see the shift in her gaze, and with the slight uptick of her smile, I know that she gets it. She squeezes my wrist, gently this time, the same way that I see her do when her three year old twins run in from the other room just looking for comfort from their mama.

“If she’s it for you Aaron, then nothing is going to stop you two from getting to forever. Be patient with her. Let her lead you. I promise, waiting for the rest of your life is worth every second.”

The rest of my life.

It’s in that moment that I realize just how much time I have left in the rest of my life.

And it’s then that I realize that waiting for Lucy to join me will be my

greatest adventure.

thirteen

aaron

“COACH RUSSO? Bro, what are you doing here?”

“Helping out with soccer practice. *Duh.*”

Liam, a seventh grader on the team, finishes folding his socks over his shin guards before lacing up his cleats.

“Actually, Liam, I think he’s trying to get a bingo on his coaching card.”

Mike Peters, the boys’ head soccer coach, razzes me as he joins me and a few of the players at the bench on the sidelines.

“Hey! I got my bingo when I subbed in for badminton intramurals last year. I’m going for a blackout now.”

Mike laughs and slaps Liam on the back as Liam races out to join the rest of the team. I shake my head and chuckle.

“Seriously, Russo, are you trying to show us all up or what?”

“I’m just helping out! I’m a helpful guy!”

I smile wide and pick up a nearby soccer ball, tossing it above my head like I’m juggling it, and catching it in the opposite hand.

“Well, I appreciate it.”

He claps me on the shoulder, clutching his clipboard under his arm as we make our way to the hodgepodge of boys who are aimlessly kicking around balls and bouncing them off their heads.

“Alright, gentlemen; circle up!” Mike hollers. Immediately, they snap to attention with laser focus.

It’s always in these moments that I feel the gym teacher guilt. A lot of boys at this age start to get an attitude in the classroom that I, as their gym teacher, rarely see. If they give the *gym teacher* lip, they run laps, or sit out of game time. If they mouth off to Coach Russo, they’re benched—and *also* run laps. For some reason, that doesn’t translate well to the classroom. The

disrespect I've seen in students—and the lack of care or follow-through from parents—has only gotten worse. *Especially* when parents seem to *not* care if their kid is being disrespectful to a classroom teacher, but raise hell if I bench their kid for talking back. It's a lose-lose situation these days.

“Some of you know that Coach MacMillan is out for two weeks because his wife just had a baby. Coach Russo is filling in for him.”

I get a few standard hoots and hollers and few *Let's gooo's!* before Mike gives the *settle down* hands. The boys instantly quiet, standing in a ready position.

“Happy to help, boys.”

Mike gets the team set up with their first round of warm-ups, including a mile run at two laps around the field, and he and I keep pace together.

“Damn, paternity leave is only two weeks? Kind of sucks that he has to come back to work that soon.”

“You're telling me,” Mark huffs. “My last kid was born over the summer. I ended up using mine throughout the year to give my wife a hand at home adjusting to three.”

I grimace, thinking about one sister at home with her toddler, and another with her third on the way. While I do enjoy playing fun-uncle, I wonder how much more I could be doing to help them out at home. Guilt trickles in as we round the corner of the field.

“Thanks again for helping out, man. I didn't think you had time to fit anything else into your schedule.”

“Anytime!” I say. “Basketball's in the winter and baseball doesn't start until spring. I've got the time.”

It's been a while since I've touched a soccer ball outside of demonstrating skills to my team sports P.E. class, so the next hour and a half is actually pretty fun. I'm sure my mom will be thrilled to hear that my lone U-6 season didn't go to waste.

After practice wraps up, and I help Mike lug all of the equipment back and lock up for the night, I head back to my office to take care of some stuff. Lesson planning, sports schedules, looking over absences in the staff that we have for the upcoming week to see if I can help subbing anywhere. Lastly, I look over my clipboard notes, reviewing anything I jotted down about specific students this week.

Gym can tell you a lot about a kid, and can also make their weaknesses and insecurities shine. It's here that I build my best relationships, and also

where I make the most connections between shy students and the counselor. Which brings me to the last item on my to-do list.

The counselor.

I have a short list of students I'd like her to check in with, and a few things on our monthly mentor/mentee checklist to go over. I chew on my thumb nail, debating if I should shoot her an email or not, when I ultimately decide on a meeting. I attach the invite to an email listing the students I'd like to chat about, and block off an hour.

An hour of her time.

Which I know will be full of technical jargon and business talk, but at the same time, it's an hour full of *Lucy*, and I can't help the way my heart gets its hopes up that maybe I'll get one of those soft, half-smiles that I can't seem to get out of my head.

Even though she and I seem to be doing an awkward tango since she sent me to the bench. I think of my sister's advice to trust in the process and take things slow. Lucy could have told me to buzz off. Could have asked to only be cordial coworkers. But friends? Friends I can do. I just have to prove to her how much better than temporary we can be. And I have to do it in the *opposite* of my natural pace—Lightning McQueen fast. Lucy has me slowing down for the first time in my life, and I can't deny that it has been challenging.

I head out for the night, ignoring the buzz of a notification on my watch as I loft my bag over my shoulder. The sun is still fighting for those last inches of summer, but I can see the pinks and oranges fading into deep blue through the hallway windows. What I don't expect is the illumination of her office, like a siren's song luring me into dangerous waters.

And here, I thought I was the last person left in the building on practice nights.

Lucy is typing diligently at her computer, and I couldn't stop the smile from sneaking slowly up my cheek if I tried.

I remember the way that she startled at my enthusiasm the other day, so I try a different approach. I shuffle my feet, tap the door frame, and then knock against it lightly with my knuckle. Her head twitches, but she doesn't scare like the last time. The surprise of seeing me fades, replaced by a blend of hesitancy and embarrassment, all playing out in a rush of color that settles on the apples of her cheeks. So I smile, trying my best to erase that unease that we've both been accidentally piling between us.

“Hey, friend,” I say softly, instead of in my usual boisterous tone. “Competing with me to see who can be the last teacher in the building?”

The edges of her lips quirk up. Relief floods through her and over to me.

“I could curl up on the floor and spend the night here if I had a blanket. I might just beat you at that game.”

She’s joking with me. That *has* to be a good sign, right? I don’t have time to overthink in a billion different directions before she’s speaking again.

“Oh! I just responded to your meeting invite. Wednesday is good.”

The victories just keep piling up.

“Awesome! I’ll try to have a breakdown of my concerns to you by Tuesday so you know what to expect.” She nods.

I *could* walk away right now. I could tell her goodnight, and keep heading to my car like I’d planned to all along. I could take this interaction as a clean slate for both of us, could head home, whip up my momma’s chicken parm for dinner, and settle in for the Sox game.

Lies. I am lying to myself.

“So, how is my friend Lucy doing today?”

It’s the easiest way to allow myself to keep standing in her doorway. As if on cue, she yawns. Like a kitten, her mouth opens wide as her eyes pinch shut. God, could she *be* more adorable?

“Tired,” she says, settling back into her chair with a pair of faint circles under her eyes. But that tired gaze is washed with a faint pink flush, and the small, soft grin she gives me could last me a decade.

“What’s got you here so late?”

Her back stiffens, hesitation warring over her before she answers.

“Oh. I’m... Finally getting my Master’s. Figured it was easier to just stay late and finish my assignment then get home, get comfy on my couch, and then not want to do it.”

She shrugs, and I see that ghost shade its way over her in the way that she almost folds in on herself.

“Hey, that’s awesome! Good for you. What are you going for?”

“A Master of Science in School Counseling.”

The way she almost whispers it, instead of bragging about her new chapter, makes me curious. But I’ll be her cheerleader.

“Lucy, that’s amazing!”

She smiles, and this time, the color in her cheeks is a happy shade.

Then she yawns again, and I push off the doorframe, standing to my full

height. It feels almost criminal to be stealing these moments with her tonight.

“So I’ll see you Wednesday?”

“Yeah. By the looks of this email, probably before that. Shelby is the student you want to talk about?” I nod. “She put in a counselor request last week Friday, so she was already on my radar.”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. “I’ve had concerns about her in the past, but this week, she outrightly refused to change for gym. Kept her hoodie and jeans on. I know that she’s been having issues with her parents’ divorce, but things have escalated pretty quickly.”

“Poor girl. Maybe we’ll move that meeting up to tomorrow, if you’re free?”

“I’ll make it work.”

She nods, and in the same moment that she glances to her unfinished assignment, cracks another yawn.

“Cool. Well, hey, have a good night, Lucy.”

I barely get past her office bulletin board before I’m taking backwards steps to her door.

“And, hey, it’s getting dark. You sure you don’t want me to walk you to your car?”

She smiles, one that isn’t inhibited or held down, and I swear my heart thinks we’re about to run the Pacer test.

“Thanks, but I think I’ll be okay.”

Her smile draws in, but not like she’s pulling away. For the first time in knowing Lucy, it seems like she’s trying to hide the breadth of her smile from me.

What I wouldn’t give to see the whole thing.

fourteen

lucy

"YOU'RE DOING IT?!"

"I'm doing it."

I'm in my typical turtle pose: feet up on the couch, arms wrapped around my shins, chin tucked into the divot between my knees. Wrapped all up in the protective shell of myself. It's a habit, even though I know Samantha is my number one cheerleader.

As I detail to her the online classes I started taking for my Master's, and as I do my best not to shake off the praise she gives me, I realize that she *isn't* actually the first person I told.

That title belongs to Aaron.

And *he* reacted in almost the same way.

And yet, I'm still not ready to admit that I have more than one person in my corner.

"How are you feeling about the decision?"

I shrug.

"Good and bad. I'm enjoying the classes so far, and the work load is exactly what I need, but..."

Here, in the pause, is where Samantha typically gives me thirty seconds to get out the difficult words. But here, in the next ten, an unexpected thought pops into the space before I get the chance to curl in on myself. It's Aaron's wide smile and encouraging words from the moment that he found out I was getting my Master's. The flap of a butterfly's wings has been happening more and more, like it's shaking off the cobwebs inside me, and while usually I have no idea what to do with it, suddenly, the difficult words don't seem as weighty anymore.

"I still feel guilty. Like it's a waste of time and money. Like I could be

doing something else.”

“Remember, Lucy, the money that you earn is *yours* to do with what you wish. Is this something that you see value in spending money on?”

Even something so simple as remembering that Scott doesn’t have a hold on my finances anymore still niggles in the back of my mind, much like the ways he’d so casually reminded me that I could start spending my money on *frivolous shit* once I paid off my student loans. The ones he never helped me with, even in marriage.

“I do.”

Samantha nods, one hurdle out of the way.

“So, getting your Master’s would be a waste of time in what way?”

“I guess I could just be using it better.”

“Sure,” Samantha nods. Not once dismissing the way that I feel. “But how? What else would you be doing with that time?”

And for that question, I have no answer.

Because grad school is something that I wanted from the beginning, long before I ever fell for the resident director at my university and let him derail those plans entirely.

“Nothing.” The clarity of that answer shakes around the mist in my mind, the fog that’s plagued me for over twelve years. “Nothing.”

I sit up straighter, unraveling myself from the cocoon. My spine creaks as it straightens, my bones awaken, there’s a splitting inside my chest as it expands and wraps around that truth.

“I wouldn’t want to be doing anything else. This is what I want to do.”

Samantha smiles, one of those soft, warm, gooey cookie smiles that I’ve always sealed away and collected like precious moments. Like she’s proud of me.

Something I haven’t felt from another human being in a while.

Or, maybe, something inside me reflects, something you haven’t allowed yourself to notice in a while.

That voice feels like it’s coming from the same place as those butterflies, somewhere dormant and dusty, somewhere untouched and foreign.

My homework for the next session is to journal about what I do with my free time and what I enjoy about those activities. It’s supposed to be a double exercise, according to Samantha. For one, I’ll be able to recognize if I’m actually using my time to do things that I enjoy. And secondly, I’m supposed to find ways to fill my time doing something *not work related* too. Find some

things in my new home to introduce me to new people. She didn't explicitly say, *Go find friends and have some fun*, but I feel like if I *don't* do that in the next two weeks, she'll make "fun-tivities" my next assignment. Luckily, I'm catching on to her ways.

After I finish my grad school assignment for the night, and before I tuck myself in for bed, I text Penelope and ask if she wants to get together for dinner or something in the next week.

And as I'm getting ready for bed, I see the small hints of the steps in front of me. Making plans. Bettering myself. Doing something I want to do, when I want to do it, to make myself happy. All without the fear of someone squashing that nipping at my heels. It's still there, but for the first time in a long, long time, there's the hint of a light at the end of the tunnel, and no one is there to stop me from seeing it.

fifteen

lucy

“HOW IS my friend Lucy doing today?”

Aaron Russo is leaning against the doorframe to the classroom I’ve been prepping all morning. He greets me with a smile that I can only describe as *pleased as punch*. That thought crosses my mind and I *have* to shake it, but at the same time, it seems like exactly the kind of thing you’d use to describe him. His happy little smile makes me feel like all of the awkwardness between us never existed, like we didn’t squash a one night stand and trip over muddled intentions for each other. I can’t even try to hide the way a tiny grin follows the slow creep of blush up my cheeks. It’s like this man exudes contagious cheerfulness.

More than that, the fuzzy feeling in my core starts to tingle, and I get a flash of a memory: his smile at me over the high top table at the bar, the way his eyes had lit up when I’d asked him to take me home. I beat that thought away with a bat.

“A little nervous,” I admit with a laugh. “I’ll be better once this is over.”

His first period gym class shuffles in, and it’s clear that they’re feeling the same way. The more athletically inclined kids, anyway. The students who clearly prefer video games to physical activity are buzzing with excitement that they’re *getting out of gym* for the day.

“I will admit, they’re a little testy about the whole idea. The counselors we’ve had in the past haven’t really been as involved as you are.”

“I guess they’re going to have to grin and bear it then.”

“Just be glad they didn’t work out before this. The post-gym-Axe-cloud is nothing to joke about. It’s downright *asphyxiating*.”

“Maybe I’ll have to make ‘The Balance of Personal Hygiene’ one of our lessons.”

Aaron smiles, shaking his head, and presses two fingers to his temple in a mock salute. I bite the inside of my smile and shake my head.

“They’re all yours, Ms. Lucy.”

I face the early morning stares and groans of middle schoolers, and realize this might be a little tougher than I thought. I clap my hands together to get the attention of the eighth grade class that he’s brought in, and paste on my best winning smile.

“Good morning, everyone! My name is Ms. Lucy. I’m your school counselor, and—”

“Yeah so like, why do we have to be here exactly? Not all of us have daddy issues and need someone to cry to.”

A boy in the front row interrupts me, and a few other jock-type students snicker and sink into their chairs. I will say, he *did* raise his hand. He just didn’t wait for me to call on him before letting his insensitive words fly. Luckily for him, I’ve heard so much worse that this one barely registers.

Instead of giving him the reaction he’s so clearly seeking, I wait until the laughter fades away. I notice that several of the boys are looking to Aaron for approval, clearly thinking that their gym teacher is going to give a grin and an eyeroll, like *I know, right? Who needs this chick when we could be playing dodgeball?*

To my surprise, he crosses his arms, widens his stance, and glares sternly at each and every student who bothered to laugh, before saying, “I’ll see you three with Ms. Lucy during your lunch period so we can discuss the insensitivity of those words,” leaving them each to slink down further in their chairs at the disapproval of their favorite coach.

I look to him with a grateful grin, and continue.

“As I was saying, my name is Ms. Lucy. I am the new school counselor here at River Valley, and I’m excited for the opportunity to get into your classrooms this year. I’ll be in your P.E. class once every other week for what we call social and emotional learning, or SEL. We’ll be covering topics like character, balancing emotions, navigating friendships, and learning skills to cope with all of the big and little issues that life can throw at us. Today, I wanted to introduce myself and a few of the things that I’ll be doing to get you more comfortable with a new face in your building.”

I finish my spiel, and for the most part, the kids take it at face value. At eight-a.m., they’re still half-asleep, and I don’t answer too many questions aside from confirmation that I will indeed be taking up one of their gym

periods every other week.

The first few classes have about the same reaction. Aaron brings in the students, the kids wearing school sports apparel put up a fight, and we make it through Get to Know You Bingo by the skin of our teeth. By the end of the day, I'm on the cusp of drained. Oddly enough, Aaron has continued to look more and more frustrated as the day has worn on, too. There's a divot between his eyebrows, and I swear with each disrespectful remark about having to *skip gym to learn about feelings*, it has grown deeper.

I wish I hadn't noticed.

"Why do we even have to learn about our feelings anyway? Ain't that kid stuff? Like, when I'm mad, I'm mad. When I'm happy, I'm happy. If I get them all right, can I pass the class and go back to gym?"

During the last period of the day, we made it through bingo with twenty minutes to spare, after almost no one wanted to be here, let alone ask questions.

"I'm glad you asked, Parker," I say to the boy in the front row with his snapback hat on sideways. "Since we have a little bit of extra time, why don't I show you guys a little sneak preview of our next lesson."

I am met with about as many groans and eye rolls as I expected, but at this point in the day, I need something to lift my spirits, and if moving around the classroom is going to make these kids less grumpy, then so be it.

"Okay. I want to introduce you guys to something called your Zones of Regulation. Do any of you know what it means to regulate your emotions? How about you, Parker?"

I'm not typically one for calling kids out, but this Parker seems like he could use some grounding.

"Huh?"

"What does 'regulate' mean?"

His face turns a deep red. "Like... your poop?"

As the teacher, I do my best to hold back my snicker. But when I chance a glance at Aaron, he is hiding his not so subtly behind his clipboard, eyebrows skyrocketed over wide eyes.

"Not quite the regulating I was talking about, but good try."

His classmates' laughter gets a little louder, and his face turns a deep tomato shade.

"Uhh..." He lifts his hat and itches his scalp. "To... make more regular?"

"Exactly! When our emotions are irregular, or imbalanced, we have to

find a way to get ourselves back in our state of readiness. When you're in school, that means being ready to learn. When you're ready to learn, you're focused, attentive, and generally in a calm state. How many of you came into the classroom feeling this way?"

A few students raise their hands, and I direct them to the corner of my room labeled with a square of green paper on the wall that is dotted with emotion labels.

"Great! You're in what we call the 'green zone.' Could one of you read off some of the emotions you see on the chart?"

A girl turns to read the cards that say *Focused, calm, happy, ready to learn.*

"Would any of you like to share why you came into this class happy, calm, or ready to learn?"

"I was low-key excited to not have to change for gym. It was kind of a relief," answers a shy looking girl. I nod and smile, her cheeks blushing with my approval.

"Now, raise your hand if you *didn't* come into this class in the green zone."

The rest of the students raise their hands, and I smirk.

"Thanks for the honesty. How *did* you feel when you came into my classroom today?"

"Annoyed," a boy in a River Valley baseball tee says.

"Pissed that I was missing gym," says one wearing a Patriots jersey.

I get a range of nods and agreeing murmurings before I get to a student who says, "Indifferent," and shrugs.

"Why is that?"

"I don't really care for gym, but it's not like I had anywhere better to be. It's whatever."

"Alright. Mr. Indifferent, I'm going to introduce you to the Blue Zone."

He heads over to the corner with blue paper, and as he starts to read some of the emotion cards on the wall, I notice several boys snickering behind me. I'm pretty proud of both my thick skin *and* my classroom management—both of which I've strengthened over the past several years—but I don't have to put the latter to use. Before I can so much as pivot my head to see who is poking fun at the lesson, Aaron's sharp tone sends a chill down my spine for the second time today that I hesitate to label as delicious.

"Adams. O'Connor. Front and center."

An instant quiet washes over the classroom, and I quickly deduce that these two are leaders of some sort—whether because they’re good in the sports world or class clowns, I have yet to figure out.

“I’m in the yellow zone right now. Do either of you know why?”

“Uhh...”

The boys glance to each other before one says, “No, Coach. I don’t even know what that means, Coach.”

“That’s exactly my point. Ms. Lucy, could you please explain to Mr. Adams and Mr. O’Connor what being in the yellow zone means? And gentlemen, it would be in your best interest to pay attention so that you don’t *put me* in the yellow zone again.”

He’s directed the power right back into my hands, and I can’t fight the fuzzy feeling in my chest.

“Sure, Mr. Russo. I’d be happy to. Before I do, could someone else explain what it means if we aren’t in the green zone?”

I call on a student who answers, “Doesn’t it mean we aren’t, like, ready to go?” and nod, before I walk over to the yellow corner—the corner of the classroom nearest to where Aaron has been standing all day, clearly reading over the material.

“When you’re in the yellow zone, your body is in a heightened state, right before you become out of control. This could mean that you’re feeling silly or giggly; this could mean that you’re feeling nervous or anxious. Or, like Mr. Russo, you could be feeling...?”

“Frustrated. I can’t focus on the lesson and learn when you two knuckleheads are cracking jokes about a topic you should be invested in, *especially* when these topics apply outside the classroom. Right, Ms. Lucy?”

“You’re absolutely right,” I take the bait. “How many of you have ever been in a situation where, during your sport, you’ve been anxious or nervous or frustrated? And you couldn’t get yourself out of it?”

Now, I’ve got them engaged. The hands of several of the boys who had been snickering moments ago shoot up, heads nodding.

“Has it ever gotten you into trouble?”

All of their focus immediately shoots to one particular student—including Aaron’s. Some smirk, some chuckle, and some eye him cautiously.

“Yeah. I uh...I’m a pitcher on the baseball team. Gave up a few too many runs one inning last year and...”

He looks to Aaron, and Aaron gives him a small smile and a nod.

“I may have cussed out the ump for not giving me a strike. Got tossed. And benched. *And grounded.*”

His cheeks are red, but the small smile shows that he clearly paid for the mistake.

“You went from yellow to red pretty fast, huh?”

“Oh, he got red *real* fast, no cap, bro.”

The rest of the kids all giggle, and I take the brief respite to lift my gaze to Aaron. The little sparkle, the way a quick wave glitters on the ocean backdrop, entrances me. I shrug and laugh silently, while his close-lipped smile and eye roll clearly say, *What are these crazy kids even talking about?* Something about the slow wave in his gaze keeps me hostage as I say, “Well, you’re in luck. We’re going to learn how to identify when we aren’t in the green zone, and find some strategies to get us back there.”

“And that’ll help me with sports?”

“Absolutely, it can help you with sports.”

“Bet.”

He nods, and a student in the back says, *Keep Johnson outta the red zone, Coach!*

“Did you know that sometimes, it’s great to be in the red zone?” I say, lifting my chin with that little tidbit as I catch their attention.

“Actually?”

“Mhm. How many of you have been to Fenway when a player on the Sox hits a home run over the Monster?”

The hands that immediately shoot up, as well as the murmurs of, *Dude, she watches the Sox?* give me a little boost.

“It’s *totally* cool to be in the red zone then.”

With only a few minutes left until the bell, I let the kids have the rest of the time to chat. Aaron sidles up beside me, and my own yellow zone anticipation buzzes in my veins.

“That was pretty cool, how you related it back to their sports. I think you have this class invested,” he says, the timbre a sweet sugar that I can taste. I keep my gaze trained over the sea of students as I reply.

“It’s one of the things I try to get them to understand by the end of the unit: No emotion is a ‘bad emotion.’ We’ve just given feeling crappy a stigma. If something unexpected happens and it’s out of your control, you *get* to feel upset or angry or frustrated. It’s how you react to that emotion and get yourself back into the green that determines your path.”

There's a somber understanding to his nod. Like there aren't any more words to say, but he gets me all the same.

"So, you're telling me that sometimes it's *good* to be a little out of control?"

I don't miss it. I don't miss it at all. The way the timbre of his voice drops from cane sugar to thick molasses. That shift pulls my gaze against my will. The slow tide of the ocean in his eyes twists into a dark tsunami wave, the slight curve of his smile predatory in a way I didn't think I'd ever want to be pursued again.

"It's absolutely okay to be out of control sometimes, Mr. Russo."

The bell rings. There's chaos in the hall. His name is shouted by no less than four students. But he holds my gaze captive as he takes three slow, intentional, backwards steps toward the classroom door, tips his head like he's bowing to me, and makes his gracious exit.

I don't miss it. I don't miss the way that this man has seen me defensive, has seen me turn him down, has seen me throw up my walls, and somehow still has this careful hunger in his eyes for me. And I don't miss the way that somewhere, way deep down, buried beneath mountains of rubble that another man left behind, sparks the smallest flicker of a flame.

sixteen

aaron

“ARE we *sure* this is safe to do with alcohol in our systems?” I ask Sam.

“Oh, *buddy*. The *only* way I am surviving roller skating with our coworkers is with a buzz.”

We do a few different River Valley “fun” staff outings a year. Roller skating just so happens to be my *least* favorite. But Sam convinced me that it would be more fun than sitting on my couch on a Friday night, and somehow, I believed him.

Sam claps me on the back with a chuckle and walks past me, straight to the section of the roller rink concession stand that has been turned into a bar for tonight’s adult skate.

They had to check my ID and everything.

“A Sam’s for me,” he tells the bartender. “Russo? First one’s on me.”

“I’m good.”

I shake my head, dismissing his offer. When he raises his brow in question, I say, “I look like a newborn baby giraffe on these things *without* being inebriated.”

Gesturing to the rental skates in my hand that I have yet to put on, I ask for a good old fashion Coke before heading to a vacant bench to tighten up my laces. Which I somehow promptly fuck up and tangle within the first thirty seconds.

“Oh my God. You’re hopeless,” Sam chuckles. “Don’t you teach gym?”

“I might as well just turn them in. I’ll watch all of the beverages.”

“Don’t tell me you’re pussying out already, Russo!”

Penelope Barker appears in front of me, turning in a wide circle until she hockey stops across the neon-patterned carpet.

“Is *everyone* better at this than I am?!”

“Probably.” She shrugs, then tilts her head. “Lucy? How are you on eight wheels?”

Lucy has somehow snuck up on me again. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of that surprise.

“Decent. Although I prefer them in straight lines.”

It’s then that I notice the hot pink set of roller blades she’s balanced on, as if she’s standing barefoot in the sand. She looks poised. Relaxed. There’s even a cut of a smirk tearing into her lips, and for a second, I think about standing up and biting it. Until, of course, I remember that I’m as stable on roller skates as a rowboat on a tsunami wave.

“Lucy and I are going to go get drinks. Do you guys want anything?”

Sam and I wave them off, and he plops down next to me on the bench as I watch them go, my gaze lingering a little too long on Lucy’s ass in those leggings.

“Please stop naming your future children in your head.”

Sam’s advice comes with a clap on my shoulder that rings in my ears, interrupting my train of thought.

“I just like to be *prepared*.”

“I know, buddy.” Sam squeezes my shoulder. “But your ‘preparations’ make most women run for the hills.”

His eyes are comically wide, and I rest my elbows on my knees, my head in my hands.

“Maybe stop trying to leap to the top of the stairs. *Maybe* take them one at a time this time.” He pauses, sincerity in his eyes when he asks more softly, “Serious question: what makes her the one you want to pursue?”

“I—”

It’s a valid question. One I’ve never really stopped to explore in the past.

An attractive woman catches my attention, gives me hers, and the rest is kind of history. I like to sprint down the aisle faster than women can say *Hello, my name is*, but my race has come to a grinding halt miles before the church, because Lucy is idling.

And I think I want to, too.

I want to set my cruise control to *Lucy*.

“She’s different.”

“Yeah, okay, but *how*? I mean, what about her is different?”

“Ugh. *Samuel*. This was supposed to be a night of *fun*.”

He chuckles and tips back his beer.

“I know that. I’m trying to save you from ruining it by proposing before you take this girl out on a proper first date. Now, answer my question. What makes her worth it?”

I think back to in-service, when he’d called me out on wanting marriage as a title. It hurt because there may have been some truth to his accusation.

I’ve wanted to be a husband, a father, my entire life. And I’ve been rushing through women without giving the person behind the title of *future Mrs. Russo* a second thought. I *have* been reckless, *careless*, with my dating habits, because I’ve been trying to fill a hole. It wasn’t until recently that I started realizing that I didn’t know the hole in me was round, and I’ve been cramming quadrilaterals into it for years. It wasn’t until recently that I realized *what* I needed to fill the hole isn’t just an idea.

I think about that first night at the bar, when I’d imagined Lucy dropping in from the clouds. Taking extra care and caution with her. Following her every move. Letting her lead the way. I’ve been so programmed to take the lead that allowing Lucy to sit in the driver’s seat has been the most frustratingly worthwhile lesson in patience I’ve ever had.

I *haven’t* proposed yet. Haven’t told her how many kids I want or asked her about matching Christmas pajamas or which school district we should live in or if she’s okay painting our picket fence white, because I saw the look in her eyes when she’d fled from my bathroom and took a step back—despite every romantic bone in my body that has been screaming at me to pick her up and bride-walk her over every threshold we enter.

She fits into that hole, because it has only ever been in the shape of Lucy. Like Cinderella’s glass slipper was only ever meant to fit one princess.

“She’s worth it because I’ve never wanted to slow down for anyone in my life, and she has me taking my foot off the gas.”

My gaze finds her at the concession counter, her lips curled in laughter around the rim of her beer bottle. From the corner of her eye, she finds me. In the scrunch of her shoulders and the slight smile that ticks up around her beer, the mechanisms within me that have attuned to her needs sync up with her speedometer and let off the gas just a little bit more.

The ladies return with drinks in hand, and two more of our coworkers tagging along.

“Well. Gentlemen. Are we doing this thing?” Penny asks upon their return, tilting her chin toward the rink that glows beneath a kaleidoscope of neon lights while early 2000s pop blares overhead. “Or is Aaron gonna

chicken out again?”

“Oh, woman, it is *on!*”

I slap my palms against my thighs as punctuation before launching myself upward.

Which was probably the worst idea I’ve had all evening.

That is, until two hands reach for me.

Tell me why the arm that Lucy grabs onto as she and Penelope haul me up feels somehow warmer?

“Oh boy. We’ve got our work cut out with this one,” Penny says, before dropping my hand, leaving me cradled in Lucy’s embrace and Lucy’s alone. As Penny shifts back toward Sam and a few others from the eighth grade team, I am left to somehow catch my breath and my balance all at once. The latter becomes more difficult when Lucy lets me go.

“Chicken out *again?*” Two syllables sneak into the cold place that Lucy’s hand just left behind.

“We kind of rotate the same fun staff outings. Let’s just say I’m not the biggest fan of the yearly trip to the roller rink.”

“And yet, here you stand.”

“*Stand* being the operative word.”

She smiles that quirky, tense smile, the one that’s almost refusing to unfurl. I’ll take it. I smile myself, shaking my head as I hold her gaze, wondering how long I can make it mine tonight.

Our large group turns to head out on to the rink.

“Where’s your wife tonight?” Penelope asks Sam.

“Juls stayed home. Insisted that she was too tired, and that I needed to have a night out with my friends. I have a sneaking suspicion that she and Mason just wanted to binge *Stranger Things* without me.”

“Oh, God, you watch that show?” I shudder.

“No, which is the problem.” Sam rolls his eyes. “It’s so dumb. I can’t stand it. They only watch it when I’m not around, which is hard to do.”

“Do you *not* watch, Aaron?” Penny asks.

“No! It’s scary!”

Lucy laughs, an almost silent sound that I somehow still can’t miss over the boom of Usher’s *Burn*. I clock the scrunch of her lips, like she’s still holding in her smile; I catch the fist that she pulls in front of her lips, with the knuckle of her index finger raised there to keep it tamped down.

The blush though? That rises at the same rate that my brows do in slow

motion, asking her with my eyes if she's got the nerve to laugh at me. She clocks me too, her lips parted and upturned, like words are caught on her tongue. I don't get to find out what they might be before Penny ushers us out onto the rink. I waddle my way to the edge and prepare to sit down on the lip and butt-scoot my way in, when a set of fingerprints brands my skin.

"You are not toddling your way out onto that rink, Aaron Russo."

It's embarrassing how much hearing Lucy say my full name affects me. Right?

"I'm not?"

"Not on my watch."

Just like that, her grip slides down my forearm and her palm slips seamlessly into mine.

"Come on. It's just like riding a bike."

"I didn't learn how to do that without training wheels until I was like, nine. Sports on wheels are my one athletic downfall."

Lucy's eyes light up brighter than the disco ball making its rounds over the rink.

She keeps us steady as we glide slowly around the large oval floor. It seems like everyone else is zooming around us, but that makes sense; when I'm with her, our little bubble seems to stop time.

But as we finish the lap, the weight of guilt and hesitance and apprehension join the weight of her hand in mine. Suddenly, I'm back to our first night; I see her dashing out of the bathroom, hightailing it out my front door like the building was on fire.

"You don't have to, you know."

I squeeze her hand, giving myself one more moment of heaven as she hums in question.

"You don't have to. Hold my hand," I clarify as we safely complete our lap. I feel her grip loosen for a moment, and everything inside of me that wants to pretend to fall just to get her to hold on readies itself for action.

But I hold back.

I want Lucy in my life so badly that it hurts, but I want her there authentically. Because she *chose* me. Not because I've masterminded her into wanting to be with me.

And in that moment, her warm hand squeezes against my sweaty one.

"I have a really bad feeling that you'll fall if I let go."

Little does she know how far I've already fallen.

She tightens her grip, and we skate on.

“How’d you get so good at this?” I ask as we continue in slow, kiddie pool laps around the rink.

“We lived in a cul-de-sac growing up, and all of the kids in my neighborhood would play hockey there since traffic dead ended. Naturally, I *had* to have skates to fit in. But I couldn’t handle a stick to save my life, so I ended up being the ‘all-time-ref,’ and got really good at gliding back and forth. I kind of kept it in my back pocket as a workout. Feels good to be back on wheels.”

The way she tenses at the end of that statement, like she just realized she said *feels good to be back*, makes me squeeze her now limp hand a little bit tighter.

“Well, you’re way better than I am,” I chuckle. “I feel like a toddler in moon boots or something.”

She laughs. Bigger than the butterfly laugh. An airy delight, like wind chimes with a little bit of age to them. Oh, *God*, how I want to bottle that sound and set it as my alarm.

“You’re not supposed to bounce on skates, Aaron.”

“Exactly!”

I throw up both arms for emphasis, forgetting for a moment that we’re connected, which was probably my biggest mistake, until the consequence follows.

We weren’t going very fast to begin, so when I slip backwards onto my butt and Lucy falls right into my lap along with me, the impact is just enough to remind me that I haven’t quite yet died and gone to heaven.

Our coworkers continue to skate around us, like we aren’t a tangled mess on the floor.

I try my best to focus on anything else; the *whizz* of Lucy’s still spinning wheels, the strobe lights painting us in technicolor, the pain in my tailbone. It’s no use. Because even though I know sitting down is going to hurt for the next three days thanks to the three-plus-decades I’m carrying around, Lucy’s breathing just turned shallow and quick, and I can feel her pulse beneath the places my hands landed in order to catch her.

“You might be considered a hazard if you stay out here much longer, Russo.” She offers me the sweet taste of my last name from her tongue with one of those hidden gem smiles, puckered like she’s trying to hold it in.

“Then we should *probably* head somewhere safer.”

I try my best not to let on that *safer* means *somewhere that Lucy isn't planted firmly in my lap*.

I let her help me up, and use the wall to guide me back to where we started. We haven't made it ten feet when Sam and Penny find us, with Drake in tow.

"Aren't you supposed to be the athletic one in the group?" Drake razzes, skidding to a half-moon stop that I envy.

"Oh, ease up on him. You looked *adorable* all crashed out."

Penelope punctuates her backdoor insult with a pinch of my cheek.

"Just know that if I didn't have to hold onto the wall right now, I'd take *both* of you."

It's an empty threat. I am not the only one who knows this.

"Aaron, my love, you wouldn't hurt a fly."

Penny reaches to pinch my cheek again, but I swat her away, struggling to keep my balance. We wind up in a weird sort of tussle, Penelope holding me up while I try to rustle her hair.

"Okay, you two. Break it up before one of you has to hobble into work on crutches Monday morning."

Sam tugs me backward and holds me upright, leaving Penelope and Lucy to snicker at me.

The five of us wind up in the arcade section of the rink, and while they all keep their skates, I rack up my wheels for the evening. With my gym-shoe-clad feet planted firmly on the ground again, I feel better about throwing back a beer or two. I school Drake and Sam in Skee-ball, but the girls take us embarrassingly in air hockey.

"God, Russo, your game is *off* tonight," Penelope chimes in with a wicked smile, right after she secures the clinching goal for their third win in a row. I circle the table to their side.

"You know what? It looks like you've got a little something..."

I reach for her, and it isn't until I have her in a headlock to give her a noogie that she realizes she's been faked out. By the time I release her, my friend is flushed the same color as her butt-length hair, and wearing a wide, laughing smile. She pulls me into a side hug before declaring that she's heading back out onto the rink. Sam and Drake follow, and they join up with a larger crew of our coworkers, leaving only myself and Lucy back on solid ground.

"You gonna head back out there?" I ask, pointing at Lucy's roller blades

that keep her close to my height.

“Nah. I think I’m gonna spend the rest of my tokens. You?”

I shake my pocketful of gold coins as my answer.

Playing arcade games with Lucy is easy.

Letting Lucy beat me is easy.

Blushing when she calls me out on it is easy.

God, I wish loving her could be this easy.

“How are you liking River Valley so far?” I ask, peering over the pinball machine where she’s hard at work attacking dinosaurs in the Jurassic valley with a metal ball.

“I like it. It’s...homey. If that makes sense.”

“We have a great staff,” I nod in agreement. “I’ve been here ten years and a lot of these people are my closest friends.”

“I can tell.”

“I’m still a little pissed at Sam for not inviting me to his secret wedding. The bastard.”

She quirks a smile, those hazel eyes lighting up as she hits a triple bonus.

“It’s all good though. Sam and Penny and Drake, they’re good peeps. I’m glad we got to hang with them tonight.”

She’s quiet for a moment, that pursed smile buttoning to one side of her cheeks.

“So... why don’t you two date?”

I adjust my frame against the pinball machine, my brows pulling toward the center as I absorb her question.

“I just mean that you seemed pretty friendly with her tonight.”

She shrugs, keeping her tense focus lasered to the game. It’s not something I think twice about, but growing up with three sisters and the revolving door of their female friends made me comfortable around women, to a point where some have seen my friendliness as flirting. I make an immediate note to curb that, especially in front of Lucy.

She doesn’t even realize how much she has me taking my foot off the break and shifting gears.

“What, me and Penelope?” I say, doing my best to reassure her, to make sure she knows exactly where I stand. “Nah. She’s like another sister to me.” Something tells me she doesn’t quite believe me, so I continue to shake off her theory. “We like to razz each other, but in the end, we’re two sides of the same coin. She and I together would be too much energy in a shaken bottle.”

It's almost like I need the opposite—someone to ground me.”

seventeen

aaron

SOMETHING SHIFTS in Lucy from that moment forward.

We finish our second beers, and I stop after that, but the buzz continues to hum in my veins as the night goes on. We finish a pocketful of tokens each, and at each game, she grows a little more daring.

Poking me in the side when I lose to her in Skee-ball.

Pushing against my bicep when I make a joke that, I'll be honest, wasn't *that* funny.

She holds my gaze longer, her smile seeming to unfurl more and more as the night goes on. I wonder for a moment if it's the alcohol, and also pray that it isn't.

At some point, the number of people congregating on the arcade floor thickens. Lucy and I, in the middle of a conversation, find ourselves edged out. There are rows of aqua blue lockers stashed along the back walls, and we sneak between them, hidden from the noise and the throngs of people.

"I just don't get it," she giggles. *I have her giggling now.* "He's not even that scary."

"Not even that... *Lucy. Vecna possesses people. That's like, the seventh circle of scary!*"

She catches my abs to steady herself, and I swear the little innocent touches she's been giving me all night are going to burn this poor establishment to the ground. Sorry in advance to all of the eight-year-olds who were hoping to have their next birthday party at Skate West!

"I...I like hanging out with you."

She says it to my T-shirt, to the fingers that are tracing the divots of my abs through the material. It's innocent. So simple. So innocuous. And yet, Lucy enjoying my company has made the year brighter.

Her hands still, and I watch her smile blossom, like just the simple presence of my company has earned me the unfurling instead of the way she's been tucking away her joy. Pride surges through me.

I slip my hand to where her wrist hangs between us, testing the waters, and circle her skin like a bracelet. She inhales sharply, but her eyes glitter, her smile almost seeming to tick up.

"I like hanging out with you too, Lucy. I like it a lot."

The timbre of my voice has thickened, and I watch the way something new swirls in her eyes. Before I can determine what it is, the hand on my shirt lightly fists the fabric, lightly pulls me in like I wasn't already tethered to her like a lifeline.

"Are you sure you don't want to..."

I lose the rest of her question, because she's so close that her words paint me in breath that's warm and a little hoppsy. Her teeth tug her bottom lip so slightly, you'd have to be this up close to see it. She tugs me so that our bodies are nearly flush in the same moment that her back thuds lightly against the lockers. I catch myself with my palm against the cool blue metal next to her head, caging her in on one side. My pulse has quickened to a hummingbird's pace, and I can see hers trying to jump out of her neck to match.

I blink, remembering that she asked me a question.

"What was that?"

She chuckles. "A little distracted, Russo?"

I lick my bottom lip, watching as her gaze traces the movement hungrily. "You could say that."

Her other hand shifts, and now she has both on my waist, pulling me until there's nothing but a whisper between us. I swear I'm going to wake up tomorrow with her fingerprints as tattoos.

"We could get out of here. Somewhere with less wheels." She starts, the wheels in her head turning in a way I've only seen once before. It takes me a moment to process exactly when that was. "I could...go home with you. I'd check under the bed for Vecna for you and everything."

Warning bells begin to flash, but I ignore them, the desire I have to close the centimeters between my lips and hers just a fraction stronger than my will. My forehead presses into hers and I stifle a groan at just how delicious even *that* feels.

"How are you somehow making me mush and burning me from the inside

all at the same time?”

One of her hands finger-crawls up my chest, leaving ashes in its wake. I cup her cheeks, dipping my toes into the shallow end, my entire body buzzing with electricity. She tilts her head into the divot between my neck and her shoulder, skimming her nose along the sensitive skin. If I were to inch any further against her, she'd be able to tell I'm already half hard.

“Maybe I could take your mind off the scary things for a little while?”

I stop.

Time stops.

She thinks she's directing her words to me, but I see in her eyes and in the slight slight quiver of her lips, that she's talking to *herself*.

In an instant, I remember where I saw that look before. I'm back in that bar, when she asked if we were going to *get out of here*. Back in my bathroom, the fear in her eyes catapulting her out my front door like a cannonball. It's like she wants to take her mind off of her own scary things by...

I know that I can't be that. Not with Lucy.

I loosen my grip on her cheeks, not enough to let her go, but just enough to turn soft, press my forehead against hers, and exhale, hoping that the breath I give to her is enough to put back any confidence that's been stolen from her.

eighteen

lucy

“I CAN’T, Lucy. Not with you.”

I’m about to spiral again, to pull the plug on whatever I’m feeling for Aaron before I let all of my insecurities and whatever it is *about me* that he can’t seem to want drown me, when he throws out a life raft instead.

I slipped on the mask again. Slipped into the role when I saw the opportunity. But this time, he’s letting me down while also laying down a safe and gentle landing.

Aaron cups my face to pull me away from where I’d been tracing the column of his neck, gentle enough for me to feel safe, but firm enough to direct my gaze right into the swirling ocean of his own. His thumbs stroke symmetrical patterns on my cheeks. He isn’t supposed to be this gentle with me. Isn’t supposed to make rejection feel this sweet.

Not when I asked to be friends, but have been casually sneaking glances at his handsome face, have been pocketing his giant smiles as something I can pull out in the middle of my own darkness. My inner demons are about to remind me that *this is why I don’t hand my heart out to men* when he flips the script.

“You are so much more than someone I can be casual with. I’d break my own heart a thousand times just to piece yours back together, but not like this. Tell me any other way and I’m yours.”

“I...”

Embarrassment begins to churn, the ugly feeling bubbling up inside of me just like it had when he’d offered me sweats and a place to sleep instead of turning me away. And somehow, he catches me again.

“Don’t turn in on yourself again. This is *not* a rejection.”

“Kinda feels like one,” I say, letting go of his T-shirt, to wipe at my eyes

that are suddenly watery. He beats me to it. Aaron's thumb catches the lone tear before I have the chance, and then takes my hand prisoner.

Somehow, with his warm breath and his body still pressed against me, my hand in his feels the most intimate.

"I don't think I have the time or the words to explain how opposite of rejecting you this is."

With Aaron holding my hand, his forehead pressed to mine, I realize that we are having this moment in the back corner of a roller rink. Suddenly, the lights are bright and the music is loud and my humiliation is staring me in the public eye. I'm about to pull away when he stops me. Gently. Like he knows I need to get away, but might need to hold his hand while I do it.

"Ready to leave?"

I nod.

"Can I walk you out, or would you rather I didn't?"

"I..."

Scott would've laughed.

Scott would've told me to fix myself up in the bathroom.

Scott would've told me to stop embarrassing him in front of his friends.

For once, it isn't *his* voice inside of my head, but my own consciousness, badgering its way into the light.

For once, it's *my* voice.

"You can walk me to my car. As long as you don't scream too loudly at the shadows that you think are Vecna."

At the mention of his arch nemesis, Aaron jumps and shivers in over-exaggeration. I am grateful for that distraction. For the way the awkward moment has once again vanished.

We walk in silence, the sun and moon competing for territory over the sky, painting long shadows across the cracked pavement. We make it to my car, and I turn to face him.

"Sure you'll be able to sleep tonight with Vecna lurking around?"

I see the glimmer of jest in his eyes, and though I urge him to play along, he takes a slight detour.

"I would rather have a monster under my bed than rush you into something before you're ready or comfortable."

My heart slams into my chest so hard, I wonder if there will be a bruise in the morning.

When Aaron reaches for my hand, I let him take it.

“Lucy I...”

Staring at our hands, he exhales harshly. His thumb traces delicately over my knuckles.

“I want nothing more than to say yes to you. But I meant what I said. I’m not built for one night stands or friends with benefits situations. I’m an all-in kind of guy. If I had known back at the bar that night that that wasn’t what you wanted...”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, but I’m smart enough to fill in the blanks.

He wouldn’t have taken me home.

Before I can drown in overthought, he adds, “I can wait.”

I tilt my head, my hand freezing in the warmth of his touch. When I meet his gaze, the swirling tides have turned over into slow-lapping waves.

“For you, I mean. If your heart is still trying to heal from something, and you need the time to put those pieces back together first, I’ll wait. Still friends?”

I nod. It’s all that I can do.

He opens my car door after I use the fob to unlock it, lightly taps the roof, and I drive away with another joke about the monsters under his bed lying in wait on my tongue, unable to escape because that word *wait* weighs heavily on my mind.

Waiting, once upon a time, meant something entirely different.

Scott and I were *waiting* for me to turn twenty-one so that being at the same bar wouldn’t seem weird.

We were *waiting* for me to graduate, so that he wouldn’t get in trouble with the university.

We were *waiting* for a job opportunity to open up in another city, so that people around town wouldn’t ask questions.

And then, *I* was waiting until I had the courage to pick up and leave.

Luckily, a change in plans and coming home too early to see my ex-husband with another woman in our bed cut that waiting time for me.

nineteen

aaron

“HAND ME MY COFFEE, WILL YA?”

Like the dutiful servant that I am, I hand my father his nine-p.m. cup of joe.

“This isn’t going to keep you up all night?”

“I’m up at four anyway. Might as well push through.”

He takes a swig from his Patriots mug and wipes his brow with the back of a steel-grey-streaked hand.

“This will only take us about another hour or so. Let’s just push through and finish.”

I sigh. Which isn’t the right move, but it isn’t the wrong one either. I *could* have used my words. Could have told him about the busy schedule I have this week, with basketball tryouts and after school meetings, and—ya know, *sleeping*. But that would have gotten me yelled at.

Wait, Aaron, aren’t you a grown adult?

Yes. Yes, I am. Thank you for asking.

Sighing is the lesser of two evils. My dad, paint roller in hand, guffaws with heavy sarcasm.

“You got somewhere else to be?”

I snag my roller and force my eyes not to roll.

“I mean, bed?” I say, moving to the corner of the den that I’d been painting before we took our union mandated thirty-second break. “It’ll be after ten by the time we finish cleaning, and I still have to get home.”

“You’re young and you have weekends off. Suck it up.”

And that’s the end of *that* conversation.

We paint without words other than my dad’s classic rock station gently booming from his phone speaker as we work on this little den transformation

project. Without all four of us at home anymore, he wanted it to be a play room for the grandkids, which first means a fresh coat of paint. And, since he's retired, means that beginning this project in the middle of a weeknight doesn't matter.

To *him*, anyway.

I yawn, and wouldn't you know it, am immediately heckled for it.

"What's that about?"

"I'm tired," I bite, turning toward the wall so I don't have to watch him eye me up and down.

"Your sisters have toddlers running around and you don't see them complaining."

"They also aren't painting the den at ten o'clock on a Wednesday."

"What was that?"

I hear the argumentative tone in my father's voice. The one that says, *Use that tone again with me and I'll have your mother's wooden spoon on your hide faster than you can backtrack.*

"Nothing."

We resume painting, me working as fast as I can in a way that will ensure my side of the room is done to my dad's expectations. I love the man to death, but he was the type growing up to dump out a basket of freshly folded laundry if the lines weren't crisp enough and make us do it again. There's a reason I like to keep my place impeccably clean—that, and Danny Tanner was like my hero growing up. When he comes to visit at my place, it's like going through a military inspection.

"Are you all done coaching fairy ball?" he says with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I was only helping with the *soccer* team for a few weeks. Basketball is in full swing now."

"That's why you're so tired," he decides. "Why don't you just learn to say no to these people?"

"Because I didn't have to," I shrug, dragging my roller back over the line I just drew to seal in the coat. "I had extra time at the beginning of the year to help out, so I did. Like you said, the girls have kids at home. I don't."

I hate voicing that aloud. It's like confirming that my sisters have everything I've ever wanted. The spouses, the babies, the white picket fences. Growing up and watching Disney fairytales and *Full House*, going to parties with my hundred-person extended family, had me writing *Dad* on every line that asked, *What do you want to be when you grow up?* "Gym teacher" has

been a nice place holder until then. But watching all three of my sisters walk down the aisle and become mothers has been a double edged sword each and every time. I'm so happy that they've found their happily ever afters, but waiting on my fairy godmother is getting kind of old.

"Don't exhaust yourself picking up other people's slack."

That grates on me in more ways than one. I'm a helper. I *always* lend a helping hand. It's kind of my love language. And...

"I'm exhausted right now, but I'm still helping you."

Ooooh, bad move, Aaron. Bad move. He's gonna take your phone and your car keys.

"You watch your tone with me, boy. *This* is different. *This* is for family."

And here in lies the hypocrisy. The way that I am expected to drop anything and everything for my family, but when it comes to other people, I should leave them to suffer. But there is no getting through to him.

"If you're so damn tired, go home."

I sigh. He knows I won't. *I know I won't.*

I have three feet left of my wall, and probably twenty minutes left of cleaning. We get through it with AC/DC now cranked louder. When we finish, he doles out instructions for cleaning step by agonizing step, one direction at a time. I have to complete one task before he gives me the next, like he's trying to hold me hostage. I keep my head down and my lips sealed.

Even as I'm lacing up my shoes, already dreading the alarm that will come too fast after I get home and shower this day away, even after he tried kicking me out, my dad still finds me at the front door.

"We'll need to finish this up Saturday before the bachelorette party. And while you're here, maybe we can put that entertainment center together, as long as I have the hands."

There is no *thank you*. No, *Have a great night, son!* Because my help is expected. It always has been.

It's like nothing I ever do can be good enough for him. There's always a *next*, always something more that I can be doing. Chasing his approval is like chasing the sunrise.

I nod, the mechanical movement engrained since I started doling out *Yes, sirs* at age four.

There's no mention of my brothers-in-law coming to help before my sister's party on Saturday. Not to mention that *they* aren't going, and would have the entire day free. No, they have *families* and *wives* at home. The

weight of what's missing makes my heart stuffy on my late night ride home.

twenty

lucy

“ALRIGHT, LADIES. I NEED REINFORCEMENTS.”

Penelope, Juliet, and I are having lunch in Penelope’s classroom today —“having lunch” being the operative term. While all three of us brought our lunches with us, I have a feeling that a lot more strategizing about this student and slamming back cans of Celsius is going to happen before students return from their lunch and study hall.

“At your service,” I say, opening to the section of my clipboard for *New Student Profiles* and clicking my pen into action. “What can we help with?”

“You can help me from saying yes to a fist-fight with a fourteen-year-old.”

My eyes widen.

“This is about Amaya, isn’t it?” Juliet asks. I watch as melancholy paints over her expression and she rests her chin in her hands.

“It is.” Penelope confirms while pacing the center of her classroom that divides her desks like the Red Sea. “Does she ever stop making animal noises?”

“Oh, gosh, she’s back to that? I thought we’d phased it out.”

Juliet’s head tilts back, and she scrubs both hands over her eyes.

“Animal noises?” I ask, filling in the girl’s first name at the top of the blank form, and adding “animal noises” under the section labeled *Teacher Behavior Concerns*.

“It’s attention seeking behavior,” Juliet fills me in. “She came to the district last year—her dad moved her and her siblings out of the inner city. Their mom abandoned them, and she took it the hardest.”

“That’s awful.”

“She just needs a lot of love. And for you to *not* give in, Pen. I know how

much you like to win arguments with teenagers, but this is one you've got to let go."

"I like a challenge," Penelope answers, cracking her knuckles. Their stare down is mildly entertaining, but I cut it off.

"Did any specific approaches work with her last year?" I ask, making several notes in the *Family Information* box. "Counseling sessions, built in break time..."

"She needs strong adult relationships in her life." The sadness that tinges Juliet's words reminds me of the reason I chose this profession. "She needs someone to show up for her and stay. She needs to know that the people in her life aren't going to trap her into false securities."

It's as simple and as complicated as that.

As we pick at our lunches, Penelope offers details about some of Amaya's more concerning behaviors that are becoming a disruption during math, and Juliet offers guidance about strategies she used last year when Amaya was in seventh grade.

"I'll schedule time later this week to observe her in your class, and then I'll pull her early next week for a get-to-know-you meeting."

"Thank you," Penelope says, her eyes wide with gratitude. She slumps into the nearest desk, like that little vent-and-brainstorm session about her student was much needed. After she slides down as far as she can in the chair, her chin barely makes even with the desk, and her curtain of red hair hangs over the back of the chair, nearly touching the floor.

"I didn't want to have to call in the new AP just yet," Penelope says, scrolling through her phone. "Amaya pegs me as the type of student to tell authority figures to go fuck themselves."

"She flipped Sam off last year," Juliet nods around a forkful of salad. "That's when I had to step in."

"Like, I feel bad for the girl. She has a shit home life. But don't take it out on me. *Damn.*"

"Take it as a compliment," I interject. "If she's willing to misbehave in your class, that means she feels safe with you."

"Could she feel safe in a nicer way?"

Juliet and I chuckle just as all three of our phones buzz on their respective desktops.

"Ten bucks says they're looking for extracurricular help again. Nose goes!" Penelope says, touching her nose before I can even unlock my phone.

Sure enough, staring up at us is an email with a subject line that reads *Various Extracurricular Sponsors Needed!*

“Damn, this is long,” Penelope notes from her spot still slithered down in the desk. “If I had a dollar for every vacancy we need filled this year, I could probably buy us all lunch.”

“Why are there so many?” I ask.

“A lot of retirements last year,” Juliet says, scrolling through the email. “Our principal is retiring at the end of this year, too, which is why Don has someone shadowing him as a new assistant principal.”

“I think I met him at new hire orientation,” I muse. “Quiet guy.”

“That’ll be perfect for Amaya,” Penelope snorts from her hovel. “She won’t be able to stand it when he doesn’t interact.”

“Maybe you should try it,” Juliet offers.

I snort, scrolling through the list of vacancies in extracurricular help. In the background, Penelope is daring Juliet to take the open position for assistant cheerleading coach, but I pay them no mind.

Because suddenly, my chest is tight. My heart is pounding. About halfway down the list is a bullet point that simply reads *Spring Musical Director*.

It might as well be in neon flashing lights.

I sit up pin straight, reading those words over again as my body becomes a fuzzy blob.

“You good, Luce?”

“Yeah,” I say, thumbing over the words again as I try not to let myself become trapped in the past.

I’d been standing in the kitchen, staring at Scott’s feet so that I didn’t have to look into the poisonous captivity of his eyes.

“Directing a musical? What in the hell would you need to do that for?” he’d asked.

I shrugged, letting the speech I’d practiced on the car ride home for three straight days fall from its battle position right down to the floor. To the shoes I’d been staring at. Right beneath his toes, where he squashed them.

“I don’t know. I thought it could be fun.”

He’d scoffed, a grainy sound that churned my insides.

“You can have fun right here. At home. With me. You don’t need to spend

any extra time at that place than you already do. You're already wasting time at that job as it is. Don't know what you think you're doing in a job helping people. There's no way you actually help any of those damn kids."

The same job I'd gone to school for. In the place where we'd met. The same job he'd once encouraged me to pursue.

"So, no?"

"No."

"Lucy?"

Penelope's voice startles me from the runaway train I'd been trapped on, the one that nearly derailed me in the middle of a school day. I shake my head, shake out that *No*, and take a deep breath in.

"I think I want to do the musical."

It's not a *think*. It's a *know*. But the residuals of Scott still hanging around make me cautious around anyone, including these two women who I'm almost *certain are safe*.

"That's awesome!" Juliet exclaims, a wide smile lighting up her face. "I love theater but I can't carry a tune to save my life."

"You'll do a hell of a lot better than Martin has in the past—Lucy, Martin was the choir director until he retired last year. Remember when he tried to convince Don to let him bring *actual cats* on as extras when they did *Cats*?"

"Half the building was allergic!" Juliet laughs.

I smile. It's small and tight, but it's there. Because with just a few confirmations from people I've only barely started to let in, I press the *Reply* button.

I don't get around to actually typing out the message until much, much later, when I'm at home, beneath a blanket and half a glass of wine. Oh, and with Samantha on speaker.

I really thought I could do it without the crutch of her, but having someone to lean on as I take baby steps still gives me comfort. For right now, I'm okay being tucked under my security blanket.

"I'm so proud of you, you know," she says, crackling through the speaker of my phone that I have sitting next to me on the couch, my laptop propped open to the email.

"Thanks."

I chew on my thumb nail, staring at the blur of words that center on

Spring Musical Director. I don't even know what the rest of the information says. I'm sure there are requirements and compensation, but none of those top the freedom of making my own choice.

"Tell me how you're going to reply to the email."

I lift my fingers over the keyboard, heavy with both fear and anticipation.

Fear that as soon as my fingers hover over anything resembling a yes, Scott will come and snatch my dreams away again.

Anticipation that, for the first time in over a decade, I could finally have something in my hands that belongs to me.

"I think I'm going to say, *I was wondering if the musical position is still available.*"

"Mhm. That would work," Samantha says. But I hear what she isn't saying. The way that she holds back because she knows when to push me and when not to.

"Go ahead," I say, swallowing down the residual fear that's lingering inside of me. "Push."

"Don't ask," she says. "You've been asking for too long, Lucy. Tell them."

Don't ask.

Somewhere in our marriage, I'd stopped *telling* Scott what I was going to do and started asking for permission. I don't need to do that anymore.

That singular thought has my fingers slowly pecking across the keyboard, letter by letter, making both childhood dreams of being on a stage again, and adult dreams of being secure in my own person, come to life.

I am interested in the position of director for the spring musical.

Samantha counts me down to hitting *Send*, and as soon as I see that email officially out there in the universe, my heart sprouts wings.

twenty-one

aaron

“UH, COACH?”

“Right, right! My bad.”

I shake my head, and toss the ball to the player waiting for my chest pass from beneath the basket—the drill I literally just got done explaining. Kind of hard to start the drill when your coach’s head is in the clouds and the ball is glued to his hands because of it.

I watch as two seventh graders work through the drill, one catching the pass at the top of the key to begin a quick offensive move to get into position for a layup. I snag the rebound and pass the ball to the next kid in line while the boys who just finished high five me and make their way to the end.

Basketball season is in full swing, but my head is anywhere but here. I can’t help it, the fact that my head is stuck in outer space. I haven’t been able to shake her all weekend.

Lucy has been swimming Olympic laps through my brain, leaving me in the ripples of confusion. One minute, I think she’s finally going to give in and let me in, and the next, she’s caught me in her web, dangling no-strings-sex in front of me. I can’t do it. Not usually ever, but *especially* not with her.

Not after I’ve seen the hesitation in her eyes, heard the subtle bite in her words that tells a different story. I have to get her to trust me, but I fear that every time I get closer, she’s going to sink her claws in just a little deeper and make it hard to say no to whatever she asks of me.

What’s going to happen when I just give in?

It’s safe to say all of my classes were positively thrilled when I chucked my lessons for the day and we just played dodgeball. On a *Monday* no less. I can’t let my basketball team suffer too.

Once we’ve made it through the drill line, I blow my whistle and draw a

circle above my head with my index finger, signaling for the boys to circle up under the basket.

“Alright, guys. Our first game is in two weeks. We’ll start scrimmaging tomorrow. Get your minds ready. Remember, this game is 10-percent physical...”

“...and 90-percent mental.”

My team echoes one of our mantras, and I can see the hunger in their eyes for the real season to begin. We end practice with a quick game of lightning and then head to the locker room to pack up. As I’m lofting my bag onto my shoulder, beat down from a day of daydreaming, I nearly run into one of my players lingering outside the locker room, staring down at a paper in his grip.

“Get a bad grade on a test, Blake?” I ask, clapping him on the shoulder as I peer over to see what he’s got. Before I can see what he’s looking at, he nearly crumples the paper as he pulls it away. When he glances up at me, he’s red in the face.

“Woah, sorry chief. I didn’t mean to pry.” I hold both hands up in surrender, taking a step back. I must’ve just startled him, because when he realizes it’s me, the tension in Blake’s shoulders slips a bit.

“It’s okay. No, it’s not a bad test grade or anything. I’m keeping up my grades to play; promise.”

I nod. Our team has a C+ average requirement across the board to play, and my boys know that I take that seriously—unlike our football coach, who asks teachers to fake grades to let his students suit up.

“We should probably head out then. I’m sure your mom’s waiting.” He nods, and we walk together. “Anything you wanna talk about?”

Blake hesitates, which isn’t typically like him. He’s quiet, a good student, an above average player, and a leader on our team. He always speaks up, and is generally open with me. But for the second time this evening, I seem to have spooked him. He’s frozen thirty yards from the exit, where I can see the headlights from his mom’s car waiting for him. Staring between the folded, crumpled piece of paper in his hands, the car idling out front, and me. Wordlessly, he unfolds the paper and gently pushes it toward me.

It’s a flyer, pulled down off the walls. Advertising auditions for the spring musical.

“Oh, awesome! You thinking about trying out, dude?”

The hesitation I’d seen in him melts away by a fraction with his barely-there nod.

“I uh... want to?”

I hear the question in the same moment that I hear the dull buzz of his cell phone in his pocket. Likely his mom from the car waiting out front.

“But...?”

He sighs.

“My dad.”

And I get it.

I pass him a stare that hopefully conveys, *I understand*, and, *I support you, dude*, and, *Let’s talk about this more later*, all in one.

“You’d better get going. Don’t wanna keep your mom waiting.” He nods. “Tomorrow though?”

Blake tilts his head.

“Meet me in my office with this before school, okay? I want to look over the practice schedule to make this work for you.”

“Really?”

“Really, really.”

There’s a flicker of hope in his eyes. I understand the hesitation that stops it from being full-on joy. Between his coach and his dad, I’m definitely the lesser of two evils to get past—and hell, I’m not really an *evil*.

I pass another flier on my way out, and see my own crossroads in the byline:

See Ms. Lucy for Audition Information!

twenty-two

lucy

I DON'T HAVE to go into work this morning, right?

Don't get me wrong, I love my job. River Valley is the absolute best community I could have dropped into after the year from hell. I'm finally finding my stride with my students, making a few friends, the musical position is officially *mine*. But this morning in particular, I'm dragging my feet.

I made things awkward with Aaron, and I know it.

I propositioned him, and he turned me down in the absolute sweetest way possible. After that, and what happened at his place when I ran out without a word, there's absolutely no way he's going to keep giving me more chances.

And my heart hurts at that thought.

There's something about Aaron and his over-eagerness, something that makes me sad that my heart is in pieces. Because if it wasn't, I'd have fallen into his offers of love and companionship right from the start.

I wish I wasn't broken.

That's the truth of the matter.

I wish my head and my heart could be on the same page, that I could see this man who keeps putting his heart out on the line, wish I could roll the dice and take up his offer.

The sad fact is, I literally *have* to work with him today. I've done a pretty good job of avoiding him since roller skating. Today, not only do I have another SEL lesson with his classes all day, but Aaron and I are meeting for my monthly check-in as mentor and mentee.

I genuinely debated calling in sick, and asking if we could have our meeting in an email.

With a gallon sized mug of coffee and a pair of shoes that can keep up

with my dragging feet all day, I enter through the doors farthest away from my office, simply because that means I won't have to walk past Aaron's and chance seeing him before I'm ready.

But whether it's luck or fate or karma, as I round the corner, I hear him chatting outside my door. My heart leaps into my throat before the hallway comes into view, settling a bit when I realize he's there with a student.

Kids are the best buffer.

I paint on a tense smile when I meet his eye. He does the same. At least we're both passengers on the same awkward boat. I just hope he's not up to his neck in it like I am.

"Uh, Ms. Lucy! Good morning!"

"Morning, gentlemen. You're here early."

"Uh, yeah..." Blake starts, adjusting his backpack on his shoulders. "Coach said he would meet with me before school to talk about something and..."

His eyes hit the floor, and Aaron fills in the blanks.

"Blake has something he'd like to chat with both of us about, if you have a minute. If not, we can always shuffle some things around in our schedule."

"No, I've got time. Come on in, Blake. Just give me a second to get my things settled."

Aaron and Blake take seats in the flexible seating I have posted up around my office. I wish I could say that the middle school student was the one who chose the yoga ball, but no. As soon as I turn from stowing my coat and bag in the back closet, I see my puppy dog of a friend bouncing lightly atop it like he doesn't have a care in the world. Blake, on the other hand, looks nervous, slouched in a regular chair. I take a seat in my desk chair and swivel so that we make a triangle.

"Alright, Blake. How can I help you this morning?"

Blake swallows, then stares at his shoes again. I've always found power in silence, but with the minutes on the clock dwindling to when the bell rings, Aaron settles his bouncing long enough to tap his shoe lightly against Blake's.

"I uh... *wannatryoutforthemusical.*"

"Sorry?"

He clears his throat, pulls a folded sheet of paper from his hoodie pocket, and says, "I want to... try out for the musical."

"That's great!" I exclaim with a smile. "We would love to have you!"

He clears his throat again, fidgeting with the wrinkled edges of the paper.

“I have basketball though.”

“That’s perfectly fine. I’m sure Mr. Russo and I can work something out with the schedules.”

“It’s not just that...”

In this silence, the one that Aaron grants him, I see the anxiety playing out on Blake’s face. Anxiety can manifest itself in thousands of different ways. For me, it has always been shutting down and muting the world around me. For Blake, it’s gnawing on his thumbnail and avoiding my eyes.

“Would it be easier if you wrote it down for me?” I offer. He shakes his head, still chewing on his thumbnail. I see the kick of his knee as it begins to bounce, and then Aaron cuts in softly.

“Would it be easier if I told her?”

Blake takes a moment to consider, still staring at the floor, still bouncing his knee. After a few blinks, he nods.

“Blake is nervous about auditioning for the musical because his dad wants all of his focus to be on athletics. Blake is a great asset to the team, but he wants to try other things. He’s afraid his dad won’t be accepting of him splitting his time.”

My heart stumbles for the boy in front of me. It’s a story I’ve heard too many times.

Middle school kids feeling pressures from their parents. They come in all shapes and sizes. I don’t get too many athletes in my office to talk things through though. Boys in sports at this age have a stigma slapped on them like a *Hello, My Name Is* sticker that tells them not to show emotion, and that the pressure is all part of the game. Blake being in my office gives me hope that he can be a leader for his peers.

“I’m proud of you for being brave enough to talk to a trusted adult about this, Blake. I’m sorry that your feelings are jumbled.” He shrugs, and I continue, “You must really look up to Mr. Russo.”

“Mhm. Yeah,” he replies, still staring at the floor, at the heels of his shoe that he’s tapping in a light rhythm against the tile. “I thought he might have advice for me.”

“I told Blake that we could work something out with our schedule, but it turns out, I’m not the biggest obstacle.”

I give Blake time to think. Just like Samantha does with me. I don’t fill in the blanks for him. He’s already done that himself. He just needs time to

gather the courage, to line up his words in the right way. After taking a big breath, he does.

“My dad... He wants me to go to college on an athletics scholarship. He’s not shy about telling me that either. Don’t get me wrong, I love sports, but I think I’d like acting, too.”

“Have you ever tried it before?”

“Yeah. When I was little. We did a play in third grade, and then again in fifth. It was something we did as a class, so I *had* to do it. I really liked it. I was pretty good, too.”

A smile peeks through the red stain of Blake’s cheeks; the joy he’s been hiding for his father’s sake.

“It sounds like this is something you really want to pursue.”

He nods a few times, his lips pressed into a tight line like he’s slinking back in on himself.

“How can I help?”

Blake lifts his head, tilting it in question.

“I can help you figure out how to talk with your dad—we could practice what to say, and then you’d do the heavy lifting at home. Or, I could ask him to come in for a meeting, with myself and you—maybe your coach too—so that he sees that we’re all on the same team. Or, if you don’t like either of those ideas, we go back to the drawing board.”

Blake looks from me to Aaron and back again, training his eyes on his tapping feet as I let him simmer. In the meantime, I catch Aaron’s gaze. He wears a smile that’s part appreciation, part awe.

“Um... I think, maybe I’d like to think about it?”

“That’s totally fine. No need to make a decision today.”

He looks relieved, and I attest that to both the fact that he was able to talk out his anxieties *and* the time I’ve just given him. He thanks us both before hefting his backpack onto one shoulder and heading toward my door when I call after him.

“I’m really proud of you for coming to your coach about the trouble that you’ve been facing. I know that being a teenager is weird and tough, and adding emotions and feelings to the mix can be uncomfortable.”

“Me too, Blake,” Aaron echoes. “I’ll do whatever I can to make sure that you can do both basketball and the musical, if that’s what you choose.”

Blake smiles, nods, and heads out the door.

Leaving Aaron and me alone for the first time since this weekend.

I think we both realize this at the same time, because as soon as we smile at one another in the small success we've had with our student, we both immediately turn away, chuckling awkwardly. I hate myself for knowing that Aaron will scratch the back of his neck moments before he does it.

"Thanks for your help," he says. "For meeting with us before school on such short notice."

"All part of the job," I say, echoing the same nervous shake of his words.

We sit there, silence weighing between us like a curtain, before he says, "I think we make a great team." I don't have time to process that before he says, "Let me know what else I can do to help with Blake. Heck, I'll keep the kid after practice and teach him how to dance if it helps."

"You know how to dance?" I ask, grateful for the diversion that eases a little bit of the awkward.

"I know a step or two."

His expression slinks into a saucy kind of silly—his brows snap into a straight line, and his eyes narrow, as he tilts his head, shimmies his shoulders, and shuffles around on the yoga ball while snapping his fingers.

It's too hard not to giggle.

And in the same snap of time that the giddy sound escapes my lips, I see the silliness melt instantly into an inferno.

I didn't know a giggle held so much power.

Thankfully, as my lips part and his eyes track the movement, the bell rings. Aaron clears his throat, I discreetly tug at the neck of my shirt, and I wonder if erasing the awkwardness between us won't be so hard after all.

twenty-three

lucy

WE'VE BEEN in a standoff for seventeen minutes now. Two past the allotted time that I'd blocked off for my meeting with Amaya, but I can wait. The cadence of her snapping gum, the ticking second-hand on the clock, and the tap of her sneaker against the metal leg of my desk is actually kind of soothing.

And besides. Seventeen minutes is nothing. Scott once stared me down at the kitchen table for almost two hours when I told him I didn't want to hang out with his friends on an errant Friday night after I'd already told him several days in advance that I had plans with friends of my own. He'd called and cancelled them for me, and then took my phone and snapped it in two so I couldn't contact them.

The bell rings, but without any conversation between us after my initial, "Hi, Amaya. As you know, my name is Ms. Lucy. Today, I'd like to—" and the way she'd cut me off with, "I don't talk to shrinks," I'm not about to let her head to her third period class so easily. She stands and starts to shoulder her backpack, but I put up a hand.

"You can't force me to stay here."

The curtain of dark hair covers the indifference she's tried to paint over her scowl. She hates being here just as much as I hate the terrors that I've heard about her home life.

"I can't," I agree. "But I'd really like to chat with you before we leave for winter break, and we don't have many days left on the calendar."

Her brows tighten, eyes turning to slits as her hand grips the lone backpack strap tighter.

"I already told you, I don't talk to shrinks."

"Good thing I'm not a 'shrink' then," I say, keeping my calm, half-smile

expression. Her gaze narrows.

“Then what are you?”

“I’m a school counselor.”

She scoffs. “What’s the difference?”

“There are a couple different aspects of my job. While part of that is to speak with students about their emotions, family and friend conflicts, and helping them improve themselves academically, I also teach several classes, support small groups, create student schedules, and help with the incentives programs that we run.”

“Sounds like a load of bullshit.”

I shrug, letting her language deflect, which is the opposite of what she wants.

“What? You aren’t going to threaten to send me to the principal for cussing?”

“Depends. Do those words give you a sense of control over expressing your feelings for having to be in my office instead of on your way to third period right now?”

She squirms, shifting between the balls of her feet. When she shrugs in reply, she doesn’t look at me.

“I don’t know. Kind of.”

“Then, by all means, I’d much rather you use them in here than in the classroom.”

At this, she meets my eye, skepticism painting one brow into an arch.

“I can cuss in here?”

“Go right ahead.”

She doesn’t let out a string of curse words, but she does take a seat and sigh.

We sit in silence for another three minutes before she speaks.

“You can’t fix me, you know. I’ll sit in here or whatever, but you can’t fix me.”

“You’re right,” I say. “I can’t fix something that isn’t broken.”

Her head snaps up, that wariness bunching both brows to the center.

“Then what do you call all of this? Why am I even here?”

It’s small, but I hear it—her voice cracks on that last syllable, and I think she surprises even herself, because she tries to fold in again. Lock it down. Her eyes narrow in protest to her own vulnerability, her body scrunching in the chair to cage the emotions that she’s likely kept at bay since her mom

ditched her and her siblings.

“You’re here because the people in this building care about you,” I say as gently as possible. The demons in her head are forcing her not to believe it. It’s a hell I know all too well.

“I’m mean to them,” she insists. “I was a bitch to Ms. Barker today.”

“I told my mom I didn’t need her in my life once. Doesn’t mean she cares about me any less.”

I shock myself at that share. I’m typically open enough with my students to make connections, but not like this. Not into the deepest depths of me, when my parents were trying to pull me out of a toxic marriage only for me to close the door and put on a deadbolt before throwing the key into the Atlantic, using words Scott had convinced me were true. I reel it back in and focus on the girl in front of me, the one who *didn’t* tell her mom to leave. The one who had no choice.

“What can you even do about it anyway, huh?” she asks, thankfully bypassing the way I’d just accidentally gutted myself moments ago. “You can’t bring her back.”

“You’re right. I can’t,” I say. “But what I *can* do is help you to take that tangled ball of yarn that’s inside of you and make some sense of it.” I toss her the ball of blue yarn that I keep on my desk. “Some of us have one difficult knot, and some of us have a whole tangled mess of them.”

Amaya catches the ball, and I keep the loose end, watching as she turns it over and over in her hands, slowly unraveling the blue yarn until it snags. Frustration sets in as she has to slow down in order to untangle the section, but her face relaxes just a smidge when she unknots it, when she realizes that she can move forward.

“Some knots are harder than others,” I say, indicating what she’s just unraveled. “Some of them will take more time. But I’m here to help you untie as many as we can, and figure out how to prevent the string from tangling again.”

She continues wordlessly unraveling my ball of yarn, pausing at the snarls, before I have the entire unraveled string in my hands. She glances up at me, beneath hooded eyes and a curtain of hair, and nods once.

“Okay. Fine.”

I lift my chin, waiting for her to continue.

“You can ask me questions or whatever.”

“Cool.” I smile.

“Can I go to class now?”

I nod, telling her that we’ll meet again after winter break, but that she can fill out a request to see me before if she really needs me.

“Oh, and Amaya?”

She pauses, turning in my doorway.

“Two things. One: The feelings you’re feeling? They’re completely valid. I know they might seem intimidating, or you might be embarrassed to let them in, but you are allowed to feel.” The drop in her shoulders and the flicker of vulnerability in her eyes makes me realize just how much she needed to hear that. “And two? Please stop mooing in Ms. Barker’s classroom, or I might have to schedule some one on one time with *her* before Christmas break.”

She smiles. It’s small and pursed, but the way her eyes shine in mischief and understanding are a win for me. She rolls her eyes, says, *Alright*, with a slight chuckle, and heads out.

I relax into my chair. This girl is going to need a lot of love. *A lot* of it. But that’s why I went into counseling in the first place: to show students who don’t feel worthy of love that they deserve it. To help kids find their voices, to find the words to use when they don’t know which ones to say.

It’s personal therapy in and of itself. What I can’t do for myself, I can surely do for others.

twenty-four

lucy

“...AND when I asked why he didn’t just *tell me* that he, in fact, *did* want to date the new sixth grade teacher—you know, when I *asked* if there was anything going on between them—he said, and I quote, ‘I didn’t want to make either of you mad.’”

I don’t think Penelope has stopped talking since the moment we walked through the doors of this bar, and frankly, I don’t care. She has a gossiping heart, and I have a mind that needs to be filled to the brim with distractions.

Between Scott taking up squatter’s space for over a decade despite my constant efforts to evict him, and Aaron doing his best to move in with six overnight bags all screaming, *wear my sweats to bed, you’ll be more comfortable, I’ll wait for you Lucy*, I figure I’ll need more than just alcohol to clear my murky thoughts.

Which is why, when Penelope asked me to hang out with her again, I didn’t hesitate to say yes. If my therapist asks, I’ll just tell her that I’m finally getting out and socializing. Becoming part of my new city. I don’t *have* to tell her that listening to Penelope’s drama is a distraction technique from my own.

If I thought I had trauma, Penelope can fit her relationship issues into the hanger of an airplane, and still need the overhead space for carry-ons. This is only her second story of the very young evening, and quite honestly, I’m content to settle in for the long haul.

“What bullshit,” I say, sipping my second drink of the night. “Is that code for ‘I didn’t know which of you would put out more, so I was waiting around to see?’”

“That’s exactly what I said!”

“How long did they last?”

“Oh, they’re still together. And God bless ‘em. She can have him. A year later, and he still hasn’t decided on a career path, and his hair line has receded at least another inch.”

“Wasn’t he thirty *at the time*?”

“Sure was!”

Penelope raises both brows, a sparkle of mischief in her eye as she wraps her lips around the straw of her drink and sucks until the ice cubes rattle gently against the glass. I swivel my own straw in my shallow beverage, spiraling the ice cubes around.

“You seem to have handled all of these dipshit men pretty well, all things considered.”

She shrugs, turning to the bartender to signal with the flick of her wrist and a thumbs up that she’d like another.

“It’s the only way, really. I learned a valuable lesson, about relationships and myself, with every failed one. They’re in my past. Why let them control my future?”

Oh, I do not have enough alcohol in my system to handle this.

Because even with the purity of those words entering my bloodstream, the poison is already winding its way around them to snuff them out, reminding me of all the ways that I’m still letting Scott have ownership of my past, present, and future.

I almost don’t have time to put up my shields, can see the bullets barreling towards me like there’s still a bright red target painted on my chest, when something else intervenes.

“Anyway, less about me. I could talk all night and not realize you were waiting to cut in. I promise, it’s something I’m working on, but you don’t look like the type to tell me—no offense!”

I laugh. It’s small, barely a whisper of a sound, but it’s there.

“No, that’s okay. I like to listen. It’s one of the reasons I went into counseling.”

“Where’d you get your undergrad from?”

We trade roles for a little while, and I skirt right around the way that undergrad was the beginning of my downhill tumble, to trade stories about our favorite New England haunts instead. It’s freeing in a way that I didn’t know it could be. Talking about it without really talking about it. Because this is the first time that I’ve let any single part of my past enter my present. Granted, I’ve barely nicked the surface, but even uttering the name of my

college makes my gut sink down into my shoes. Either Penelope doesn't notice, or she's wise enough not to mention it.

We're so loosened up with alcohol and conversation that by the time she says, "Got any fuckboy stories of your own?" I shut down less than I normally do.

Even through the murkiness of alcohol, he's there. Slithering up through the muck and trying like hell to break down the little bit of sunshine I've allowed in. But I close my eyes. Inhale for five. Exhale for five. And my therapist's words come out in the form of a shield.

Any progress, no matter how small, is progress, Lucy.

It makes the weight of my next words somehow lighter.

"It's not something I like to talk about."

The people pleaser that Scott bullied me into becoming thrashes inside the cage I've spent the past several months putting her in. My chest hurts, heaving just a little heavier, and I wonder how much Penelope can decipher from my change in behavior, because suddenly, she lays a gentle hand on my wrist.

"Not a problem. Let's talk about something else then."

Just like that, the image of Scott inside my head slinks back beneath the surface. He isn't gone by any means. I know he's still lurking, waiting for another moment when my defenses are down, but for now, he's at bay. It's a feeling I'm still getting used to.

"Like maybe how much you enjoy having *Aaron Russo* as your mentor?"

Welp. That peace lasted for a whopping ten seconds.

But Aaron doesn't spur on my anxiety like my manipulative ex-husband does. Instead, I see the guy who took me home from the bar, treated me like someone he'd known forever, and offered me sweats so I'd feel more comfortable. I see the guy from the roller rink who turned down my offer for a casual fling with a confession that it was breaking his heart to do so. And somehow, *that* guy has butterflies that have been dormant in my chest for so long shaking off the dust. I might have to start taking an allergy pill.

"He's nice," I say, hoping that the blush creeping up my cheeks is the same pigment that vodka gives me.

"Oh, I'll bet he is."

Penelope gives me suggestive side eye as she presses her elbow lightly into my arm, and I realize how much I've missed this. The camaraderie. Sharing girlie secrets with friends. The way they slowly trickled off after I

got married wasn't apparent until I needed to get out. Realizing, when I got to the other side, that I had no one was almost as devastating as having to pick up my pieces and start back at square one.

"I thought you said he was a flirt?" I giggle into the lip of my drink, making the pinkish liquid bubble at my lips.

"Aaron is..."

A kaleidoscope crosses her face, her eyes narrowing and widening as her brows crinkle and smooth, like she's trying to decide what to say.

Some long hidden away part of me hopes that she's trying to tell me how wonderful he is, hopes that she's going to affirm every wondering I've been turning over inside my head like flipping pizza dough. Some piece down inside of me, buried beneath the rubble that Scott left behind, wants to like him. Wants to one day accept when he asks me out on a date again.

If he asks me out on a date again.

I don't know how much longer I'll be able to deny the attraction I have for Aaron. Something pulled me to him in that bar—and not just Drake, who had insisted that if I *didn't rescue his buddy soon*, they'd be *saving him from his own puddle of drool*. But, in the aftermath of what we did, I realized that I wouldn't have gone home with any other man. Aaron made me feel safe. Valued. He took care of me. And, the way his face lights up whenever he sees me? It has most definitely snuck up in my daydreams more and more.

I ready myself, willing something positive to maybe sneak its way into this small tunnel I've carved for myself in this new life, the one that is hanging out with a friend on a Saturday night and just accepted the job as director of the middle school spring musical. The end of Penelope's sentence isn't what I'm expecting at all.

"Here?"

Her head tilts, and I immediately follow her line of sight toward the dance floor part of the bar.

Sure enough, Aaron Russo is here. In this very bar. Living right up to his flirty namesake, with his hands high in the air, and a circle of women dancing on him.

twenty-five

aaron

“IT’S A PARTY IN THE U.S.A.!”

We finish the song with our hands up out of obligation. Honestly though, having a dance party with my sisters and their friends would’ve ended with our hands up in the air at some point anyway. The song switches over, and the ladies squeal before I recognize the tune. I roll my eyes for show. I am secretly psyched as the soundtrack to *The Greatest Showman* queues up next. Sophia beckons me with a purposeful wiggle of her fingers, and I put on my game face.

“Alright, which one of you is behind this?” I shout over Zac Efron’s sweet, sweet voice.

“It’s tradition!” Dani calls. “And it’s *my* party!”

“Damn, I cannot *wait* until that expires at midnight.”

“Not how that works!”

“You think you remember it?” Sophia asks, placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on my waist, “Rewrite the Stars” sliding quickly toward its first chorus.

“After you made me practice with you for five straight days? This choreo will be drilled into my brain so long, I’ll be doing it on my way to the pearly gates.”

She swivels her wrist, flips me the bird, and immediately snaps into the choreography.

I won’t ever call myself a dancer, but growing up in a household of award-winning ones, I did eventually pick up a thing or two.

Including my sister’s nationals-winning duet routine, that she made me practice after-hours.

That I am now doing in the middle of a bar on a Saturday night.

My body is built for lifting weights, sinking baskets, and hitting dingers over the left field fence, but I keep up with my sister, letting the grace of her lithe dancer's body lead as I follow her steps and anchor myself to the ground to lift her when necessary. The disparity between us is probably comical—with her arms gracefully splitting the air as she draws circles on either side of her body, and mine looking bulky and robotic as I go through muscle memory motions.

The song eventually comes to an end, with Soph angled backwards in the cradle of my arms, panting heavily after the exertion she hasn't really touched since her dancer days. The smile on her face tells me how much she missed the stage, and I grin widely, tipping my sister back onto her feet before ruffling her hair.

I'm barely finished wiping the sweat from my brow when an early 2000s club hit comes on, and my sisters and Dani's friends circle up with me in the middle. I lift my arms into the air and let them use me as they always have: the totally harmless brother, the "one of the girls" guy who makes sure they all get home safely and provides endless shitty dancing entertainment. I'm halfway through "Whistle While You Twerk," stuck between two of Dani's bridesmaids, when I feel the air around me shift.

I don't even get a chance to register just how quickly my body has become attuned with Lucy's presence before I hear her voice.

"God, Penelope was *right* about you."

I stop. Shove out from between my sister's friends. See the look in her eyes, and remember how she'd asked why I wasn't dating Penelope back at the roller skating rink.

The hope that had just exploded like fireworks at her presence fizzles like a bucket dumped over Fourth of July sparklers. My heart pops outward like one of those cartoon bunnies, reaching toward her, but pauses at her words, at the thin line of her brows and the hint of glassiness in her eyes.

"I... hmm?"

"I should've taken her 'flirt' for 'player' instead. You had me so fooled the other night. I can't believe I fell for it."

In the face of her accusations and anger, I can see only one thing: the sadness bubbling over it all, consuming like her anger is the dam to her wall of devastation.

"Back up, bitch. Don't you talk to my brother like that."

Oh, the way my heart tears. You can hear it like a record scratch.

Dani, with her freshly manicured kitten claws, pushes through the group of girls with a finger pointed right at Lucy, the Italian in her blood simply oozing out as she charges forward to defend me. Which, on any other occasion, I would stand back and let her. But Lucy is about one pinprick away from popping, and I cannot, *cannot* let that happen again.

“Woah, woah, ladies, *ladies*. Let’s all just calm down for a second, okay?”

I step casually between my sister and my—

I don’t know what Lucy is, but my heart seems to have it worked out that right now, she needs to be protected at all costs, so I do just that. I give my sister a look that says, *Back off; I’m handling this*, and swivel my attention to figure out what is going on in Lucy’s head, when I see her mouth the word, *Brother?*

Those two phantom syllables end with a quivering of her lip, the blood draining from her face. She’s about to fold in on herself. It’s not quite the same way I saw her turn into a shell before she dashed out of my bathroom, but it’s similar enough that I can’t let her run away again.

“Hey. Lucy?”

She snaps her attention back to me, and the phantoms mist over her eyes, her lips still parted with unsaid words like she’s in a trance. Her chest heaves with short, shallow breaths. Something tells me I have to handle her delicately.

“These are my sisters,” I start, pivoting on my toe so that I’m facing her, my back to the angry Italian mob. “And a few of their friends. We’re here for my sister Daniela’s bachelorette party.”

I shrug, offer her a small smile, and step to the side, glancing over my shoulder in hopes that my sisters will go easy on her. Unfortunately, they’re all wearing matching scowls and folded arms.

“Sick moves, Russo. No one told me you coached dance.”

Thank *God* for Penelope Barker.

“Penny!”

I think I shout her name less to acknowledge that she’s here too, and more as a prayer of thanks. She sidles up next to Lucy and I instantly wrap her in a bear hug.

“How’s it going, Barker?”

“Not bad. Just having a little girls’ night with Lucy, and we thought we’d come over and say hello. What are you up to?”

“Sister’s bachelorette party.” I shift so that I’m next to Penny, creating a semicircle instead of the divide of the Red Sea from moments ago. “Penelope and Lucy, meet the rest of the Russos: Maria, Daniela, and Sophia. Dipshits, these are my friends from work. Please be nice to them.”

“Oh, excellent! I love wedding gossip. Please tell me *everything!*”

Penelope understands exactly what needs to happen next, and in a matter of moments, she has my sisters all smiling again, and on their way back to the bar for refills, leaving me blessedly alone with Lucy. Some color has returned to her cheeks, and for that, I’m relieved.

I take a small step back, giving her space to breathe, and a line of sight to Penny at the bar.

“I tried to warn you about my sick dance moves,” I shrug, trying to break the ice. I scratch my ear, tilting my head as I gauge where her head is at—if I should go and get Penelope back over here as her life raft.

“Oh, I’ve seen worse.”

A small smile ticks up at the corner of her mouth, the tiniest fraction of altitude, and yet somehow, it makes my pulse skyrocket.

“I’m a little rusty. We haven’t done that one since *before* I entered the dirty thirties.”

That pinched smile rises, but I don’t get the chance to appreciate it before her eyes squeeze shut, and watch the five seconds it takes for her chest to inflate, the five it takes for her to exhale, and the way her eyes flutter back open. I don’t at all miss the way she steels herself to speak, like this courage is brand new.

“Those are your sisters.”

“They are! Three of them, at least. But their friends are basically adopted siblings at this point.”

She nods twice.

“And I just came over here and...”

I want to interrupt her. Cut her off. Put her at ease. But that confidence she’d just donned moments ago seems like something she’s fighting to maintain. I remain quiet in her pause, letting her put the pieces together.

“Accused you of not being honest with me the other night at the roller rink, and called you a player.”

“It happens,” I shrug. “I get accused of being someone’s boyfriend every time I go out with this group. It’s one of the downsides of being the only male in the family.”

Her eyes shine with relief and thanks. “And the upsides?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I’m Mom’s favorite. I can do no wrong in her eyes.”

I offer her a cheesy-big grin and pocket my hands, earning myself another of those butterfly Lucy laughs that I’ve come to covet oh so much.

My gaze drifts over to my sisters, who are now so deep into wedding conversation that they aren’t even concerned with me anymore.

“I’m sorry I called you a player.”

“It’s no biggie. I prefer the term ‘hopeless romantic,’ but...”

I trail off, not knowing how many more times I can show this girl my entire hand before she finally shoos me away.

In that moment, Penny and my sisters start making their way back from the bar, fresh liquor in hand—aside from Maria, who cradles a virgin piña colada.

“I’m crashing the party. Might even be crashing the wedding,” Penny says, and I am not at all surprised.

“No trying to hook up with any of my cousins.”

“Awe!” she pouts. “But Maria was just saying how Joey—”

“*Especially* not Joey!”

The circle falls into relaxed laughter and chatter, with Lucy somewhat on the outskirts. I can tell that my sisters are still harboring residual anger, that Lucy’s still harboring residual embarrassment. I take a step back, widening the circle so that she’s in it, but angling my body so that our conversation is kind of our own.

“You wanna hang out with us? We will one hundred percent be shutting this thing down by like eleven.”

She quirks a small smile, but it falls as her eyes start to scan the room, debating.

“Thank you for the offer, but I think I’m going to call it a night.”

It’s fine, because no matter if she would have stayed until the end of our night, or left right now, I feel like I’ve just banked some extra credit time with Lucy. Stolen moments that I wouldn’t have gotten otherwise.

“Okay,” I nod.

She signals to Penelope, and they head to the bar to pay her tab. When they return, she pauses on the outskirts of the circle, takes her breaths, and flushes red before she speaks.

“I’m sorry about interrupting your party. And for what I said to your brother. I was...”

I can tell that she's fumbling over what to say next, but thankfully, Maria cuts in.

"It's no big deal. Aaron has always been one of the girls. It happens."

Sophia nods, and I see some relief trickle down Lucy's face.

Dani, on the other hand, keeps her arms crossed, her tongue running across her teeth as she eyes Lucy up and down. I know in that moment that if I have to jump between them, it won't be my sister that I'm defending.

Lucy waves goodbye to the group and heads toward the exit. As soon as Penny's back in the fold, I slink away, falling into easy step with Lucy. She waits until we get to the door to speak.

"Sorry again for the accusation."

"I appreciate your apology, but it's been forgiven," I promise. "It was really nice to see you tonight, friend."

Her gaze tracks over my shoulder, that courage trying to catch the flame again. There's a small flicker of it in the golden of her eyes as she blinks back to me and says, "It was nice to see you, too."

I do my best to tamp down my grin. No reason to scare her off with my bulky dance moves *and* my wide, carnie smile. She has her hand on the door when I stop her again.

"Hey, Lucy?" She gazes up at me. "Could you let... Penelope know when you make it home okay?"

She smiles, and nods. I wait until I can't see her out the bar's windows before returning to the party.

"That's her?" Maria asks, sidling up next to me as I melt back into the fold.

"It is."

"She's got some work ahead of her."

"Yeah, but she's so much more than worth it."

We're laughing over old Daniela stories when my phone buzzes in my pocket, stretching my grin so widely across my face that it hurts.

Unknown

Made it home, friend.

twenty-six

lucy

“HOW’S MY FRIEND, Lucy, doing today?”

Oh. That word *friend* should *not* be turning my heart into a ball of fuzz this early in the morning.

“Tired,” I chuckle, trying to tamp down the blush in my cheeks.

Aaron rounds my desk and stops at the corner, hands shoved into a pair of joggers that look just a little too snug on him. I swallow, going back to arranging my supplies for our SEL activity today. When he doesn’t respond, I look up.

His mouth is stretched into a wide O, and a loud yawn escapes him, blending suddenly into the image of watching him do that on a lazy Saturday morning.

What? No. Absolutely not.

I shake my head.

“You too?” I ask instead.

He waves me off. “Nah. I’m good to go. I was just up a little too late last night.”

“Doing...?”

“Prep for finals. Prep for our holiday invitational basketball tournament. Oh, and baking the cookies for today, of course!”

“Sounds like you have a lot on your plate.”

“Would you be surprised if I said that the plate of cookies I kept for myself is already gone?”

I laugh from my belly. I haven’t had this free feeling in forever. Somehow, being around Aaron makes it easy.

“I could have made the cookies, you know.”

“Yes, I *do* know that,” he says, bringing the large Tupperware containers

of holiday-shaped cookies to the table I've set up. "But *you*, my friend, are in a brand new school, *and* completing your Master's, *and* directing the spring musical. The *least* I can do is bake a few dozen cookies."

"And *you* coach basketball. You made a cookie for every student in the building, *and* I saw extras out in the workroom. Don't bullshit me, Russo."

"Language, Ms. Lucy!" He gapes with comical, wide eyes, and I bite the inside of my cheek. "Watch your words. Are you in the yellow zone? Do I need to help you come back to green?"

Oh. Oh, my insides are on fire.

He's joking. He is *absolutely* putting on a bit. But for some reason, the way his eyes narrow and he slowly creeps toward me when he says those things, makes me want to ask him for a detention for cussing in school.

Makes me want to peer toward the crotch of those joggers to see how tight the bulge between his legs has gotten.

Instead, I swallow, turn my back to him before that gaze that I *know* wants me deeply can incinerate any more of my insides. Luckily, the bell rings, and students begin filing into the halls. First period doesn't start for another twenty minutes, and Aaron heads up a homeroom class, so I set to work finishing our station.

It's finals week, *and* the week before our winter holiday break. Each grade level is putting on a relaxation station for students to rotate through before testing begins. It was my idea, something we did at my old school, and I honestly still can't take all of the praise coming my way. *This was such a great idea, Lucy! The students are so excited, Lucy! What a great way to give them a day to relax, Lucy!*

It's something I'm still working on. Hearing nice things about myself and not automatically thinking they're fake, or that later on they'll come back with double the amount of insults. It's a good thing I've been left alone to finish setting up.

Well, not technically alone.

Instead of being in Aaron's physical presence, I spend the next twenty minutes combating the Aaron in my head, who wants to *help get me back into the green zone*, and all of the ways he might just make me red. I'm flushed and embarrassingly turned on when he comes back to the classroom, his joggers somehow tighter than they were a half hour ago.

The station he and I put together is cookie decorating. Within thirty seconds of Aaron and me explaining the rules, there are sprinkles

everywhere. Students decorate snowflakes and evergreen trees and snowmen and menorahs in shades that one-hundred-percent do *not* match their intended color schemes. But they're relaxed. They're smiling. They're eating cookies. They're having fun.

"You *do* know that this is the first time the kids have been this chill before finals, don't you?" Aaron says from our joint perch in front of my desk where we stand with our lower backs leaned up against it.

"I don't," I smirk, watching our current sea of sixth graders as they decorate their cookies. "This is my first year here."

"*Smartass*," he chuckles, nudging his elbow into my bicep.

"*Language*, Mr. Russo. Do you need a tool to help you get back into the green zone?"

I'm only echoing his bit from earlier, but somehow, over the chaos of the classroom, I hear his breath catch. I dare to sneak a glance, tracing the fitted River Valley pullover that does nothing to hide the definition in his biceps, up over the corded neck that I suddenly remember as I'd drifted my nose along it in that roller skating rink once upon a time. The charcoal in his dilated pupils saps the moisture from my mouth.

"I thought you said it was okay to be a little out of control sometimes, Ms. Lucy?"

My parched lips part, the desert growing on my tongue.

Thank *God* for the school bell.

We snap to attention, parting to opposite sides of the room to assist with cleanup. We spend the rest of our rotations on opposite sides of the room, chatting with kids and making sure they don't eat too many rogue sprinkles.

Even from across the room, I feel his magnetizing pull too strongly.

twenty-seven

aaron

“HOW ARE THERE MORE SPRINKLES?! I just vacuumed this corner!”

“I think they’re multiplying,” I groan.

Lucy furiously runs the vacuum over the same corner again, and I laugh, partly because she’s adorable in this annoyed state, and partly because I’m *exhausted*.

I don’t know why I insisted on hosting the holiday invitational basketball tournament this year. Hosting a tournament is a *huge* undertaking. On top of teaching, coaching, and everything going on in my family right now, I haven’t been sleeping much lately. I’d be excited for winter break if I actually got to *enjoy* my break.

“I think we have to surrender,” she says, plopping into a desk, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

A lazy smile crosses my face, and I saunter across the room with a container of Clorox wipes in hand, nearly depleted from all of the frosting I just scrubbed off the desks and tables. And floor. And whiteboard? They’re middle schoolers. I no longer question it.

As soon as I sit down, Lucy yawns, and I follow suit. Hers tails into laughter.

“No! No more yawning! We have finals this week. And basketball. And musical callbacks.”

“And Master’s homework,” I add.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

Her head tilts back, and though my body is exhausted, my subconscious immediately sinks its teeth into the long, expansive view of her throat, and the way she moaned when I’d sucked there. I clear my throat.

“How are things going for the musical?”

She tilts her head to one side and then the other, little pops and cracks releasing tension.

“Good. Really good. It’s just busy nights, which I don’t mind. I’d rather be busy than not.”

I nod in agreement.

“Oh! I forgot to tell you. Blake got a callback for a supporting speaking role!”

I don’t know what powers my climbing smile more: The fact that my boy is making waves in the theater world, or the joy that radiates from Lucy at sharing the news with me.

“That’s awesome! I’m glad you were able to help him talk to his parents about it.”

Through a couple of coaching sessions, Lucy was able to persuade Blake into talking with his mom first. While his dad was initially against it, having his mom in his corner helped soften the blow.

“I’ll just be a little more relaxed once the cast list is finalized. Then it’s onto my next checklist item.”

“Which is?”

“Finding a choreographer.”

“I can help.”

Those three syllables are met with instant exhaustion. My body fights between the want to say yes to her and the mile long list of things I’ve already got on my plate.

But this is Lucy.

And the fear that I’ve always had, that telling people *no* would make them resent me, is multiplied by a hundred when it comes to her.

Besides, the shy smile on her face, the slow lift of her brows, the slight drop of her shoulders like I’ve just lessened some of her load, is enough persuasion for me. I will gladly fill the small cracks in my schedule with more of her.

“You can dance?”

“Excuse me?” I feign a scoff. “Did you, or did you *not* witness the *greatness* that was my Zac Efron impression at the bar?”

She exhales a laugh, her close-lipped smile making her cheeks puff beneath those wide-framed glasses.

“I didn’t realize that meant that you could choreograph.”

“I have so many tricks up my sleeve, Ms. Lucy. You might be surprised

at how many skills I have in my inventory.”

Her lips part, and there’s a tug in my belly doing its best to make me forget about my exhaustion.

“Anyway,” I say, clearing my throat. Reminding myself that *she isn’t ready yet*. “Are you looking for Broadway-caliber stuff, or basic middle school steps?”

“The second one, please. I’ll eventually have to learn and teach it myself.”

“Then I’m your guy. I didn’t spend the entirety of my youth being used as a stand-in for my sisters to practice with for nothing.”

“Seriously? You already have so much on your plate. You’d do this for me?”

There are so many things on the tip of my tongue.

I’d move mountains for you bangs on the back of my teeth as I forcibly keep my mouth shut to contain them.

I settle on, *Absolutely*, and leave it at that.

We get back to cleaning—I know we have a custodial staff, but *they* didn’t make the Keebler factory explode all over this classroom—and eventually find ourselves at the front table, condensing the remaining cookies into one container.

“What’s your favorite Christmas movie?”

“Oh, easy,” I say, stacking a few snowmen. “*The Polar Express*.”

“Why does that make so much sense?”

She snickers, and I press my elbow into her bicep.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“I just... Most people our age go with *Christmas Vacation* or *Home Alone*. You *would* pick the movie about the magical train and the true meaning of Christmas.”

I cross my arms and turn to face her.

“Oh, would I?”

“If I started singing, *I’m wishing on a star...*”

“*And trying to be—damnit.*”

I am gifted with her true smile in her laugh this time, and suddenly, I’m wondering if that kid really *did* know the true meaning of Christmas; he’d clearly never seen Lucy smile before.

“You? *Christmas Vacation* or *Home Alone*?”

“Neither. *Die Hard*.”

“*Die Hard* isn’t a—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.”

She has turned to face me now, and when she presses a playful pointer finger between us and it lightly grazes my bicep, I must steal all of the oxygen in the room with the force of my sharp inhale.

“Wow, a die-hard-*Die Hard* fan. When was the last time you watched it? This morning?”

“No actually, I...”

She begins to disappear. It’s been happening less frequently, but I still wonder where she goes, when her eyes seem to glass over and her breathing turns to shallow dust. This time is different. This time, she closes her eyes, and I count each and every second of her inhales and exhales before she opens them again.

“I haven’t watched it since college. Since before my divorce.”

I almost begin to drown.

The wave that washes over me is so many things. Understanding. Clarity. Defeat. Relief. But riding the crest is the overwhelming sadness I feel for Lucy. The fact that she’s been carrying this the whole time. And still yet, there’s a strength I could never have that seems to radiate more brightly from her with that confession.

The questions swim around me: Who else knows? How long has it been? Is this why she moved here? *Why?* I don’t know what to say. An apology seems wrong, and so does pity. I have more questions than breaths, but I know that none of them are right for this moment. Clearing my suddenly dry throat, I settle on something simple.

“I guess you’ll have to cash in then. Make up for all the times you missed it.”

The wave over her hazel eyes spirals slowly in a technicolor of understanding and gratitude and hope. She nods once, summarizing her thanks.

“I guess I will.”

We exit the building side by side, bundled in our winter gear to ward off the chill.

“What exactly does it take to put together a whole basketball tournament?” she asks as we step over the curb.

“Too many moving parts,” I chuckle. “I’ve got most of it done. Teams are all registered, plaques are ordered, refs have been hired. It’s just a matter of

filling the little spots with volunteers.”

“Volunteers for what?”

We arrive at my car, which is only a few spots down from hers. I open the back door of my SUV and we start loading Tupperware into the backseat.

“Concessions. Running the clock. Hallway security. Setup and takedown. That sort of stuff.”

“I can help. It’s the week after Christmas, right?”

I unfold myself from the backseat of my car, standing to my full height that’s only about a head taller than Lucy.

“It is. Are you sure? You don’t—”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

She interrupts with a quick but cautious purse of her lips.

“That would be absolutely amazing, Luce. Seriously. I put out an email to parents, but I don’t have a ton of bites.”

“Maybe send it out to staff?”

I nod, cursing myself. “Shit. You’re right. We have budget money for staff to work games. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re so swamped with everything else that it may have slipped your mind?”

I shake my head, grinning, adding *Send a Sign-Up Genius to the district* to my mental checklist.

“You’re sure you don’t have better things to do after the holidays than help out at a boys’ basketball tournament? You don’t have plans to like, watch *Die Hard* eighty-thousand times?”

I chuckle, kicking a stray piece of gravel, watching it skitter off toward her car.

“No, I think I can be okay with fifty-thousand if it means taking a little bit of your load. And besides, you’re helping me with the musical. The least I can do is return the favor.”

Her shrug and the slow rise of her eyebrows is too adorable not to turn up a smile.

“It kind of seems like you do everything for everyone else, but don’t like taking on the help yourself. I’d like to be that person, if you’ll let me.”

I wonder if she can hear my heart exploding inside my chest?

We’ve known each other for a few months, and yet here she is, cracking open the parts of myself I don’t usually let others see. Parts that I barely like to admit to myself. I *do* help out wherever I can, and I *hate* taking other

people's kind gestures as a return. But Lucy noticed. Lucy cared enough to show me that I don't have to take on the weight of things alone.

We do that thing that I often see happening on a first date. We smile, make eye contact, look away out of shy embarrassment, and then find ourselves doing it all over again.

"I should get going," she says, hitching her thumb toward her car. "I have a final due at midnight."

"Yeah, no problem. Can I walk you to your car?"

She huffs, one of those *laugh-and-closed-mouth-smile* combinations that I'm slowly becoming addicted to like it's a drug.

"It's right over there, Aaron."

I shrug. "Figured I'd ask."

"I appreciate it. You can watch from here if you want."

And I do just that, standing with my hands in my pockets, not taking my gaze off her car until I can't see it anymore.

twenty-eight

lucy

I WATCHED *Die Hard* three times this weekend.

Simply because I could.

Scott hated that movie. He watched it once, back when I was still a resident assistant on campus, and he was still my supervisor, and the staff had gotten together for a weekend movie night while we were all on duty. The eleven o'clock round had been my turn to pick the movie, and I had been so *excited* to see his reaction. We'd sat next to each other on the couch in the student lounge, close enough that no one would be suspicious. When the credits rolled, I'd looked up to him with excited expectancy, only to see a spiteful frown.

I'm glad we got that out of the way. Let me introduce you to real culture.

I know. *I know.* Trust me, I saw it all once I was removed from the situation.

But as a gullible twenty year old who fell into heavy infatuation with this man from day one, I was all too eager for him to *show me real culture*. To please him with every fiber of my being, even if it meant losing them all. I'm almost embarrassed to admit that his version of "culture" was a twisted backlog of every horror film known to man.

You'd think I would be fully put-off by horror now, but the scary movies and I have become friends almost. When facing your real fears is worse than the bloody horror happening on screen, you learn to live with it.

This is the last day before winter break, and while most classes finished finals yesterday, I've still had a revolving door in my office all day. Lots of kids who don't want to go home for our two week break, because home is so much worse than school could ever be. I haven't said no to any of them. Most need ten or fifteen minutes to chat about nothing. They don't want to share

the horrors of home, but don't want to be in math class either. It's times like these where I break out the mini Celtics basketball hoop on the back of my door and let them talk while they shoot hoops.

Amaya has taken to chucking the ball against the wall as hard as she possibly can, and even that isn't getting all of her anger out. But from what I understand, this is her first Christmas without her mom. Unfortunately, I can empathize way too much.

I don't ask her what she's excited to do over break. I don't try to make her see the positive side of things. Instead, I let her chuck a ball at my wall, two of my posters already on the floor, for as long as she wants. It doesn't take her long to start letting it all out.

"What if she calls?"

It's laced with teary anger.

"Do you want her to?"

She stalls, the green and black ball clutched in her death grip.

"I don't know." It comes out in a phantom whisper. She lets that settle for a few beats before chucking the ball again.

"You have a choice, you know."

It's moments like these that remind me why I do what I do. The pause in Amaya, the realization that dawns over her. The understanding that she is in control of her emotions and her reactions. I love putting that power back into my students, especially the ones who have been hurt as badly as she has.

"If she calls, you get to decide if you talk to her."

She ponders this, tossing the ball three more times before saying, "Yeah, okay, but like, what if I *don't*, and she's pissed or sad or something?"

My heart breaks for this girl. She so clearly longs for her mother's love and approval, and I know she'd ask for it back in a heartbeat.

"That's up to her. She made a choice, and now she has to deal with the consequences of her actions. You can't control her reaction, but you *can* control how you choose to respond. If it hurts you too much to talk to her right now, you get to set that boundary."

She nods, her brows drawn in and her lips pursed into a scowl. I know it's all a mask. But the anger and bitterness are rightfully real.

"Can I like, email you on break? Just in case?"

"Absolutely."

She tosses the ball up at the basket, watches it sink through the hoop, collects her rebound, and places it in my hand.

“Alright. Bet.”

I smile, and before I let her leave, I hand her a candy cane from the jar on my desk.

As she exits my office, I think about the boundaries I never laid down for myself, and make a promise to start.



“This is always the worst time of the year,” I say over lunch. I’ve taken to eating with my coworkers—sometimes for the distraction, but also because I’m genuinely starting to make friends.

“Winter and summer break,” Penelope adds.

“It was always this way for Mason, too,” Juliet chimes in. Sam nods.

“I snuck presents into his locker one year, but then I felt bad for not being able to help them all. You know?” Sam says.

I nod. I know that feeling all too well. The feeling that you’re doing absolutely everything you can, but it doesn’t even feel like you’re making a dent.

“What are you guys doing for the holidays this year?” Penelope asks.

My coworkers share their plans, all pretty similar with scattered traditions and winter activities in Boston alike. When the circle eventually gets to me, I tense.

I’ve been open lately. Strong. Confident. But even the thought of spending Christmas alone makes my heart hurt.

“Oh, I... It’ll be quiet this year. New city and all.”

I shrug, reaching for an apple slice to keep me occupied, hoping that the conversation will drift to someone else.

“You’re not going back to Rhode Island?” Penelope asks.

I shake my head. I haven’t been there since...

“So, you’ll be...”

I connect with Aaron’s gaze, because the rough scratch of his throat is hypnotizing. I can hear the pain in all of his unsaid words. Can see it in the swirling rocky road of his eyes. He is the only one at this table who gets it. He knows why I’m spending Christmas alone, but he covers for me, keeping my story sacred, mine alone to tell.

“...watching *Die Hard* on repeat?”

I purse my smile in thanks.

“Exactly. With a big tub of cheese balls in my lap.”

“Okay, Michael Scott,” Sam quips. And just like that, we fall into banter about our favorite Christmas episode of *The Office*.

Lunch ends, and Aaron and I end up walking together back toward the athletics wing, where my office door stands at the head of the hallway.

I push open my door, noticing several meeting requests stuffed into my mailbox that I need to go through so that I can pull as many students as possible before the end of the day. Aaron leans casually against the doorframe, his gym teacher outfit of Adidas joggers and a tight-fitting River Valley T-shirt so sinfully combined with his thick, dark hair makes me forget about my revelation for a moment.

I’m transported right back to my loneliness when I see the tight-lipped frustration on his face. His hands are in his pockets, but I make the mistake of eyeing them to see that they’re bunched in tight fists.

“I guess I should get to—”

“You’re not going home for Christmas. You’re spending Christmas alone.”

I’m pointing at the stuffed mailbox, ready to help teenagers work through their own emotional regulation when Aaron slaps me with that statement. He isn’t asking.

I swallow, tucking a strand of hair that’s escaped my ponytail behind the arm of my glasses so it stays put.

“Yep,” I state simply, crossing my arms to match his. Only in posture though. Mine is to keep the emotions tucked safely inside. His, by the looks of it, is to keep from reaching out to me.

“Is it because of him?”

It’s the first he’s brought it up—the fact that I’m divorced. He doesn’t know that he’s the *only* person here who knows, but the way *him* comes out as a whisper makes me wonder if intrinsically, he *does*.

My heart bangs rapidly into my chest, with all of the reasons I won’t be going home begging to get out. Samantha barely knows this part of my trauma, and yet for some reason, it’s reaching out toward Aaron Russo like he’s a safe place.

I nod slowly, inhaling the courage that I need to exhale the biggest truth I’ve given anyone other than my therapist since I moved here.

“Yeah. Yeah, it is. My family didn’t like what he did to me.”

The storm clouds in his eyes tell me that, if and when I reveal more, Aaron won't like it either. The vein in his forehead pulses, and I swear I can hear his back teeth grinding as he restrains the thousands of things I know he's holding back, before he settles on something I don't expect.

“Do you want to come and hang out with my family?”

The question is strained. I can tell that he didn't want to ask. He wanted to tell. Wanted to pull out the alpha male card and say something like, *Come home with me. I'm not taking no for an answer.* But like he has since the first day I met him in that bar, he knows how to handle me with care. With loose reins left in *my* hands.

I think about Aaron's sisters, who probably hate my guts. But I picture the alternative: *Die Hard* on repeat, a bucket of cheese balls, and my feelings.

I'll take their hard, ruthless, Italian judgement over that black hole.

Because on the other side, I know he'll be there too.

Before I can change my mind, I nod.

“Sure. What can I bring?”

twenty-nine

lucy

I SEVERELY UNDERESTIMATED JUST how big Aaron's family is. The address he gave me for his Christmas Eve soiree isn't a quaint New England home on a hill.

This is a rec center.

Like, YMCA, they-rented-out-a-building big.

The parking lot is already packed like sardines with cars when I arrive, but in the one loop I did, I didn't see his SUV with the River Valley Renegades sticker in the back window. I'm sitting in my car, chewing on the thumb nail of one hand while I type out a text with the other. It's a simple, *Are you here yet?* but there's something in me that says he'll pick up on all of the terrified undertones.

My text has barely clicked over to *Delivered* when there's a light tapping on my window.

My guardian angel has arrived.

And he has a *lot* of pizzas in his arms.

I scramble to open the door, unfold myself, and reach for any of the ten pizzas he's trying to balance.

"Do you need—"

"No, I've got it!"

I reach at the same moment that he steps back, giving me room to step out of the car. We stand there awkwardly for a beat, before a shy smile creeps over Aaron's face.

"Sorry I'm a little late. I'm on pizza duty this year and *severely* underestimated how many pies I could Tetris into my trunk."

"Are there any more?"

"No. I circled up front and made my cousins carry in the bulk. This is all

that's left."

I nod, then reach into my backseat to grab the goods: One bottle of sangria for his sisters and his mom, one bottle of Martinelli's for his pregnant sister, and one gift for the white elephant exchange that I was instructed I *have to participate in*.

"Are you sure I can't help?" I ask, watching him shift the stack of ten pizza boxes in his grip, hiking his knee up to nudge them into place.

"No, I've got—*shit*."

I shift my bags on my arm and push the toppling Jenga tower before it falls. In the process, my hand clutches over the back of his. We stand there, breathing so silently, I wouldn't know we were except for the frost gathering between us. Or is that the steam from the pizzas? His gaze pops, and I remove my hand, immediately missing his warmth.

"Lead the way."

I follow him across the parking lot, watching as families file out of what seem to be clown cars.

"I didn't realize you had such a big family."

"My sisters and I are actually the *smallest* of the Russo clan. My dad has seven siblings and nineteen cousins, and I'm pretty sure at one point, they were all trying to outdo each other with the breeding." It's my turn for my eyes to pop. "Now that everyone is having their own kids, it was just easier to have our family gatherings *not* at Nonna's house. Less cleanup, and we all fit comfortably."

I hold the door open for the pizza delivery man—and three other gangly dark-haired boys, who were *definitely* up to no good in the parking lot by the smell of it—and follow him inside.

I immediately want to turn on my toe and run.

We don't make it ten feet before four separate people utter some form of, *Aaron brought a girl?*

"Woah! Calm down! She's a *friend*. And *I* am carrying the *meat lovers*, so I suggest you all mind your beeswax before I take it up to the roof for *myself*."

His cousins shrug and scatter in different directions, but that doesn't mean the questioning ends. We are stopped by no less than ten of Aaron's relatives—surprisingly, *not all women*—on our way to drop off the pizzas. Did I mention that no one tries to help him with said pizzas?

I end up insisting, despite his protests, taking the top half of the stack and

setting it on the vacant end of the table before I start organizing the boxes, checking the Sharpie'd X on the end to place them each with similar toppings. As I'm arranging, I notice Aaron is consolidating boxes that have already been torn into and dumping empty boxes near the heavy duty trash can at the end of the table.

Taking on the work that no one else has bothered to do.

I wonder just how often that job becomes his.

"Well! Now that *that's* settled..."

He finally stops and grins, that mile wide smile with brows that climb to the top of his forehead. It's like joy exudes out of this man. Stand too close and you'll get a contact high.

"Welcome to the Russo Family Christmas! Please don't stop being my friend because my family is insane."

I quirk my smile to the side and chuckle.

"Where can I..."

"Oh! Right. *MOM!*

No sooner am I wondering where to put my gifted wine is Aaron gently dragging me across the room. A short, plump woman with a '70s style to her shoulder-length chestnut hair stands on her tiptoes to hug her son.

"Thank you for getting the pizzas, my favorite son."

"Anytime, Mama."

"And who have you brought?"

Now, he's shy.

Now, in the face of introducing *me*, his boisterousness seems to vanish. He clears his throat.

"Mom, this... This is Lucy."

The reverence that surrounds the two syllables of my whispered name off his tongue could rival the chorus the angels are supposed to sing tomorrow when baby Jesus is born.

"Hi."

I extend my hand, but am pulled in for a hug.

"I'm Della. So nice to meet you Lucy," is smushed to the side of my head as Aaron's mom squeezes me tightly.

The tears sneak up, suddenly, and then all at once.

What I wouldn't give for this to be my mom.

I wipe at my eyes as soon as she pulls away to ask Aaron a question, and think I've gotten away with it as soon as she says, *Enjoy the party! I've gotta*

go stir the punch, and turns her back on us to dash across the room. But Aaron has clocked me.

The tilt of his head, the way his brows draw in, screams that he's about to paint me with pity. But as soon as that thought crosses my brain, I see the pause in his eyes. The way he reassesses me.

"Too many people?"

I sigh, grateful for his diversion, and nod.

"Sort of? I haven't been around big families in..."

A long time.

He nods, extends his arm, and tucks me into his side.

"Stick with me then. I'll fight off the bad guys for you."

We snag a slice of pizza each, drop my white elephant gift on the table of presents that rivals Mount Everest, and meander toward his sisters. It isn't until three pairs of eyes go from Christmas joy to honed in on me like a Zero at Pearl Harbor that I feel my stomach turn over. Aaron's sisters turn to us, crossing their arms on the defensive.

"*Ladies*," Aaron says as we stop a few feet from them. "You all remember my friend, Lucy."

"Mhm. We do."

Daniela—the one who had called me a bitch back at the bar—runs her tongue over her teeth as she bites back.

"Well, in the spirit of Jesus's birthday, let's all get along!"

"I brought wine. Aaron said you guys are big fans of sangria, so..."

I hold out my peace offering. His sisters eye it, then each other, before Sophia accepts it slowly, taking her time as she drums her finger around the bottle before cradling it.

"Oh! And I have..."

I rifle back into my Stop & Shop bag, coming up with the bottle of sparkling apple juice. I offer it to Maria, the sister with the cute baby bump.

"I didn't want you to feel left out."

She accepts it, rolling it between her hands before showing it to her sisters with gratitude on her face.

"I think we're going to go pop these open. See you two for dessert?" she asks Aaron with a smile.

He nods, and it takes the three of them trickling out of sight for me to exhale.

"Well, hey! At least they didn't maim you?"

I laugh, like I've been socked in the stomach.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess."

"Don't sweat it. They're very protective of me. They'll come around."

He wraps his arm around my shoulder, and the protection I feel layers me like a blanket.

We wander around the rec center, and Aaron introduces me to upwards of fifty people before I give up trying to remember them all. It's a constant train of introductions and food and food and introductions. I'm stuffed so full that I could probably miss meals for a solid week and still gain weight. I end up scoring big during white elephant—whoever thought these socks with Betty White's face on them *wouldn't* be popular was sorely mistaken.

I connect with Aaron's cousin, Giulia, who is a school social worker, and end up chatting with her for quite some time. Eventually, when her kids and their cousins ask me to play a few rounds of Uno, it's an instant yes. I'm so caught up in actually having a good time that I don't even realize until he returns with a refill of my punch that Aaron had left my side. By the time the party starts to wind down—close to midnight, I realize—I actually feel kind of relaxed.

It's been a while since I've been around this sort of family camaraderie.

Scott's an only child, and his parents are old. Guess that kind of comes with the territory when there's a thirteen year gap between you and your husband.

I find myself looking up at Aaron—who barely leaves my side the whole night—a *lot*. And every single time, I catch him staring at me. Smiling. Asking with his eyes if I'm okay. And you know what? I am.

I'm having fun, drowning in his loud, Italian relatives, not having to worry about anything except apparently keeping my plate full, lest one of his aunts gets offended that I'm not eating. I'm having fun, playing cards with his cousins and enjoying a glass of wine and some adult time where I don't have to worry about my snake of an ex-husband telling me to *cut down on the alcohol before people think I married a drunk*.

I allow myself a few stolen moments to enjoy the sight of Aaron: with his nieces and nephew strapped to his back and each of his legs, stomping around the rec center in his Christmas sweater like he's Godzilla; with a toddler in his lap, helping to carefully remove the toy from "Santa" (his uncle in a costume) from its packaging; reading to a group of kids from *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

I have to look away before I let that image settle and morph into one where the kids on his lap look a little like him and a little like me.

By the time we're packing up to leave, I have three plates of leftovers wrapped in tin foil. As we head toward the entrance of the rec center, I hear, *Woah, hoh oh! Get it, Aaron!* from behind us. He looks down at me and rolls his eyes. We turn and see one of his teenage cousins pointing to the doorway above us.

Mistletoe.

My stomach somersaults, but not because I'm nervous.

"Knock it off, Frankie."

Aaron eyes his cousin in warning.

"Oh, come on, cuz! You gotta kiss your girl under the mistletoe. Them's the *rules*."

The thought of kissing Aaron right now? I'm not afraid of it at all. What *does* scare me is the way that I want to do it.

I don't want to kiss him and drag him off to bed tonight. Gone are the urges to use him as a shield or a place to hide, to keep him as a friend who lets me bury my demons into meaningless sex. Tonight, I have the sudden urge to kiss him sweetly under the mistletoe in front of his family, to let him know that something in my heart has shifted.

I shudder at the way that thought creeps in so easily.

"Watch it, Frankie. I told you to knock it off."

This stern, no-nonsense tone from Aaron Russo is something that I didn't expect to tickle down to my core.

Yes it absolutely is. You begged him to be more aggressive when he took you home.

I swat at my subconscious, shooing her back into her cave, and melt instead into the embrace that has become as comforting as it is protective. Even after his cousin Frankie does indeed stop hounding us, and we say the rest of our goodbyes, that fire stoked inside of me does not lessen.

The more time I spend with Aaron, the more I start to see the light at the end of the tunnel growing from a simple spark to an actual exit.

Freedom.

Could freedom in him be my ticket?

He must sense that I stiffen under his touch as we walk back to our cars, because he stops, turning me to face him.

"Hey, are you okay? I'm so sorry about—"

“No, don’t apologize. He wasn’t exactly wrong.”

It takes him a few beats to comprehend what I’m saying. Hell, it’s taking me that same amount of time to come to terms with what I’m about to do.

It’ll have to be slow. So slow. Baby steps before baby steps slow. But I see hope in Aaron’s eyes. I feel it in the way he puts himself in front of me as my protector, but next to me when I can fight battles on my own.

As soon as his lips part in surprise, I reassure him.

“I’m not... trying to take you home tonight.” My hands drift to his forearms, holding him softly through his peacoat. “I...”

I can’t say it. Can’t bring myself to say, *I think I want you, but we’re going to have to do this on my terms, which may as well be at a snail’s pace.* I know that I want to kiss him. But words haven’t been my strong suit in so long that it seems, when they matter, I can’t figure out how to line them up in order.

“Just a kiss?”

Those three words come out in a timbre I haven’t heard from Aaron since he told me that I would never just be one night to him.

I nod quickly, pursing my lips, feeling the wetness in my eyes at the step I’m about to make. The step where *just one kiss* may just take a door that’s been bolted shut and blow it off its hinges.

He exhales, and I feel his forearms tense where I’m holding him as he slides his hands to my waist and holds me there. When he shifts to cup my face, I think about pressing up on my tiptoes. Propelling myself forward. Biting the bullet. But he holds me so reverently, stares at me like I’ve got stars in my eyes that map out the secrets to life, and I know that I have to give him this.

Aaron kisses me sweetly. Gently. He kisses me like he’s handling fine China; like I’m something he doesn’t want to chance breaking. But when I lean into him, pressing myself into the kiss to show him that I’m in this too, when I squeeze his forearms gently where I’m still holding on, he flips on a dime.

His mouth turns hungry, his kisses eager as the hold on my face deepens, shifting to tangle in my hair. His fingers weaved up through my ponytail, tangled like he’s a part of me, turns on something feral inside of me.

I want more. I want it all.

But before I can quench my thirst, he’s pulling away. Honestly, that might be for the better. I just wish the quiet, protesting moan that escapes was

on the same page. I know I told him that I wasn't trying to take him home tonight, but one kiss from him and I'm suddenly wondering what this man can get me to say yes to.

We each take a few moments to catch our breath, and I'm glad I'm not the only one affected.

"Thank you for bringing me here tonight," I say, breaking the quiet between us. "It was nice to not be alone."

He's still cupping my cheek. Still drawing intricate little circles there that I wonder if I'll be able to see in the mirror when I take my makeup off tonight.

"Thank you for coming with me. You don't *ever* have to be alone if you don't want to, Lucy."

He tucks me into my car, leaning down to press a kiss to my temple. His, *Text me when you get home*, only stokes the flames higher.

thirty

lucy

“DO you have any idea what you’re doing?” I ask, eyeing the score box in the center of the table like it’s alien technology.

My assistant principal pushes his square, tortoise shell glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“I made a cheat sheet.”

Wordlessly, he slides the piece of paper between us.

“Not much of a basketball guy?” I ask, dragging the paper toward me so I can take a closer look.

He shakes his head again. “Not much of a sports guy. I prefer books.”

I chuckle, reading over the cheat sheet he made. It’s written in neat, all-caps style font that looks printed off a machine. This guy means business.

“You’re Mr. Harding, right? I think I remember you from new staff orientation.”

“Yes. Nathan Harding. Shadowing as Assistant Principal. Please, call me Nathan.”

He turns to shake my hand, which I find a tad awkward, but I shake it anyway.

“What brings you to a winter break basketball tournament then?” I ask.

“The money.”

Short, sweet, and to the point.

“You?”

“I...”

I can’t very well say, *I’m avoiding being at home alone during the holidays* without opening a can of worms. And I can’t exactly say, *I might have the hots for the guy running the tournament* without the same implications.

“Same. And I had nothing better to do.”

I shrug, offer him a small smile, and go back to examining the cheat sheet. We decide that Nathan will work the scoresheet, while I’ll be in charge of the clock. With his handy dandy little cheat sheet neatly pressed between us, it shouldn’t be too hard.

“You two kids having fun?”

I’m jostled from my diligent note studying by the wide grin of a man who shouldn’t look as put together as he does, given that he’s been up since four this morning to get this whole tournament in order. Aaron’s mile-wide grin shines brighter than the overhead gym lighting.

“I’m a little nervous, but I think we’ve got the hang of things. Nathan made a cheat sheet.”

I jerk my thumb in Nathan’s direction, but he’s deep into studying the rosters of the first matchup and doesn’t react.

“That so?” Aaron snags the paper from my hand, and I feel a zap along my skin when our fingers skim. “Not too shabby, Nate. Mind if I run a copy of this to keep for the table?”

“Go ahead.”

Nathan doesn’t even look up from the rosters he’s studying.

“Do you want me to do that?” I ask, moving to stand, but Aaron waves me off.

“Nah. I’ve got this. Park your cute little tush right there and settle in for some high stakes shooty-hoops. Let me know if you guys need anything. There are four games before lunch, then an hour break, and five after. Make sure you use the lunch coupons at the concession stand as a thank you for all your help today!”

He winks, then hop-steps toward the gym doors.

“Nice of them to get us lunch,” I offer. Nathan nods, humming, still diligently looking over the rosters. I’ve never been one for small talk, and notice that he clearly isn’t either. Instead, I familiarize myself with the scoreboard and its buttons as the two teams warm up, and go over the sheet once Aaron has returned it.

The clock counts down the last few minutes of the warm-up, and suddenly, it’s go-time. I’m relieved that basketball is a faster paced game. The laser focus required for keeping up is the best thing for my brain. Nathan and I work well together, and by the five-minute break after the half, I’m feeling a little bit of an adrenaline buzz.

“This isn’t so bad,” I say, cracking the can of Celsius I bought before the game.

“No. It’s simple enough. Do you want to switch jobs for the next game?”

“Not unless you do,” I say, shaking my head as I glance at the system he’s got worked out on his side of the table. “You seem to have things down to a system over there.”

“I do.” He nods. And that’s the end of it.

The game concludes, and as soon as the two teams clear the court, two more step up. Branding the home court side, in navy and green, are our Renegades.

God, Aaron looks good in his coaching outfit.

Trim fit khakis, a blue polo with the school’s logo, sleek black Nikes. He must’ve changed out of the gym clothes he arrived in.

“Lucy?”

I snap back to the present. I must’ve zoned out, because apparently Nathan was asking me a question.

“Hmm?” I ask, subtly swiping beneath my bottom lip to make sure I wasn’t drooling.

“I asked if you were ready to go. The teams are heading to center court and the clock needs to be reset.”

I feel about as red as the opposing team’s jerseys. And, I’m acting like this in front of our new assistant principal? Lord, help me. With the push of a button, the clock is reset to the eight minutes for the quarter, our boys take center court, and the game begins.

I’m lucky to have Nathan keeping the running score, because I would not have been able to keep up with the players like he is. Aaron as a coach is quite the distraction.

For a man who is typically smiling and peppy one-hundred-ten percent of the time, a switch flicks inside of him as soon as he dons the name *Coach*. And boy, do I like it. The fierceness that overcomes his features, the precision with which he walks the court, the strong clap of his hand over the shoulder of a player as he grabbed a substitute moments before he sent the boy in to give him advice. It all has my own skin burning, and he wasn’t even touching me.

I take to the rest of my drink like the boys at halftime, slightly embarrassed when I have to catch the bit dribbling down my chin. Wordlessly, Nathan slides me a tissue.

“Thanks,” I mutter. When I twitch my gaze to his side of the table, I see a quirk of his lips as he shakes his head.

He’s clearly onto me.

I do my best *not* to glance at the bench for the second half, which is hard to do when the game is close and I can hear Aaron barking from the sidelines. At one point, when one of our players gets a foul (that apparently is *Absurd* according to what Aaron yells at the ref), I have to physically angle my body away from the action.

I *cannot* watch him get all worked up like this.

Sue me for pressing my thighs together under the table.

In the end, our team squeaks out the win by four points, and the joy that typically exudes out of Aaron comes back full force. He is full on, hands on his head, jumping for joy. I grin so hard that my cheeks hurt. I may even do a little fist pump.

He heads toward the locker room with the boys, but as my gaze follows him out, I don’t miss the fact that he turns back to look for me. His smile is a little cartoony, but I match his victorious arm raise, right down to the air high five that he directs to me. I swear, I can feel the clap of his palm against mine, even from across the court.

Nathan and I eat lunch together in the cafeteria over our hour break.

“How are you liking River Valley so far?” he asks.

“I’m enjoying it. I think I’ll stick around. You?”

“Me too.” He nods, chewing on his burger, then, “You’ve been in education before. What brought you here in the first place?”

I don’t stiffen at this question as much as I did in the beginning, when the creeping threat of Scott loomed around every corner.

“Needed a life change after my divorce. You?”

Nathan doesn’t appear too much older than me. I wonder what spurred on his life change as much as his wheels must be turning about mine.

It’s small, but I notice the slight stiffening in Nathan, too, like he’s quieted a little because it’s his personality, but a little because he’s got things to hide.

“I just...needed to get away.”

There’s hesitation in his voice, the slight gravelly texture to words that are only a fraction of the truth. But I get it. I nod, and we finish our lunch just in time to get us set up for the first game of the afternoon.

“You’re quiet,” he states.

It's an odd, straightforward statement to make, but if I've learned anything over the past few hours about Nathan, it's that he's a cut and dry type of guy.

I nod. "Most of the time. Sometimes it's nice to not have to say much."

We take our seats at the score table.

"You're quiet, too."

I busy myself setting up the scoreboard for the next game while Nathan nods slowly, humming in agreement.

"It takes the right kind of person to open me up."

I meet his gaze, finding a kindred spirit. There's hurt buried deep in the forest green of his eyes. But as we work the scoreboard together, and he offers me tidbits about his life in exchange for the details I give to him, I can see that we're more similar than I thought. He's trying to break his way out, too. I wonder who it'll take to finally crack him.

It certainly won't be me.

Because I currently can't pull myself away from the coach of the third place team and his silly, Pixar-character grin when he and our boys fight their way back to take home that plaque.

Unfortunately for me, I have a championship game to keep score for. But Aaron does stop by the table on his way out—according to the boys, for *celebratory ice cream on Coach Russo!*

When he offers up his hand for a high five, I don't expect our fingers to lace. He closes his fist and squeezes, and I swear I see championship-caliber fireworks.

"Congratulations, coach! You guys did good out there."

"I'm proud of them," he smiles, then points matching finger guns at me. "Catch you in a little bit?"

"You're coming back?"

"Yeah, I have to make sure everything's cleaned up and closed down for the night. Shouldn't take more than an hour or so."

He shrugs like it's no big deal, but I know the truth.

He would have put on this entire tournament by himself, would have sold popcorn while he coached, if I hadn't reminded him that he's allowed to ask for help.

He follows his team out the door to spend his paycheck on ice cream, and as I pretend that I didn't wish I was on my way out with them, I decide that I'm going to take something off the plate of the man who seems to eat from a

buffet.

thirty-one

aaron

THE FACT that I had my head in the game at all today was a freaking miracle.

Lucy being on the sidelines had me in the biggest blessing-and-distraction sandwich. I found myself missing key plays because I was too busy staring at the slide of her finger up the bridge of her nose to fix her glasses, or the concentration she wore comparing notes with Nate over the course of the game. The fit of her River Valley hoodie and tight gray athletic joggers had my tongue swollen in my mouth all day. It's a good thing I wasn't wearing athletic clothing myself, because when I caught her walking back from lunch, the outline of her ass was enough to make me stiff.

I haven't been able to get her off my mind since that night at the bar, but ever since Christmas? *God*, it's been so much worse. Seeing her play games with my cousin's kids, and in the fold at my family party? That kiss in the parking lot? I'm screwed. Visions of her there *every* year have been on a constant loop—putting out cookies for Santa; the matching pajamas that we wear on Christmas morning; holding our own sweet babies that look just like her under the tree.

I've got a sickness, and I don't want it to be cured.

We end up taking third place, and I couldn't be happier. These boys have been hungry for success since day one, and they played their hearts out today. I'm excited to see where the rest of the season takes us. But after celebratory ice cream, I have to run back to school to close down the tournament.

The last game wrapped up while I was gone, which means I should be back just in time to start cleanup. I'm dead on my feet, and the only thing to lift my spirits is the thought of seeing Lucy one more time before I head home and sleep for a solid forty-eight hours.

The sight that greets me confuses me at first.

The gym is back to its normal state.

Basketballs are stowed away. The floor is being swept. Two of my volunteers are racking up the rest of the chairs. A quick step into the hallway and I see the concession stand closed up, cafeteria tables folded and pushed against the wall, and the floor swept clean. I shake my head, confused, and step back in the gym. The sound of her voice makes my heart press up against my rib cage.

“...then I think we should be good to go. I’ll get the cash box to Aaron when he— Oh, hey! You’re back!”

Lucy is behind all this? And the sight of me returning has diamonds in her gaze? My heartbeat is a hummingbird’s.

“How was ice cream?”

She bounds up to me with a smile that could power Times Square on New Year’s Eve and I have to stuff my hands into my pockets to keep from reaching out, holding her to me, and never letting go.

“Delicious. They had a good time.”

“I’m sorry I had to miss out.” Her eyes widen, like she didn’t mean to say that out loud, and blush paints over her like a watercolor. I give myself a moment to take it in under the gym lights.

“How did this happen?” I ask, gesturing to the now clean gym, the closed out cash box in her hand. The pink watercolor deepens to burgundy, her sheepish gaze trying to hide beneath long lashes.

“You would have had to come back and do this by yourself.” She shrugs. “I wanted to take something off your plate for once. You do so much for everyone else.”

She shrugs again, like it’s no big deal. Like she didn’t sacrifice an entire day out of her *own* holiday break. Like she didn’t rally up the troops in my absence so that I would get a couple hours back for myself.

“You didn’t have to do all this,” I say in a breath of disbelief, still not sure how to say thank you.

Because she’s right. I *don’t* ask for help. I take things from other people until I’m so buried in tasks, I forget to schedule in time to breathe. But Lucy noticed, and intervened.

“Neither did you.” She tilts her head with a knowing smile. “And besides, Coach, you did everything else. It was the least I could do. I’ve got two willing hands, after all.”

I can’t help the grunt that escapes me. The way *Coach* and *two willing*

hands goes straight to my cock. I cough into my fist and nod, knowing that whatever comes out of my mouth next is bound to be dangerous, especially with the rest of my night now open, and my mind now suddenly wide awake and buzzing at how much I appreciate Lucy's thoughtful gesture.

One I didn't even ask for. One she willingly gave, because she wanted to take something off my plate.

I look her in the eyes, ensuring that my gaze, heavy with gratitude, has caught hers.

"Thank you, Lucy. This... I would've stayed and done it all by myself if you hadn't stepped in for me."

That thought catches, the realization that I would have stayed until midnight just to make sure the building was better than it was when I showed up this morning. Lucy knows me. And my skin hums with the realization not only that she knows me, but that she knows what I need, too.

When we head out to the parking lot after locking up, I still don't feel like I've had my Lucy fix, despite the fact that we've spent the entire day in the same building, which is why I make a desperate move as I walk her to her car.

"So, what are your plans for the rest of the night?"

She looks so cute, all bundled up in her parka, the faux fur hood jostling as she shrugs.

"Not sure yet. Might crack open a bottle of wine and dive into a book. Might deep clean the place now that I'm in that mode. What about you?"

I mimic the up and down of her shoulders.

"I'll probably unwind with a movie or something. I've had the itch to watch *The Polar Express* lately."

"Oh my God. You would."

She giggles, and the way it winds in wintery white and wraps around me, squeezing my rib cage, is the most delicious friction.

"What's that supposed to mean?!" I balk.

She shrugs again, and I take a step to close the small gap between us.

"Are you going to sing along?"

"You bet your ass I am."

Her toes slide forward and the puff of our jackets touch. Her smile is radiating a warmth that makes me want to take mine off.

"Come back to my place and watch it with me. I'll even let you laugh at all of the scenes I can recite from memory."

Her smile drops, but she doesn't back up. I've caught her by surprise, and I don't want to back off this time. Instead, I grip onto her waist and tug her closer.

"Or, we can watch *Die Hard*, and you can cover my eyes during the bloody parts."

Her eyes swim as she considers it. She shifts beneath my touch, like she's trying to decide if she wants to get closer or back away.

"I..."

"There's no pressure." It comes out husky, and I shift my hands from her hips, one to span her back, the other to push the strand of hair that's loosened from her ponytail back beneath her hood. "We're friends, right?"

She nods.

"Yeah. Friends."

"Then come crash at my place for a movie marathon, friend."

She presses her teeth into her bottom lip. I'll have to tell her at a less pressing time that she really shouldn't do that around me.

"I think...I need to maybe take it a little slower than that."

I don't feel crushed like I have at her past rejections, because slow doesn't mean a red light. Slow means *yellow*. Slow means *we're making progress*.

"Totally cool," I say, squeezing my hand at her back.

Her hands that have been smushed between us make the delicate climb around my waist, and I swear I might die when she embraces me so tenderly like this.

She closes her eyes, inhales and exhales for her five counts, and says, "Thank you for being so understanding."

I cup her cheek, the biting air doing nothing to quell the fire of touching Lucy like this.

"We'll go any speed you need to. Just let me know which pedal to put my foot on."

I watch as she walks to her car.

"Text me when you get home?"

She smiles warmly, offers me the cutest thumbs up, and tucks herself into her car.

When my phone dings twenty minutes later, I'm not expecting the words on the screen.

Lucy

Let me know when to press play.

In the attached photo, queued up on her screen is *The Polar Express*.

We text throughout the entire movie. Even with her streets away, cozied up on her own couch, my heart has never felt this content.

thirty-two

lucy

I'M GETTING INTO A GROOVE.

Once January rolls around and winter break has wrapped up, I find myself in a rhythm and routine. Something I need to keep me grounded, but also, something that has been a comfort instead of a lifeline.

I'm coming off of a high after these past few weeks off of school. I spent a large chunk of my free time unpacking my last boxes in my new place, organizing the building I'm slowly starting to call home. I finished my first semester of grad school and completed a winter course to knock another class off my work load. And in the slivers of free time, I started to slowly find myself again. She's still buried beneath a mountain, but the climb doesn't look as treacherous anymore.

And in the in between? Aaron Russo existed.

Christmas. The basketball tournament. Sweet touches that lingered when we were apart. We watched three movies together over text message and not once did he make it seem like he'd rather us be on his couch instead. He truly is taking this friendship slash whatever it is that we're doing at my pace, and I couldn't be more grateful.

It's the reason I'm so nervous to see him today. After talking it over with Samantha at our last session, I think I might just be ready to let him in a little bit more.

As friends who maybe hug. Maybe cuddle. Maybe kiss under mistletoe. Maybe agree to a date? But my baby steps might be turning into strides, and though that terrifies me, it's a thrilling haunt that I'm ready to conquer. There's a skip in my step at the thought.

I'm smiling as I head to the workroom before school to check my mail.

"Did you have a good break, Ms. Lucy?" Joan, our school secretary, asks.

“I did! Thanks for asking. Did you get to see your grandkids?”

Her smile warms as she takes a seat, reaching for an unsorted stack of mail.

“Bruce and I had them all to ourselves for a long weekend, and it still wasn’t enough. They might force me into early retirement!”

I reach overhead for my mailbox to snag a few stray pieces of junk mail and two holiday treats I must have missed before we went on break. I can hear Joan muttering to herself as she sorts the mail, and what she says next makes my heart stop, brings the skip in my step to a dramatic halt.

“Alcott? Who’s Alcott? Do we even have an Alcott here?”

I’d be able to hear the timbre of those two syllables, feel them settle into my bones, from miles away. A stone sinks into my gut, crushing the wings of happiness that I’d flown in on this morning.

“Hey, Don! Did someone get married without you telling me? Do we have a—”

“It’s for me.”

I haven’t heard that robotic voice scratch from my throat in months. Not since I’d buried her down. Not since I’d been brave enough to push the fear of my old self away. But I have to cut Joan off before she says that word again.

My old last name.

My ex-husband’s last name.

The one brandished in *his* slanted, blocky letters across the manila envelope that Joan is still clutching, halfway to Don’s office. She has no idea who *Alcott* is, because I filled all my paperwork out with my maiden name, and no one here knows that for the past decade, I was Lucy Alcott.

Well, I’m sure the people in human resources do, since I had to put that on my background check.

I ground myself in cold hard facts like those, instead of the slight pale edge that’s overcome Joan, the shake in my hand as I reach for the mail, the scent of *him* still attached to the yellowed envelope, like he wiped it over himself to serve as a reminder.

“Oh. I thought—”

“I’m divorced.”

I leave it at that. Despite the small ways I’ve been opening up to my friends and coworkers.

To Aaron.

I have to leave Scott sealed up inside this envelope, at least until I can get it back to my office where I can break down in peace.

It isn't until I slice the packet open with shaking hands that I let the truth that he found me here settle, because not only was that evident in the mail he addressed *to my old name*, but from the snake of a letter he affixed to the top.

*My Lucy,
I thought it'd be a little harder to find you. Luckily, it wasn't.*

My insides churn right up my throat.

You missed a signature.

How? *How* had I missed signing *any* part of myself away from him? I read over the divorce papers beneath this letter so many times, I was reciting them in my dreams.

Maybe that's fate telling us something.

*I miss you.
Your Scotty*

I don't hesitate to even consider the bile rising in my throat before I heave into the trash bin. I do it twice more; once for the *I miss you*, and once for the *Yours*.

Words I once would have killed for. Words now that feel like scars so deeply etched into my skin, they'll be purple for weeks.

My head hangs between my knees, and I see my office walls in an upside down blur of contrasting colors. The smiley faces on my motivational posters stare down at me eerily, reminding me of strategies to regulate myself, when all I want to do right now is drive straight home and curl into a ball and hide.

Home.

I can't go home anymore.

He knows I'm here, doesn't he?

Sooner or later, it won't be my place of employment, but the place I was just starting to think of as mine.

But it *can't* be mine. Nothing can ever be *mine* when he wormed his way

so deceptively into my soul that I'll spend the rest of my life untangling him.

Footsteps remind me that I'm not alone. I'm about to be responsible for the emotional regulation of hundreds of middle school students, and I can't even put on a happy face.

But I've done this before.

Put on a mask.

Pretended.

Acted.

Today is just another performance.

And it begins sooner than I'd anticipated as the one person I almost want to see less than Scott Alcott shows up at my door, wearing a grin that had my heart pitter-pattering not half an hour ago.

"Order's up for Ms.—"

His giant grin falters immediately.

Oh. He brought me coffee.

And I can't even accept it now.

It doesn't matter that I'm already in survival mode and donning a mask; he can definitely *smell* that something is wrong.

"Oh my God, Luce, are you—"

"I'm fine. Bad breakfast burrito this morning."

I cannot look up at him. *Cannot* let him get his eyes on mine, because I know, I *know* I'll want to dive in and drown. And I cannot let him get tied up in this. *Cannot* let him save me.

"Anything I can—"

"No. Seriously. I'm fine."

It kills me to be short with him, but the less I let him in, the better.

He lingers in my doorway, and as I tie up the trash bag, I steal a sideways glance.

Worry paints him like the *Starry Night* sky. He's biting the inside of his cheek, clearly to keep from saying anything. I wonder, as I move to stand, if the white knuckled grip he has on my door frame is to keep from reaching out.

But I can't let myself hope for things like that. Not anymore. The thoughts about us trying that I'd had this morning? They may as well have vaporized.

I stand to my full height, putting my eye line with his neck. His throat bobs, and I swallow down my own pleas, the ones doing their best to jump

out from the place I've been trying to crawl out of, the ones that are slip-sliding back down into the hole like an avalanche.

"Can I get by?" I lift the garbage bag for emphasis, hoping vomit will be the thing that makes him move.

Makes him forget that he came here with a coffee, hoping to make me smile.

"Lucy, I..."

He swallows again. Stares. The hard pools of blue threaten to drown me and I look away, my gaze catching on the overturned envelope. The one that's thankfully face down, the mockery of my married name smothered against my desk so that only I can hear it laughing back at me.

And it catches long enough that, even though I'm not looking at him anymore, I can tell that Aaron has clocked it too.

"What's—"

"Nothing. I screwed up some paperwork for grad school. Can't seem to do anything right these days."

The way that Scott's reminders come pouring back in so easily makes me wonder if any of my progress has been real in the first place, or if I'd just slapped a piece of Scotch tape over a crack in a barrel and expected it to hold. I see Aaron's worry purse into alarm, his brows immediately creasing in the middle. Questions form on his lips, but I push forward.

"I should throw this away."

He finally moves, but not without following.

"You sure I can't—"

"I'm *fine*, Aaron."

It's so unnecessarily harsh. But it's the only way to get him to leave me alone.

He halts, either at my abrasive tone, or because I have, too.

"I fucked up. I'll fix it. I'm used to making mistakes at this point, so it's nothing new."

It's just a glimpse, since I don't allow myself to watch Aaron crumble for me. Just a glimpse of his face as it crumples is enough to quicken my steps. I'm not allowed to fall into him. To let him question why I'm upset or why I would talk about myself like this. I'm not allowed to fall near enough so that he can catch me.

I'm not allowed to have nice things. I don't deserve them. Scott made sure I knew that so long ago that deep down inside, I'm still listening to that

voice.

Aaron is a nice thing, and I don't deserve the concern he has for me.

Hiding around the corner, outside the school in the biting January temps after I throw out the trash bag, I let him eat me alive.

Already moved on, little Lucy? Such a slut. Always wanting what you can't have.

He'll use you for that body you drag all over town and toss you for someone better just like I did.

He'll never love you, Lucy. You're not strong enough for him. You're weak and pathetic. You don't deserve him.

And I let that become my mantra as I smush every good thing that Aaron Russo has brought near to the surface back down to the deep, dark depths where they belong.

thirty-three

aaron

SHE'S BEEN AVOIDING me all week. And when she's not, she's cold. Bitter. *Mean.*

I can't tell which is worse.

Something snapped inside Lucy, and though I'm almost certain it has to do with that envelope she'd been hiding on her desk on Monday morning, I don't buy for a second that anything inside it is her fault.

The way that she'd ripped herself apart tore me to pieces. If I'm hurting this bad watching her hurt, I can only imagine what she has to be going through.

I don't know what to do. Do I give her space? Reach out? Push?

I defer to what I've been doing all week—which is walking on eggshells—when Thursday comes, and I'm in her classroom all day. It's a guidance lesson week, and I'm almost certain this is the only time all year that I've dreaded getting to hang out with Lucy all day.

She's hiding behind her clipboard when I walk in—as close to the bell as I can—but even with only her brows visible, I can still see the tension.

The kids take a seat, and her lesson goes off without a hitch. She's calling it the "Regulation Station," and I really *really* want to make a train noise, but I hold back.

"So, after you complete the survey and show it to myself or Mr. Russo, you can feel free to explore the different stations. Keep in mind these are tools..."

"Not toys," the kids echo. With a nod, they set to work, ranking different ways to regulate emotions from their most to least helpful.

"Mr. Russo, would you mind overseeing the fidget table?"

She points far across the room, and I wonder if she's done it on purpose.

There's no way I can even begin to check in with her from the back counter while she's meeting with students at the front of the room.

Students start scattering to us after about five minutes, once their surveys are complete, and I try to keep my eyes scanning the room as they rotate between the stations. There is a table with coloring books and supplies, and one with headphones hooked up to calming music. Along another table are several laminated pieces of paper with different tracing and breathing patterns, and in the back corner are a few bean bag chairs. While Lucy spends a few minutes with each student talking over their survey, I am in charge of the fidget table.

Fidgets have been a huge debate over the last several years, but I'm impressed by the items Lucy has for students to try. There's no obnoxious slime, none of those giant popping things shaped like Among Us characters that take up an entire desk. Instead, there's a variety of small, conspicuous, quiet items for kids to fidget with. Hell, I keep a springy hair tie around my wrist all the time to futz with myself—I get it. But whoever said giving a kid a bucket of slime or a ball and calling it something to “calm them down” in the face of education was severely misguided.

I watch as students manipulate a marble in a short mesh tube, pop a duo of poppers back and forth, and squish small, stress-ball-esq items that hopefully shouldn't turn into what Lucy has deemed “toys.” For the most part, the kids are doing a really nice job of respecting the tools, exploring different options, and rotating to different stations.

As soon as I have that thought, it's like I've spoken too soon.

I wouldn't even call it a stress ball, but since it's small and compact and *can* be thrown, apparently that means it *will* be thrown.

“Yo, go long!” Carter, an eighth grader on the baseball team says. One of his teammates, Nolan, immediately drop-steps, nearly taking out a group of girls who are coloring, and reaches for the ball that has been launched over his head.

“Weak aim, bro!”

At the last second, Nolan's fingertips graze the tiny projectile. He barely catches it. In his success, he *does* bowl over another student. Right into the table full of laptops that, about ten seconds ago, were streaming peaceful music to a group of students. Headphones are ripped off. Kids tumble. I definitely hear a Chromebook screen shatter.

And in the span of sixty seconds, the entire room is quiet enough to hear

the squeak of the weight room down the hall.

Carter joins Nolan, bug eyed, and rips the ball—we're just calling it what it is now—from his hands before offering it to Lucy.

Lucy, whose skin is fighting between milky white and burning red. Lucy, whose face scrunch is a war between agitation and threatening tears.

Lucy, who sighs in relief as the bell rings.

"We're in the gym tomorrow. You two." I point between Thing 1 and Thing 2 as the rest of my last period class tidies up their station for their poor guidance counselor before shouldering their backpacks. "My office before the first bell."

Their hair flops on their foreheads in unison as their heads hang, exhaling quiet, matching, "Yes, sirs," before they right the mess they've made in a hurry.

"Sorry, Ms. Lucy."

"Yeah, sorry, Ms. Lucy."

They do look genuinely sorry. I just wish they'd have thought through the consequences before they'd acted. Ah, teenagers.

I wait until all of the kids are out, cross the room, and shut the door. When I turn back around, she's staring down at the fidget ball in her hand, and I wonder if she's going to throw it out of anger or break down into tears.

"Guess we can take that one out of the toolbox, huh?" I try, adding a soft chuckle to the end of my words as I slowly cross the room.

She just shakes her head, slowly.

"I should have known better."

My heart pinches.

"Aw, it's okay, Ms. Lucy. They're teenagers. Put a ball in front of them and someone's bound to throw it. Isn't that Murphy's Law or something?"

Her head snaps up at me, and it's like the little dude from *Inside Out* is in control, flames shooting from the back of her ponytail.

"No. Murphy's Law states that if something *can* go wrong, it *will* go wrong. And that's *exactly* how things always go for me, because if it *can* happen wrongly, it will happen in *my* hands. You might as well call it Lucy's Law at this point."

I don't miss it—the way her voice cracks on the word *my*. She's fighting tears. Masking them with anger. I can't take this anymore.

"Hey, woah, Lucy—"

"This was *stupid*. This is the last thing they need. Who the hell was I

kidding? And look at this *mess*. They're going to take the computer out of my next paycheck. I deserve that though. I..."

She trails off, angry tears bubbling around her words, and I don't think she's talking to me anymore. In fact, the way she's going off, it's like she's tranced into her own little world. Her own little bubble of belittlement.

"Lucy, what's going on?"

It's a desperate plea, but by now, I *am* desperate. She's been like this all week.

Yesterday, she burnt a bag of popcorn in the break room microwave and sent out a staff-wide email to apologize.

Tuesday, when the copier ran out of paper during her print job, she somehow convinced herself that she shouldn't be allowed to print things, and should have just done it digitally instead of *being so damn wasteful*.

And Monday. That mystery envelope. She'd told me, *I'm used to making mistakes. It's nothing new*. Like she sees herself as a failure.

"You're my friend. I just want to help you."

Her expression buckles. She's spiraling, and I *have* to reach in and pull her out. But she stops me before I can.

"You can't help me, Aaron. I'm beyond fucking repair."

With that, she bolts out of the classroom faster than I can grab on and tell her to take back those awful words. At least one good thing comes from this: I'm no longer teetering on the edge of what to do.

She's bullying herself, wielding a sword against herself inside of her mind, and now? Now I have to push.

I'm stopped three different times on my way to her office—once by Carter and Nolan, who quite honestly look like they've crapped their pants at how sorry they are; once by Sam, who has been hard at work getting ready for baseball tryouts; and lastly by a student wondering when the weight room is open for after school lifting. By the time I'm to her office, I've got a mixture of weapons against the enemy in her head, sweet sweet words to lift her up, and pleas for her to love herself that all halt on my tongue when I see the shell of her clutching her office phone to her ear.

It's that same girl that fled from my bathroom. She looks like a phantom, like someone came in and sucked the life right out of her, and this is the shell that was left behind. I move to reach for her, and it's like she doesn't even notice.

"No! No, please don't transfer...just tell him I got it."

A fright crosses her wide eyes, and I close the distance between us to less than a foot.

“Yes...thank you...Okay...okay, bye.”

The phone hangs limply at her side, and I gingerly take it from her and place it back in the cradle, silencing the echo of the dial tone.

“Lucy?” I whisper, terrified to break the silence.

She’s shaking, shivering, and I make a promise to myself that I’ll kill whoever was on the other end of that call if they ever breathe near her again.

“Can I...”

Now, I don’t *want* to push. Not when she’s like this. *Not when she looks like she’s doing her best to hold it all together so that she doesn’t have to admit she’s breaking.* But then one tear escapes. One perfect, shining bead breaks past the surface. I feel my insides go numb. And I push.

I slide my hands beneath her arms, lifting them so that they’re extended between us. The way she vibrates in my palms sets me ablaze.

“Hey. Lucy? Lucy, I need you to look at me.” My tone is low and firm. She obliges, but I sense that it’s more out of mechanical obligation.

“Can you tell me what you need?”

Her lips are parted, but no words come out. A desperate, agonizing squeak eats them all.

“Okay.” I lick my lips. “What bags are coming home with you?”

She points, and I shoulder her bag before taking her coat from the back of her chair and tucking her into it. The zip of her parka, the beanie hat on her head, don’t stop her from shaking, and *that* almost sets me to vibrate.

“Okay. Come with me. I’m taking you home.”

It’s this that snaps her back into reality, like she’s breaking out of a fog.

“What? No, I—”

“You’re not driving like this, sweetheart.”

She bites her bottom lip, eyeing me nervously like she’s trying to catch my unwavering bluff.

“Keys?”

With trembling hands, she reaches into her purse and hands them over. I pocket them, and then take her by the hand.

thirty-four

lucy

HE CALLED. He called to make sure the paperwork got to me.

He called to get to me.

To remind me that he knows where I am.

That even though we're legally divorced, that he has *no ties to me* anymore, that he will *always* be lurking. Always be so much closer than the back of my mind.

By the time I'm in front of my house—who the hell was I thinking, calling this place home?—I barely realize that Aaron tucked me into my car and brought me here. We're up the driveway, my keys in his hand as they turn in the front door, that I realize I need to do something about this. About him. He can't be here. Not in my space. Not in the middle of the self-deprecating tornado. He can't fix me. Can't *think* that he can fix me.

He can't be here while all of my progress comes tumbling down.

"I've got it," I say sharply, snaking my hand beneath his to open the door the rest of the way. I push inside, hellbent on closing the door behind him, but he's too fast. He closes the door at his back. I busy myself with stripping off my coat and hat, my socks catching in my boots. I don't even care. The chill of the hardwood is a shock to my system. By the time I've finished, he's still here, and I turn on him.

"You can go now," I bite, crossing my arms to stop them from trembling. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." His eyes have shadows cast over them, and I swear his voice is trembling too. "You're..."

"What, Aaron. I'm *what*?"

I send up a quick prayer that my snarl sends him running. His lips part, but I interject before he can list off all of the nice things I don't want to hear.

“That was my ex on the other line,” I nearly shout. “And *one call from him* reminded me of exactly what I am. You know what I’m *not*? I’m not *strong*. I’m not *put together*. And I can’t seem to stop myself from fucking up a good thing, which is exactly why you should lea—”

“*Stop.*”

It’s not that he yells. There’s not a bite to that syllable, but it swallows me whole because the quiet force of its weight makes the ground beneath me shudder before it pulls back together for me to stand on. I’m shaking again, but for the first time since that envelope showed up in my hands, it’s not because of Scott.

“What?”

It comes out as a whisper, so far from my normal confident composure that I wonder briefly if I’ll have to use MapQuest to find my way back.

“*Stop. Bullying. My friend Lucy.*”

He inches toward me, but I don’t dare move. That stare has me captured, my bare feet frozen to the hardwood floor.

“I—”

“You haven’t been nice to my friend Lucy today. This week, really. And I don’t like that. I don’t like that one bit.”

Taking another step puts him into my bubble, our toes nearly touching. If I exhale too much, I’m afraid we will, and I know that my body will betray me by falling into him or using him as a crutch or something else I’m just not ready to deserve quite yet.

“It might not be nice, but sometimes, the truth isn’t—”

“*Stop. Stop.*”

His voice is rough, low, commanding, but so desperate that I can taste it, can feel my own desperation that’s been hiding in the back of my mind as it gives in, does its best to reach out despite my every attempt to keep it buried away.

“You are a *good person*, Lucy. You deserve all the love in the world. I don’t know what he did to you, but do you know what he didn’t do? He didn’t take what’s at the core of you. Because I see that light shining in you *every day*. And I wish you could too.”

I feel it then. The shift in the air.

Something you only read about in books or see happen with clever editing and movie magic.

But the air around us tilts, like we’ve been encased in a bubble and

someone flicked a switch that turned the current from tense to electrical pulse.

He closes that last sliver of a buffer.

If I inhale now, I *will* be tethered to him.

I don't get the chance to choose for myself, because suddenly, Aaron reaches out for me.

I was crawling toward wanting this, but pulled back from deserving it in the blink of an eye. With one touch, that all melts at my feet.

My chin fits perfectly into the divot of his hands, like it's a mold made just for me and him. I can't spend any more time puzzling that together when his lips touch mine, when his tongue enters my mouth, seeking and possessive, hungry and fierce. It's what I once wanted—for Aaron to get me out of my head. To be my distraction. To *not* treat me like I'm breakable. Now, as he backs me up against the door and pins me there with his hips shackled to mine, I wonder if his touch just might put me back together.

There's no other way to describe the way he kisses me than simple possession. He makes love to my mouth, without so much as letting me up for a rescue breath. I cannot focus on anything other than *Aaron*; space for nothing else exists, like he's pushing out my doubts and my insecurities, and *Scott* from every single nook and cranny he's dug his claws into. I try to reach between us, to put my hands on his chest or dig my fingers into his forearms, either to ground myself in him or just to *feel him, damnit*, but apparently, I am merely a player. He keeps one hand in place on my chin while the other shackles both of my wrists above my head.

"Are you going to be nice to my friend?"

He pulls back from my mouth, tracing the side of my nose and down to my cheek with the tip of his, and if my breath hadn't already been burglarized by his kisses, it would have vanished at the rough taste of his voice.

This isn't sand paper or grit. Aaron Russo sounds like he's choking on glass and will gladly swallow it down if I don't give him the answer he wants.

God, he's going to give me one of those cheesy one liners when he finds out how wet I am, isn't he?

"I..."

It's not that I want to fight him. I'm not looking to disagree. It's the simple fact that the words in my brain are currently arguing with my mouth about how to function.

He growls on an inhale, and I seriously wonder if he can feel how wet I am through my jeans. His entire body vibrates against mine, absorbing the shudder that passes through my own.

“Guess I’ve got some work to do then.”

He releases my hands to cup my face, and just as I inhale in preparation for another assault, he surprises me again. His lips fall to mine sweetly, a butterfly landing on a flower. It’s like he’s trusting *me* to catch him, which only has me collapsing further against the door, the simple thought of being allowed to surrender safely with him is my permission to hand over the reins.

His lips trace the path of my collar until that’s in his way, my bra until *that’s* in his way. By the time he comes up for air, I’m standing in nothing but a bra with my breasts pushed up beneath tugged down cups, and a pair of cotton panties that have a noticeable wet spot.

“God, would you *look. At. You.*”

He says it all with hungry hands on my hips, a drunk look in his eyes, his tongue darting back and forth across his bottom lip to wet it just slightly.

“How did I get lucky enough to have you in my arms tonight?”

I don’t get a chance to answer because his lips are at my ear, pressing, “Can I get you out of your head tonight, sweet girl?” in a kiss before the ghost of, “Can I taste you?” sends a shiver through me like a bolt of lightning. The juxtaposition of those two questions makes my head spin, but not as much as the way that he *asks*.

It’s the simple act—the way he *knows* to ask for permission despite the way I’m a quivering, desperate mess for him right now—that has me nodding frantically.

“No ma’am. Use your words, Lucy.”

“Yes. Aaron, *please* lick me.”

I’ve admitted a lot of things to my therapist in the past year, but I will *not* be admitting how desperate I sound begging for this man to put his mouth on me.

“Good girl.”

He skims along my body with the tip of his nose, inhaling me as he traces along the swells of my breasts. His tongue darts out to taste one raised nipple, and I press into him immediately. He wraps his lips around me, sucking gently at first, until I press closer to him. Then, he bites.

I also will not be owning up to the, *Oh, God, Fuck*, that just echoed through my entryway.

“You like that, Lucy?”

“Yes.”

He continues that similar path, rough bites along my breasts, my nipples, soothed by the caress of his tongue. By the time he’s paid favorable attention to both, I’m a whimpering mess that can barely hold myself up.

But then he hits his knees. In front of me. Staring up from the ground like he’s been put on this earth to worship at my feet. I don’t have time to process how dizzy that thought makes me before he rids me of my underwear, licks his lips, and growls.

“Oh, Lucy. What am I gonna do with you?” He grips my thighs and leans in, looking drunk on me. “I don’t have enough time in the world for all the things I want to do, but I’m damn sure going to do my best with the time I have.”

His tongue touches my clit, and I swear the breath vanishes from my lungs, pulling a desperate whine with it.

I grab onto his hair. I can’t decide in that moment if it’s to pull him closer for more or push him away because *I don’t deserve this kind of attention from a man, right?*, but the second he flutters it back and forth, that silver tongue makes the decision for me.

“God.”

“That’s right, Lucy, get out of that head of yours.”

He *knows* what this is, what this has to be for me. He French kisses my pussy, his tongue spearing inside for a taste or three before that mouth resumes torturing my clit and his fingers take over the dirty work.

And as soon as he pets that sensitive spot inside, I am unabashedly riding this man’s face.

Up against the door to my home.

The door clatters in a juxtaposing rhythm to his tongue, just in case my neighbors wanted to know *exactly* when his tongue was on me, and couldn’t tell by the moans and breathy curses flying from me.

“*Fuck*. Oh my *God*, right there.”

Pressure floods to my core, and the second I start to lift my knee, he knows exactly what to do.

Aaron helps lift my bent knee onto his shoulder, and this new angle opens me up wide. He sucks my clit between his lips, the kissing, slurping sound almost obscene, except it’s *so fucking not*. I squeeze my thigh against his ear, damn near drowning him between my legs.

“*God, shit,*” I cry, fists tightening in his hair. I’m getting close, my hips playing percussion with the door.

“Do you hear that, Lucy? Hear how wet you get for me when you let yourself go?” He punctuates that silly question by quickening the two fingers he has inside me.

And I do, because seconds ago, I’d been thinking about how *obscene* the sound of my wetness against his fingers was, but this man is *loving it*, and I can’t help but join him.

“Yeah.”

“This pussy should be worshipped, Lucy. Listen to how wet you get for me.”

As if to emphasize his point, he adds a third finger and thrusts harder against my G-spot, making that noise grow louder. My own sighs and moans decide to host a competition.

“Too...” My head tilts back against the door, because he’s combining the suction on my clit with that insistent beckoning of his fingers, and though I’m not quite ready, I can enjoy just this last moment. “Too much.”

Immediately, his fingers slow, back off, just enough so that I can catch my breath but stay along the electrical current of this high. He kisses my bare mound, rubbing circles on the insides of my thighs before his hands wander up to play with my breasts. Even the pinch of both nipples has my body caving, ready to explode.

“So, how is my friend Lucy doing today?”

So not the time for him to be asking that question.

“Fine,” I pant. He rubs his thumbs over my nipples and I grunt, sinking further down the door, seeking his fingers, any kind of pressure.

“Just fine?”

He crooks his fingers against my front wall again, and I pull away as I sink onto him; it’s too much and not enough all at the same time.

“Better than fine.”

I lean into his touch, tilt my hips and whimper enough to get him to press his thumb on my clit.

“Better than fine?”

His thumb picks up its circling pace, and I know that if I can keep him going, I’ll detonate.

“So good, so good, *so good.*”

“That’s what I want to hear, Lucy. Tell me how good you’re doing

today.”

“Oh, *so fucking good*, please, *Aaron*, make me come.”

It’s like the sound of his name falling from my lips is the lighter fluid to the bonfire. All in one moment, the pressure of his fingers inside of me increases and his speed quadruples and his lips replace his thumb on my clit while a garbled moan of, *Fuck, that’s it, Lucy, come for me*, vibrates against my core.

I shatter.

Broken bits of sparkly glass explode all over my entryway.

It’s like glitter in the art room. I’m going to be cleaning this mess for weeks to come. He’ll be picking parts of me from the tangled mess that I’ve crafted in his dark hair.

I melt like warm butter, sliding down the door, assisted by his two hands that are holding me up, cradling my waist like I’m some precious treasure to him instead of the garbage I’d been beating myself down with over the course of this week. I land partially on my knees, slumped in his lap, my head resting between his shoulder and his chest, where he simply holds me while I catch my breath.

No expectations. Just me and Aaron and our stuttering hearts somehow finding a similar cadence. He gives me all the time and space I need while still holding me up.

“How’s my friend Lucy doing today?” he asks.

This time, it’s devoid of that sultry, gritty sound he’d had when he was holding me up with his tongue.

This time, concern is twined around those words, dripping with the intense care he’d carried through my front door. When I’d been beating myself down and he held up the shield to protect me from myself.

I take one deep breath, in for five and out for five, to ground myself. When I open my eyes, I realize that I’ve been grounded in him this whole time.

It’s no small feat, to tilt my chin up, to meet his gaze when I know that he’s seen me near my worst. He watched me tear myself down, with a front row seat and a bucket of popcorn. I don’t know if I fear finding anger or pity more, but the feeling in my chest when I see neither is so indescribable that I stutter on my next breath.

It’s like he’s waiting on bated breath, desperate for the next words to fall from my lips like they will determine his next course of action. There is so

much welled up in his eyes that I can almost see the words etched into the swirling blues, telling me that he is a safe space to fall into.

“I’m doing okay.”

Sitting in his lap, I can feel the weight slither off of him. Somehow, we get closer to the floor. His hold on me tightens, just enough that the pressure of his squeeze makes little indents in my skin.

He touches his forehead to mine, closes his eyes, and inhales.

thirty-five

lucy

I DON'T KNOW why I fear seeing Aaron so much this morning.

Okay, I do.

My therapist would be proud of me for admitting that.

It's because I'm still so insecure with myself—even after he drove me home, beat down my own bully, made me come on his tongue, and refused my hands afterward with nothing more than a kiss on the forehead.

Even after he asked if I wanted him to stay.

Even after he asked, more than once—more than *twice*—if I was okay to be alone. If whatever had happened with Scott on the other end of the line was dire enough for me to need him in the aftermath.

Even after he *asked* if he could text to check up on me.

Even after he made sure I had a plan to eat. Watched me double check the lock on my back door. Sat in my driveway for fifteen minutes after Sam and Juliet dropped off his car, not knowing that I was watching him from the living room.

And I'm *still* playing cat and mouse with the thoughts in my head that he's going to dismiss me.

You're not good enough, Lucy.

You could never be good enough for a guy like him, Lucy.

He's too good for you, Lucy.

He just feels sorry for you.

As soon as Aaron's car had pulled away, I had immediately texted Samantha for an emergency session, in which I had a good, hyperventilative cry into my hoodie for ten straight minutes, and then had her help me sort out my shit.

We used columns. Nice, neat, organized columns to sort the facts from

the fiction.

Facts: Scott knows where I work. He knows which state I moved to. He knows how to reach me again.

Fiction: Scott can't come to take me away. He can't force me back over state lines. I am no longer married to him. I am not under his control.

I was never under his control. But that's a whole different session focus.

He *is* in my head, though—which is no match for Samantha. She's been working to get him out of there for the past year now. Which added the final slap of *fact* to me before we hung up last night.

I hold all the power when it comes to evicting Scott from my mind. I just have to give myself the freedom to do so.

The attacks were sluggish this morning, steeling into my veins and poisoning me at their own pace. Even after everything that Aaron did for me, by the time I get to school, the unease is still sloshing around my stomach with my morning bowl of cereal.

But as soon as I round the corner toward my office and see him waiting outside, casually leaned against my bulletin board with a nervous look in his eyes as he no doubt practiced what he was going to say to me because *he's just that guy*, the poison starts to dissipate.

When Aaron lifts his head and meets my eye and I can physically see the stress roll off his shoulders like snow in July, as if just the sight of *me* brings him back to green, the poison deadens in my veins.

His cautious smile paired with his quiet, "How's my friend Lucy doing today?" is the antidote.

I inhale, taking in as much as my lungs can contain, then release it all back out, closing my eyes until my lungs are clear. I let the hesitant, soft hope in his piercing eyes buoy around me, keeping me afloat.

"She's okay."

He nods slowly, like he's absorbing, accepting my *Okay* at face value and not asking why I'm not *Happy* or *Amazing*. He lets "okay" be just okay for now. And that acceptance is everything. The poison has all but vanished with that simple tug of his head. The power is back in my hands, and with it, I decide to open the door for Aaron just a little bit more.

"My ex called yesterday. He wanted to make sure I got the package that he mailed me."

His eyes harden, skin pulling tight as he clenches his fists.

"That was the envelope on your desk on Monday?"

“Mhm.” I nod. Part of me wants to stare at my shoes. The other part, the part that wins, likes the high I get from watching Aaron’s cobalt irises roll for me like tidal waves. I bite my lip instead, but find victory in keeping my eyes on him. “I uh... must have missed a signature on the divorce papers. It’s been fixed,” I tack on in a rush.

The slow nod of his head is like the calm pull of the tide.

“And now?”

I shrug.

Which scares me half to death.

“Now? I try to keep my head above water.”

Aaron reaches for me, his strong hand around my wrist like a buoy as his words anchor in my core.

“Reach out when you need to, Lucy.” His voice shudders on my name, and I feel it like a crackle of lightning against my skin where we touch. “Don’t do this alone.”

His eyes are a lighthouse, calling me home, showing me the way out.

I nod, and feel disappointment drop in my gut when he lets me go.

He’s about to leave, to head to his own office where he’ll prepare for his day full of Friday dodgeball. But with my heart now decongested, with vacancy for new feelings, I can’t help but ask.

“Why do you like me?”

These very words have been trapped in a cage for so long.

Scott had bullied me into thinking that asking for validation in our relationship was attention-seeking, that I should *just trust him* when he said he wanted to be with me. He called it *fishing for compliments*, and on more than one occasion, deemed my need for him to tell me that he loved me pathetic.

But then Aaron’s smile curls up at the corners, his eyes softening into stable ground that I could land on if I want to, and I know that I am safe with him.

He closes the bit of distance, taking slow steps, giving me space and control in case I need to run away again.

“There are so many reasons, Ms. Lucy. Where would you like me to start?”

My face heats instantly at the rich timbre of those words, a fiery inferno that I can’t control.

When I say, “I think that’s enough reason for right now,” he only grins

bigger, takes a step forward—close enough to press his lips to my ear—and says, “The way that you blush when I say nice things about you is a great start. I look forward to showing you the rest of the list.”

The rest of that list shows up in Post-Its.

My Post-Its, that Aaron clearly stole from my office.

Funny-shaped Post-Its sprinkle into my space throughout the day.

They show up on my desk, in my mailbox, on my clipboard. One makes its way into my lunch.

And they each fill my heart in different, magnificent ways.

You scrunch your nose when you’re deep in thought and it’s freakishly cute.

Your glasses make you look like a sexy librarian.

Every kid in this building feels comfortable talking to you.

You tease me, but you take my jokes too.

You have a quiet, intense passion for everything that you do. Don’t think it goes unnoticed.

I am a mess by the time I get to the one in my lunch box, the neon pink star-shaped sticky note that reads, *You are fierce, strong, and capable. You amaze me with your strength every single day.*

The fact that these are just *notes* makes me wonder how hard I’ll blush, how long I’ll have to hide, if and when he says these things to me in person. Because I know that he will. He tried to last night, but I had the barrier of my body to protect me from having to accept hearing all of the ways that someone could actually love me for once. With the poison dismissed from my body, I find the confidence to at least make a plan.

I don’t get to see him after school. He had a baseball meeting with Sam and Drake, and I scheduled a follow-up session with Samantha, and while I was secretly hoping that I’d get to see him in the hallway and thank him for the ego boost I hadn’t known I’d needed, this little bit of space is nice.

Leaving the building for the day doesn’t stop the notes from coming.

Figured I’d leave this one outside of school, but the way your thighs trembled around my head when you came on my tongue was pretty righteous, is stuck to the driver’s side mirror of my car on a high-five-shaped sticky.

I don’t know whether to laugh or to fan myself.

Samantha gets a kick out of the sticky notes. She even suggests that I find something to keep them in. I put the jar on my bedside table. Per Samantha’s instructions, I’m supposed to pull one out whenever I’m feeling the weight of

Scott, or when his words come creeping back in, to remind me that people out there see value in me. It's another strategy that I can use to kick Scott *out*, by putting good *in*.

She also said I need to give her Aaron's address so she can forward today's bill to him, because apparently, he's doing her job for her.

As I get myself ready for bed, I stare at the jar of rainbow colors like they're my own little lightning bugs. When I wake up in the morning to a jar full of hope, I don't have those winged beasts beating around my head. For the first time in a long time, I feel calm. I feel grounded.

It is all of those things—plus the unresolved tension between my legs after reading the secret note that he'd left me on my car, and being stuck with those words and the memory of his tongue all weekend long—that has me detouring past my office and straight for Aaron before the school bell rings on Monday morning.

“Do you maybe want to grab dinner soon to go over things for the musical?”

His eyes light up like the stars that populate the Mason jar on my bedside table.

“Absolutely.”

“And then, maybe, if you're feeling up for it...” I pause, both to collect myself and remember what it is I'm doing, but also because I'm trying to memorize the look of pure, unfiltered joy he's wearing so I can add it to my mental jar. “We could watch one of those Pixar movies you keep raving about?”

I've never seen a shooting star before, but suddenly a whole shower of them are darting in his gaze.

“For real?” he asks, surprise raising his volume. “You're serious?”

I almost refuse to believe that the joy on his face is reserved for spending time with me, but something in me—something contained in that jar—allows a fraction of it to seep in.

“I am.”

He fist pumps, reminding me so much of the kids that we teach that I almost start to laugh. I haven't let *laughter* be a commonality in so long that I still find myself holding it back. I bite laughter and hope and joy off at every turn because I haven't allowed myself to enjoy them. Here, with Aaron, I am reminded that I can.

So, I laugh. Because I just asked this man to help me choreograph a

middle school musical and watch a Disney movie, and he is celebrating like he just won a world championship.

As we settle our plans, I allow myself to believe that I am his victory.

thirty-six

aaron

IT'S an overreaction to bring a suit and tie to eat at a diner, right?

Yeah. It definitely is.

Because this isn't a *date* date. It's a let's-plan-the-musical date. It's a *business* date. But the more I keep referring to it as some type of *date*, the more supplies I rifle out of the back of my closet. Is *aftershave* overkill for a diner-business-not-date?

Ugh. I'm out of practice.

Or, maybe it's not so much that I'm out of practice. Penny and Sam give me shit constantly for my dating habits. They call it *serial dating*. I call it *trying to find my forever person before I die of old age*. Up until now, I've been falling short. Falling in love with ideas instead of women. But Lucy is the farthest thing from an idea. She's every idea of love come to life.

So maybe the aftershave and the polo shirt and the shine on my shoes for a diner meal where we're going to discuss choreography for a middle school musical are overkill. But I'd rather overkill it with my efforts than fall short at the feet of the woman I *know* deep in my core is forever for me.

I settle on a teal polo with dark wash jeans, go mild on the aftershave, and double apply the deodorant. After packing my trusty clipboard and a few different pens, I head to the restaurant. I had planned to arrive first so that I could panic alone for fifteen minutes, but Lucy has beat me to the punch. When I enter the diner early, she's sitting in a back corner booth, surrounded by notebooks and scripts and assorted office supplies, nursing a glass of water with a side of panic.

She's nervous too?

I swallow that fact, letting the sheer whisper of hope drown at the bottom of my stomach so I don't overdo it *too much*.

“Your choreographer has arrived!”

She jumps six inches from the red pleather seat. Okay. Maybe the arm swing and the loud declaration was a tad into the *overdoing it* category.

“Alright, Ms. Director. What’s the show?”

She flashes me the script, and I clutch my chest, falling dramatically against the back of the booth.

“*Moana Junior? A woman after my own heart.*”

“I thought you might like it.”

She slides me a copy of the script, and a sticker brands the cover, reading *Choreographer* in her neat, loopy handwriting.

“I’m going to have ‘How Far I’ll Go’ stuck in my head for the rest of the day.”

“It’s been on a loop in my head since Christmas,” she smiles.

The waiter arrives and takes our drink orders while we shove our musical supplies to the side to gaze over the menu.

“Have you been here yet? It’s kind of a town staple.”

She shakes her head, chewing thoughtfully on her bottom lip.

I still haven’t told her that lip bite might be my kryptonite.

“This menu is the size of a dictionary.”

“They kind of have everything here. I think I’m going to go with the appetizer sampler,” I decide without even opening my menu.

“As a meal?” she asks. One eyebrow lifts as she tilts the gargantuan menu horizontally to see the page.

“Absolutely! It has everything: Mozz sticks, chicken tenders, *and* onion petals.”

“The only thing it’s missing is an order of fries,” she chuckles.

“Which is exactly why I order mine on the side.”

I nod decisively, letting my menu fall to the table top with a *thwack*. Lucy lays hers down carefully, the quiet *snick* a countering echo to mine.

“You’re really going to eat an appetizer platter as a meal?”

“For sure,” I nod. “I’ll even let you steal a mozzarella stick, since you picked the perfect musical for me to choreograph.”

She taps her index finger against her menu, against the top that reads *GREAT BEGINNINGS*. This time, when she chews at her bottom lip, I see how it pairs with the hesitancy of her gaze instead.

“Something wrong?” I lean across the table on my forearms, hands clasped in the middle, dropping my voice low enough that the rest of the

early evening crowd can't hear us. When she lifts her gaze, there's trepidation in her eyes.

"I just um... I haven't ordered an appetizer since before college. Since before I was... married."

A gear in the machine that is Lucy clicks into place. *He was controlling what she ate, too?* Another reason for me to wrap my hands around her ex's throat.

"Oh." That lone syllable grates my throat, escaping around all of the other things I want to say but can't.

How badly did he hurt you?

Did he lay a hand on you?

What's his name?

Tell me how I can help put you back together.

"Yeah, he uh... Scott was super picky about what we—what *I*—ate."

She chews on her bottom lip, and I have the sudden urge to pull at it with my thumb, to tug her free of those anxieties and let her know that she's safe here.

But I don't get to decide when her anxiety takes over. I don't get to tell her to sweep it away. The only freedom I have is doing my best to be a safe place for her, and letting her use it when she's ready. So I gently take her hand, the one with the tapping finger, and scoot it over the words *Tasty Sampler*.

"So, we're getting *two* of these, and a large order of cheese fries?"

She lifts her head, releasing her bottom lip from her teeth so she can gift me one of those tiny side grins, the ones she tries her best to hide.

"Yeah. Sounds good."

We murder our meals. The table looks like a war zone by the time we're finished. For the first few minutes after our platters arrived, I swear Lucy had the same glaze over her eyes as I had when I'd looked up from between her legs to stare at her while my tongue was buried in her pussy.

We busy ourselves discussing the musical, deciding which songs will require harder choreography and which songs will take up more of our time. After we have the dance numbers prioritized, a skeletal outline of her vision, and some tentative dates penciled onto the schedule, I snap the binding to my clipboard and sigh contentedly.

"Where did your choreography skills come from?"

"All three of my sisters are classically trained ballerinas. Mom had me

enrolled for all of five minutes before she realized that something with more movement was going to be more my speed.”

“And the basketball star was born?”

“Tee-ball first. Then basketball. Hockey was a flop.”

“Oh, I can’t *imagine* why,” she chides, flashing the brilliance of her mischievous smile. I shake my head, running my fingers through my hair to keep my hands occupied so I don’t do something stupid like reach across the table and run my thumb over her bottom lip.

“What about you? Did you star in musicals back in the day?”

She nods, and for the first time, I see a bashful blush creep into Lucy, like she hasn’t been able to let this side of herself out of her cage in far too long.

And I’m starting to realize that her ex may have been the keeper of the keys.

“Something like that. I actually wanted to be an actress professionally, once upon a time.”

“Oh, wow, really?”

“Mhm.” She nods, her wistful gaze trailing out over the diner. “I decided in high school that I didn’t ever want to battle through Hollywood, so I stuck to school shows just for fun. Working in a school is kind of like acting anyway: I put on a show for eight hours, and get to take the mask off once I’m home. I think some of my students would be shocked to find out that I’m not as peppy as I am when I’m on the clock.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I chuckle.

She bites her lip, clearly contemplating her next words.

“I did try staying in the local theater scene during college.”

“What happened?”

I know instantly that I’ve said the wrong thing, just like I know instantly what the answer is to that question—or, *who* it is.

“Um... Scott happened.” She says it with a nervous, breathy chuckle. So different than the giggle and blush and excitement she’d just been painted in moments ago. “Said it was a waste of time and money. That I would be better off using my time more wisely, so I could contribute to the household and be around for him instead of wasting my time trying for something I’d never achieve in the first place.”

Someone must have cranked up the heat in here. That’s why I’m suddenly an inferno, right?

The mechanical pencil that I’ve been twirling back and forth over my

fingers snaps in the fist I accidentally close around it. We both jolt, two sets of wide eyes watching with anticipation as I unfurl my fist, uncovering the two jagged pieces.

“Oops,” she says, breathy and wide-eyed.

“Yeah,” I say, concrete coating my throat. “Oops.”

Our gazes slowly lift, and as mine waxes over her face, I follow her blush, wondering if the dazed but expectant expression swirling over her is finally breaking through the chains.

“I don’t like that, Lucy.”

I can’t hold it back.

She ponders on this, her eyes pointedly tracking from mine, down to the shards of plastic in my hand, and back.

“I don’t like it either.”

We let that fact simmer until the waiter returns to take the plates we’ve long since emptied. Thankfully, the tension dissipates, and we start to gather our things and head to the door. I tell my conscious to stop doing backflips when Lucy walks close enough to me that the back of her hand is friends with mine the whole walk to our cars.

thirty-seven

aaron

“I THOUGHT you were going to show off your Pixar collection. *Moana* isn’t Pixar.”

“You’ve been doing your research,” I say, clicking over on my streaming account to queue up the movie.

“Or, I pay attention. When you went to search for the movie, you skipped *right* over the Pixar logo.”

I turn my head, and she shrugs, pops a piece of popcorn in her mouth, and smiles around it.

“Smartass.” I shake my head. I’d give my left leg for a lifetime full of these moments. “I figured we could cap off our successful evening of planning choreography by getting acquainted with the story.”

“You mean the story we’ll be rehearsing every single day for the next two months? The one that will be so sickeningly on repeat in our heads that we’ll never want to watch it again?”

Her wide eyes sparkle, and I can’t help but pick up the throw pillow stationed between us and bop her on the knee.

Lucy snorts—full on snort-laughs—and I’m pretty sure I’ve died and gone to heaven.

“Oh no,” she says. I glance across the couch, over the one cushion of space I’ve reserved for the bowl of popcorn and the breathing room she still needs. She’s clutching the pillow to her chest, her wide eyes still clinging to the sparkle of sass behind her big frames. “You’re going to sing along, aren’t you?”

Her face scrunches into the top of the pillow, her lips pursed in an attempt to keep up the charade, to hide that smile that her eyes betray.

“Every single song,” I affirm.

True to form, I belt the opening number as soon as it hits, clocking the dance moves we'd sketched out at the diner. By the time we get to our lead character's power ballad, I have commandeered my coffee table as a raft, and am using my Swiffer as both an oar and a microphone.

Lucy wipes tears from her eyes, doubled over in laughter as I end the song on my knees with my arms spread into a wide V, my oar-slash-microphone thrust high in the air, and gives me a standing ovation.

"Wow. I don't think Brynn is going to be able to top that," she says, speaking of the eighth grader who has the lead role. "You might have to fill in for the Saturday night show."

"Can you *imagine* me in a grass skirt though?"

"Oh. For sure. The moms would go nuts. *And* all of the female teachers in our building."

"Really?" A smirk darts across my face as my brows skyrocket. "And what would they be saying about me?"

I inch forward on my knees, slowly crawling toward her at a pace that matches the creep of blush up her neck and into her cheeks.

"Oh. Not much," she shrugs. "It's just that, I was bombarded by no less than three people by the end of my first day about how lucky I was to have *Mr. Russo* as my mentor."

"And are you? Lucky to have me?"

My thighs press into the couch, her crisscrossed legs pressing into my stomach. This view from slightly below reminds me of the last time I was on my knees for her, and my cock presses into the couch as it awakens in my tight-fitting jeans.

She gives a slightly less cocky shrug, her, "The jury's still out," breathy, scratchy.

"Should I sing another song? Would that sway the vote?" I ask in an equally gritty voice.

"You're *impossible*."

She chuckles, picks up the pillow in her lap, and bops me in the face.

On a scale of one to ten, how wrong is it that I immediately want to say, *Do that again?*

Instead, I take the pillow and prop it in *my* lap, because my dick is definitely out to play, and I don't need Lucy thinking that *Moana* is what gets me going.

We watch the rest of the movie half for pleasure and half to take notes.

By the time it's over, I've already dedicated the sight of a cuddled up, sleep drunk Lucy still hugging a throw pillow to memory. She gives me a half-lidded smile, and her head tilts all the way to one side as she gives a breathy laugh before standing. As she lifts her arms to stretch, a new battle of the wits enters the ring over whether or not to steal a peek at the strip of skin that appears when her long sleeved shirt rides up. Her belly button is about to peek out and say hello when she turns and begins to lazily stalk around my place like she belongs here. And damn, does she look good doing it.

"You have a big family."

She finger-walks through the framed photos that cover nearly every surface of my living room: bookshelves, the walls, the edges of my entertainment system. I nestle up beside her, careful to leave enough space for her to breathe.

"They're crazy, but they're mine," I chuckle, crossing my arms.

"Did you guys ever fight?"

"Oh, *constantly*." My laugh is heavier this time. "There was an entire six month period where Daniela and Sophia weren't allowed in the same room at the same time, unless it was for a meal or for church—and even then, they were separated by Maria and me."

Shock ebbs over her wide eyes and puckered smile.

"Do you have any crazy sibling stories?"

"Kind of hard to do when it's just you."

With that, she idles along to my second bookshelf. I swallow down this new chunk of information and add it to my Lucy encyclopedia.

"Do you like being an only child?"

"Sometimes." Her finger lazily paints the edges of frames dotted with my childhood. I wonder what the frames at her place contain. "It was kind of nice being the only one at times. I always got to pick the restaurant or the movie we saw in theaters. Vacations, that sort of thing."

"I'm pretty sure I can count on one hand the times I've been the decision-maker," I chuckle, scratching the back of my head.

She smiles at me, this warm sadness that I'm beginning to understand more as wistful. She doesn't want pity. She wants acceptance. And I'm doing my best to give her that. Especially when I've come to recognize that her five-count breaths always precede something that she's been building up to share. These are moments that freeze me, remind me to be wholly present.

"Being an only child also makes hiding almost nonexistent. I couldn't

really get away with anything, being in the spotlight. Couldn't..." She sighs, and it takes everything in me not to reach out, knowing she's clearly been building the strength to do this on her own. "Everything I did felt like it was just short of an expectation, you know? Like, if I couldn't bring honor to my mom and dad, who would? God, I'm starting to sound like Moana."

That realization ends on a breathy laugh, and she heads back to my couch, taking the pillow back to her lap and hugging it there tightly like a lifeline. Her chin molds into a soft divot in the lip of the pillow.

"I'm sure your parents are proud of whatever you do." My words come out raspy, and I try to mask the clearing of my throat as a cough into my fist.

She shrugs, and my heart sinks into my shoes.

"I haven't...I don't..." She shakes her head, her eyes fluttering closed softly, then opening again like a butterfly's wings. "My parents didn't accept my marriage to Scott. I don't really have a relationship with them anymore."

For the first time since I've met her, I see Lucy's resolve finally split. The crack that's been there, in frosted over glazes and trembling hands, finally floods with tears. She's quick to catch them, her finger rushing to stop the thin stream before it turns into a monsoon, but I can't help it when I whisper, *Don't*.

She pauses, her tears seeming to halt along with her confuddled expression.

I scoot closer on the couch, edging the nearly empty bowl of popcorn with my knee as I extend my hand for hers. She takes it, hesitantly, and I absorb the warmth in my palm as I use that to tug myself even closer.

"There's no such thing as a bad feeling. Let yourself feel, Lucy. All of that stuffiness you've kept in a cage? It's meant to be felt."

As if on cue, she hiccups, her bottom lip quivers, and the dam breaks.

I don't know how long I hold her for. It could be five minutes, or it could be two in the morning. All I know is, if my job became holding Lucy while she cries, I would gladly take post for the rest of my life.

thirty-eight

lucy

I SHOULD FEEL EMBARRASSED. Should hate myself for getting a decade's worth of snot and tears and pure blubbering emotion all over Aaron's nice clean shirt. *The nice shirt he wore for our diner dinner, that wasn't even a date, but he sure did walk in like it was.* Instead, I hear a cross between his words and the ones that Samantha has spoken to me time and time again.

He holds me, and Aaron's soft, *Let yourself feel*, twines itself with Samantha's, *All of your feelings are valid*, crossing with words of mine that I know he borrowed, that *There's no such thing as a bad feeling*, until that melody finally clicks into place for me.

That was my tipping point.

The mountain I've avoided accepting since my jailbreak from my ex-husband.

He beat down my emotions whenever they were inconvenient to him, and I've been throwing them in a cell and locking them away with a deadbolt for longer than I can remember. I've held the key all this time. All it took was a little WD-40 in the form of a middle school gym teacher to coax the hinges.

I am allowed to feel. My feelings are valid, and meant to be.

It's everything I teach, and yet nothing I've allowed myself to accept.

The street outside Aaron's big picture window is quiet and still when I finally lift my head from where it fits perfectly in the crook of his shoulder. Before I can even raise my sleeve to wipe at my face, he's holding a box of tissues to me.

His eyes are heavy, almost as if he's taken every single tear I've shed tonight and absorbed it so that I wouldn't have to carry them anymore.

I don't want to touch that with a ten foot pole.

But in the same breath, something has cracked open inside of me tonight.

I'm exhausted and my chest aches and I know I'll have a migraine come morning, but damnit, letting things out feels *good*.

Aaron leads me to the guest bathroom, and as I'm dabbing at my swollen, red eyes with a washcloth, as I'm dabbing away the mascara tracks and cleaning the smudges from my glasses, I let myself amend the truths I'd resolved for myself that very first night here.

He has female products in his drawers because he has three sisters who he loves and who visit him often.

He brought me a wash cloth and then gave me privacy because he respects me.

He has held me through *two* monumental breakdowns now, without hesitation or judgement.

He is safe. I am safe with him.

And just when I think he can't make that statement any more valid, I see him on the threshold of the living room, pacing and chewing on his thumbnail like he's nervous. When a flood of relief washes over him at the sight of me, my esophagus knots.

"Hey."

He doesn't bother to hide the scratch of his words like he did earlier.

"Hi." My own voice is raw, and my hand flies to my throat. As if on cue, he pivots to the kitchen for a readied bottle of water.

"Thanks."

I settle gingerly back onto the couch, where my body has molded itself over the past couple of hours, and drain half of the bottle's contents. Aaron is running shaky palms over his thighs, like he's awaiting a status report but doesn't want to ask.

"Do you want to..."

Talk about it.

He's not the first person to want to incite a conversation about Scott. My parents tried to force it. My friends begged me to. So far, he's the only who has asked. Nodding grants me a choice I didn't know I needed. When he nods in return and swallows down all that he wants to offer in order to hand the power back to me, I am reassured that I chose the right person.

"My mom and dad never liked Scott from the beginning. He's thirteen years older than me, he was technically my *boss*, and they always thought something was wrong with that. Looking back on it now, yeah, he shouldn't have been showing interest in students, especially as an employee of the

university. But I just...thought I was special. He made me *feel* special. And by the time I realized I was in too deep, it was already too late.

“I picked him over my family, my friends, my dreams. Eventually I realized that part of that wasn’t a choice. He made me *think* I didn’t want or need anything but him. And once he had hold of my mind, he started to poison it. Nothing I did was ever right. Ever good enough. I could follow his instructions down to the punctuation, and he’d still find ways to beat me down. When I finally came up for air, everyone else was gone. By that point, I was isolated. I lived on Scott Island for so long, coming back to my own has kind of been like what I’d imagine rescue from being stranded in the wilderness might feel like. I’ve had to re-acclimate myself to a society I no longer know how to live in.”

That alone steals the waning energy I have left in me. I’m a rowboat sailing on still waters where the current can do the rest to bring me back safely to shore.

Safely back to the man beside me who clearly has questions that he’s holding back.

I nod a few times, letting him know that I’m strong enough to take them. His eyes dart back and forth, contemplating what he wants to know first. He licks his lips.

“So...the Master’s program, and the musical...?”

“The first time I told Scott that I wanted to get my Master's, he told me that the longer I stayed in school, the longer we’d have to put off getting married. He made it seem romantic to put it off. But then, as soon as we were married, and I was settled in my job, he told me they were *both* a waste of time,” I affirm. “That I could have been spending that time with him. In reality, it just meant I didn’t get to see other people. Or, I guess, *tell* other people about what was going on at home.”

“What about when I brought you flowers?”

“Flowers were always his apology. He sent me a dozen yellow roses once after I got dressed up to go out with friends and he called me a slut and told me he’d leave me if I didn’t stay home. And then, the morning after I found him in bed with a twenty-one-year-old bartender, there were white ones on the coffee table when I woke up after sleeping on the couch.”

I wonder if this is what will break him. The vein in his forehead is pulsing, his bulging eyes and tight, white fists making his stress visible.

“And your parents? When was the last time you...?”

Fresh tears well, and almost too late, I realize that this might be the question that takes me under, the storm threatening on the horizon to capsize me. He realizes that immediately and shakes his head, dismissing the question altogether.

The veins in his big hand flex, gripping into the meat of his thigh. Tension braces him in place, and I know he's struggling not to reach for me, simply because I'm struggling not to land safely back on his sandy shore. But the late night hour on his clock reflects, and I know I've overstayed my welcome, though something tells me that he'd have a different opinion.

In the case of baby steps, I've taken a leap off the diving board tonight.

He walks me to the door, and I let him help me slip on my jacket, simply to feel those strong hands on me again. They cover lost ground, taking care to zip me in before he gently squeezes my biceps and tucks my beanie hat over my head, tangling hair through his fingers before giving a soft tug. My insides electrify, defiant to the deep exhaustion that aches through my muscles after putting my body through the wringer.

Aaron is still playing with the ends of my ponytail, staring intently as he rustles it between his thumb and fingers, biding our time.

"You'll have to break out the Pixar collection next time. I almost feel cheated."

His gaze snaps up to mine, his dark eyes and intense stare shooting one last shock through me, all the way to my toes.

"Next time?"

"Next time," I nod.

I haven't done this in so long that it feels like I'm walking on a different planet—making plans for next times and laughing so hard it hurts in a good way. Crying a decade's worth of tears, and being able to smile in the aftermath.

"Text me when you get home?"

My nod and small smile and the flush of my cheeks dare to remind me of the first time Scott started giving me attention. But then, I remind myself of all the ways that Aaron is the complete opposite.

Aaron isn't saying sweet things to manipulate me. He's asking instead of telling. He wants to know that I'm safe.

No. That isn't true. He *needs* to know that I'm safe.

It's this that propels me up onto my tiptoes, my arms wrapped around his neck, my face buried into that spot where he held me tightly and let me fall

apart.

I inhale, his scent twining its way into my being, wrapping around my synapses like a new core memory. As soon as I try to pull away, his large hands grip me tighter, one spanning my back while the other grips my head. He clings, rocking us slowly back and forth until I feel him exhale, letting me go fingerprint by fingerprint.

“I will,” I say, letting go the half smiles and fake happiness I’ve been wearing like a mask.

Because here, I’m finally beginning to feel free.

thirty-nine

aaron

“GOOD WORK TODAY, gentlemen. Remember, first cuts begin tomorrow. Rest up. Bring your A-game. Hands in; Renegades on three!”

Sam concludes his speech with a hands-in cheer, and I rush out of the fold like a bat out of hell before all of gloves are even picked up off the gym floor.

“Russo! Where’s the fire?” he calls after me.

“Musical practice!” I bellow over my shoulder, trying to flick away the guilt that I’m leaving him and Drake alone to clean up after baseball tryouts. It soothes the ache a bit to see several of our veteran players, as well as a few incoming seventh graders, staying to help pick up, but the residual guilt still picks away at me as I rush to the auditorium, where Lucy and the crew are already halfway through today’s rehearsal.

That’s where the guilt intensifies tenfold.

She’s essentially doing this by herself, and I have to split time between here and coaching duties.

I come bearing a smile and the choreography for the day. They’re finishing up the opening chorus song when I arrive, and as soon as the CD track cuts out, a chorus of, “Mr. Russo!” precedes the flock of little theater chickens as they rush at me.

“Hey guys!”

“Why are you late?”

“Baseball tryouts.”

They nod, and I rush them back to their places on the stage that we’d practiced yesterday to assuage some of that guilt, tugging on my collar as I heat.

“Okay, Moana front and center with the ensemble in your places.”

“Need anything from me, Mr. Russo?”

The way that my name rolls off her tongue like butter melting on a hot day is the salve I needed.

“Just your presence, Ms. Lucy. Anything else is an added bonus.”

In response to my wink, blush sneaks up her neck like a thief, and I shake my head before getting to work.

It takes us an hour to block the number. Luckily the kids have most of the words to the song down pat, so by the end of rehearsal, we have a pretty clean number finished.

And I don't even get to enjoy decompressing with Lucy afterward.

My stacked schedule throws a wall between her and her hesitant smile that I want so much to sprint to, hitting brick instead. I grimace, right as her pretty smile parts with words that have to wait.

“That went really well—”

“I gotta run.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry, don't let me keep you.”

What I'd give for her to keep me.

“Wanna meet in my office tomorrow morning before school? I'll bring Dunkin'.”

“He knows the magic words.”

Her eyes sparkle, and luckily, I have that to hold onto as I make my escape. A ten minute drive later, and I'm busting through my sister's front door.

“Where are my rugrats?!”

Stella and Vinny dive-bomb me with hugs. Maria's twins are three year old hell-raisers, but their uncle is a gym teacher who knows how to wear them out. Which is exactly why I'm taking them off her hands so she and her husband can get a much needed date night before their third one arrives.

“Sorry I'm late.”

“You're fine,” she assures me as her children scale me like a jungle gym. “They're fed and bathed and in pajamas. Is nine okay?”

“Stay out as late as you want!”

My subconscious awakens and slaps me silly as I watch my sister disappear, tossing *Don't tempt me!* over her shoulder.

I sigh. There's only an hour until I put these munchkins to bed, and my heart tugs in opposite directions: one toward soaking in as much time with them as I can; the other toward the plush, inviting couch that I'll inevitably crash on as soon as they're asleep.

But this is all I've ever wanted, right? To come home to kids that are elated to see me? Read them a billion stories with character voices and sound effects, cuddle them until they fall asleep?

I suppose there's a reason Maria and Julian need a night out.

"Dragon, Uncle 'Ron!" Vinny shouts, his pudgy fists in the air, before his momma has even locked the front door.

"Save the pin-cess!" Stella nods.

She toddles down the hall toward their bedroom, and as soon as Vinny and I have located his crown and sword, she emerges wearing a princess costume dress over her pajamas, a backwards wig, and plastic dress-up heels on the wrong feet.

Oh, my heart.

"Princess Stella is in danger!" I exclaim, and our game begins.

The game is essentially Vinny climbing on my back and beating me with a foam sword while Stella bounces and giggles on the couch, cheering on her brother as he "beats the dragon." I flip him upside down a few times for good measure before I let him pin me, and then, they swap. Princess Stella claims the sword and saves her prince from capture. We go on like this until the dragon is yawning more than he's roaring.

"Alright, Tater Tots. It's time for books and bed."

They race for their bedroom like they're crossing the finish line at the Boston Marathon. Man, to have that kind of energy again.

On my way to their shared room, I pass the nursery that Maria's been setting up for their new addition. The sight of a crib and boxes of stacked diapers and Julian's toolbox cinches something around my heart. Suddenly, Lucy appears in the rocker in the corner of the room, and I see one baby cradled in her arms, another perched on her knee, and maybe one more on my back as we all cuddle in for story time.

The mirage fades away like mist when I hear my name being called. I swallow a yawn, then cuddle up on my niece's toddler bed, where the three of us read about alphabets in trees and wild things and a few different heroic tales before their heads get heavy on my shoulders.

I should move Vinny to his own bed. I should kiss their little foreheads and make sure their favorite stuffies are tucked beside them and check for monsters under the bed. Instead, I close my eyes, feeling their warm breath tickle my neck, their warm weight all snuggled in with Uncle Aaron, and try to get back that image I'd had of my own future with Lucy. Before I know it,

that daydream drifts into dreamland.

My sister's hand on my shoulder rouses me from a dream that involved Lucy and a few characters from *Moana* and a purple dragon. I squint and see Maria's warning shushing finger pressed to her lips. Julian is tucking Vinny carefully into his own bed, and I narrowly escape Stella's grasp like Indiana Jones replacing the idol, knocking the lights out on my way out the door.

"How was your night?" I ask after I crack a yawn and stretch both of my arms, tilting my head from side to side to get out the kinks.

"Nice. We got dinner and ice cream, and walked around Target for a while."

"Woah. So domestic. Go big or go home," I tease.

"That's married life for you," she shrugs.

I jest, but what I wouldn't give for a Target and ice cream date night. I yawn again.

"What has you so tired?"

"It's just been a long week," I shrug, before bending at the front door to lace on my tennis shoes. "Baseball tryouts, musical practice. No biggie. I'll just sleep in on Saturday."

"Aren't you helping dad with the den on Saturday?"

"Shit," I mutter under my breath. "Yeah, I guess I am."

I stand, running a hand through my hair before tugging on my jacket.

"You sound like you have a lot on your plate. You sure you're taking care of yourself?"

I nod. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"Okay." My big sister eyes me warily, her crossed arms resting over her bump. "What's this about musical practice? What's her name, Aaron?"

I redden as her lips quirk up.

"Lucy."

The cadence of her name draws a kaleidoscope over Maria's face. She's deep in thought for a few beats, and I hope that means she's choosing her words carefully.

"How have things been with her since Christmas?"

"Good. Great, actually. I've been trying to take your advice about taking things slow and..."

I think about all that Lucy's opened up about. Her ex, her past, the way she's been held back. If Maria was telling me to take things slowly, Lucy herself was screaming at me to work at a sloth's pace. But little by little,

we're getting to a place where I can see her walls starting to chip away.

"And?"

"She has a long way to go, but she also has so much in her past that has made her hesitant. I just need to keep working at her pace."

"Is she still worth it?"

I nod, without question.

"Absolutely. More now, if that's even possible."

She reaches out and squeezes my bicep, smiling in a way that brings tears. She bites them back, curses under her breath in Italian, and laughs.

"These pregnancy hormones, I swear! Thanks again for taking the twin terrors tonight. Julian and I appreciate you."

"You know I'll take them anytime."

She nods, and as I turn the doorknob, she stops me.

"Hey, get some sleep though. You can't take care of everyone else if you don't take care of yourself first."

As I yawn my way home, thinking over the to-do list I have for the rest of the week, I let that notion fall to the wayside.

forty

lucy

THE DAYS HAVE BEEN LONG LATELY, but I am thriving in them.

Between school, musical rehearsals, and my graduate classes, I have purpose. I'm learning to label my days as "balanced" instead of seeing all that I'm filling my time with as avoidance tactics. Because the more that I distance myself from who I used to be, and the more I embrace the butterfly who has been transforming inside of this long overdue chrysalis, the more I'm slowly starting to see the good that fills my days.

Samantha started something with that jar of lightning on my bedside table, and this week, I brought it into the classroom.

When Aaron's students came into my guidance lesson today, they were each told to choose a piece of colorful scrap paper that the art teacher generously donated to me, and write down one positive thing about their week. While there were some less eager to take the challenge, and several wrote down *Leaving school when the bell rings*, it was a neat opportunity to show them how to spin positivity into any situation.

We turned "leaving school when the bell rings" into, *How cool is it that you have something to look forward to in your afternoons?* "Sleeping" was flipped to, *You have a home and a bed*. It only took a few transformations of some of the duller responses to get their wheels moving. By the end of the school day, the number of kids who were raising their hands to change their answers and take hold of the positive side was my own personal victory. I created a jar for each class period, and Aaron agreed to keep them in the gym and read them at the end of the week.

We ended each lesson with a picture book—kind of a treat for these teenagers—about how a simple "spot of happiness" can create a ripple effect. On the way out of class, I gave each student a dot sticker as a reminder to

ripple their own positivity and happiness throughout the day.

In between classes, Aaron snuck his own dot sticker onto the back of *my* hand.

A student who raised his hand toward the end of my last class tied the lesson together with a neat bow.

“This kind of put me back in the green zone.”

“That’s great, Austin! Do you want to share more?”

He tilted his head, nodding thoughtfully. “I’ve been having kind of a crappy day. Failed a quiz because I didn’t study. Couldn’t study because I had to babysit my sister the past two nights in a row. Babysitting made me miss baseball practice. But this was like, uh, a good reminder. Bad things happen, but so do good things.”

He shrugged, and shot me a small smile.

My immediate reaction was to look to Aaron. His beaming grin, the shine of immense pride glittering in his eyes, became a Post-It for my jar at home. My spot of happiness for the day.

As musical rehearsal wraps up tonight, the auditorium void of students, I seek him out, hoping to find the courage to tell him.

“Quite the rehearsal, Mr. Russo.”

He shakes his head, and I swear I see red creep up his neck. I squeeze my thighs together at the thought of finding where it started below his collar and tracing it with my mouth. His hand running through his tousled hair does absolutely nothing to quell that hunger.

“I think they’re starting to get it,” he agrees. “One more day of practice on that finale number and we might be able to start adding props.”

“You think they’ll be able to handle dancing with spears?”

“Hmm... *maybe* we do ten minutes of sword fighting to get it out of their systems.”

“Is that for you, or for them?” I lift one brow, and he grins.

“I mean, of *course* I’ll be participating.”

Our laughter is interrupted by a smattering of blue and yellow lights crisscrossing the stage. His head turns in panic on a swivel.

“What was that?”

“Oh, I have IT checking out the sound and lighting systems to make sure they’re good to go for when we bring in the tech crew. I told them to come once the kids were gone. They’ll probably be playing around for a little while.”

It sounds like a dismissal, but I don't want to stop talking to Aaron. We spent nearly all day together, but even so, I feel like we barely interacted outside of managing our students. It's been so long since I've made an excuse to keep talking to someone that it rolls clunkily off my tongue.

"Do... you want to... see the costumes? They came in yesterday."

"Oh, absolutely! Can I try on the wigs?"

I shove him playfully as we head backstage, behind the closed curtains, taking our time to tour the costumes. He does indeed try on the wig for one of our lead characters, and my chest hurts from laughing.

Aaron's mouth cracks open in a yawn, but unlike the quiet ones he'd been stifling all day, this one is loud, open mouthed, and I can see the war paint beneath his eyes when he's finished.

"Long week?"

He hesitates, like he's about to shake it off, but decides not to. His head hangs for a beat before he shakes it slowly.

"I've just, uh... Ha." He huffs a short chuckle before meeting my gaze. "It's been a long week. A long *couple* of weeks. School, baseball, musical rehearsals... I've been helping my dad renovate the den at my parents' place, and we're working on another project this weekend. I can feel it all starting to edge into my attitude, and I've been short with people, short with *students*, and I just..."

He exhales, shaking his head like he's at a loss. He's been running himself ragged, and I'm part of that problem. He's here for *me*, after school when he doesn't have to be. When he could be taking that edge off, relaxing, making time for himself. I swallow down the broken glass in my throat.

"You don't say no to people."

I make the observation, and he scoffs.

"Are you trying to school counselor me now?"

I don't let the irritation bother me, because he just voiced that he's realized himself being short with others in light of all that he has piled on his plate, and I let him. In a matter of seconds, he pulls back, tilts his gaze toward the ceiling, exhales, and looks back at me with remorse in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be short with you too."

"Thanks for the apology."

It's something I never got from Scott. His actions and words were always right, and if they offended *me*, then it was my own fault. This flip side is kind of nice.

“I guess, to put it in Ms. Lucy terms, I haven’t been in the green zone today. I’ve been more in the blue and the yellow.”

“Oh?”

Words die on my lips as I see the true exhaustion settling, the weight sitting on Aaron Russo’s shoulders like a gargoyle.

“Well, we can’t have that. How can we get you back to the green zone?”

He lifts his head, and his gaze is painted in a hazy darkness that I can’t quite read, because as soon as I attempt to let myself believe that this man *wants* to confide in me, I feel the first trickle of poison—just a ripple, like a pebble tossed into the ocean—trying to worm its way back when I’ve been doing so good at repelling it lately.

But one sentence in that low and raspy tone scares it right out of my system.

“*You* can help me get back in the green zone, Ms. Lucy. You might be the only person who knows how.”

Suddenly, I can read that haze like it’s been magnified. It’s *hunger*. Pure, carnal desire. And it’s all for me.

He closes the distance when I’m too frozen on my feet to move. He grips my waist in a way that says he won’t be letting me go anytime soon, and I balance my hands on his chest for purchase. His heart beats like a bass drum keeping rhythm for a marching band.

“I think something like *that* might put you in the red zone, Mr. Russo.”

His hands tighten on my waist before his fingers spread across my body in a grip that’s nothing short of possession. A groan vibrates when he presses his lips to the side of my neck.

“You calling me *Mr. Russo* like that is going to put me in the red zone.”

As if to punctuate that thought, he spins me, pulling me more tightly against him so that I feel his growing thickness against my ass. I bite my bottom lip and squirm against him, wetness beginning to drip between my thighs.

“You feel that, baby? That’s the most relaxed I’ve been all week. Watching you lose control in my hands? That’s the tool that’ll get me all the way back to green.”

Who am I to deny him of that?

“Can I touch you, *please*?”

It’s the raspy, desperate taste of his whisper that has me nodding furiously, my head tilting back to rest against his shoulder as he groans and

slips his hand beneath the waistband of my leggings.

The instant flood of wet when he cups my entire pussy over my panties would be embarrassing if I didn't want more.

"Damn. Damnit, Lucy, you're already this wet for me?"

He drags his open mouth across the side of my neck and groans, his hot breath doing *nothing* to stifle his discovery.

"Let's see if I can remember what Ms. Lucy taught us about the zones. I don't think *soaked* was one of the signals, but that's what I have to work with."

He squeezes my pussy, and then finally, *finally* slips his hand beneath the waistband of my panties. His index and middle finger trace along my lips, and I press myself back into him, biting my lip to muffle the noises.

"*When you're in the yellow zone, your body is in a heightened state, right before you become out of control.*" He's quoting my lesson, and *fuck*, does that turn me on even more. "You are *definitely* in a heightened state, sweet girl. Do you know how I can tell?"

I shake my head, tilting it against his shoulder, tilting my hips for *something, anything*.

"Your body is vibrating..." I shift my hips against his hand, then his thickening cock. "Your breathing is labored..." I gift him with a sharp bite of a moan. "You're agitated..."

This time, I whine. His first two fingers have been painting over the lips of my pussy while his other hand has slipped between us to massage and squeeze my ass, and I have a feeling I'm about to find out if my body is capable of coming without really being touched anywhere significant if he doesn't give me something soon.

"I wouldn't be if you would..."

I press on the back of his hand, those thick fingers refusing to budge.

"If I what, Lucy? Tell me what you need."

I let a moan rip free in place of actual words, grateful for the thickness of the curtain shielding us and muffling the echoes of my desperation. Gone is the girl who met Aaron Russo in a bar and told him exactly what she wanted him to do. The girl who craved control so badly that she slipped into a different persona to tell him exactly what she needed. This girl? She's putty in his hands.

"Uh uh." He shakes his head, dragging his mouth hotly over my skin again before his lips find their target beneath my ear and he sucks. The palm

of his hand squeezes, his fingers remaining in place, and he's *so damn close* to that button of pleasure that I cry out again in protest and want. The hand on my ass shifts to my hip, and I feel that thickness that I'm now desperate for. "I want you in the red, Ms. Lucy. Use your words. How do I get you out of control?"

The rumble in his voice, the fact that I know he's talking through gritted teeth, does me in.

"Your fingers. I need to fuck your hand, Aaron. *Please* give me your fingers."

His fingers slide inside me to the tune of, "Such a good girl, Lucy," and I am so close to soaring that I can feel the heat of the sun igniting me.

Two fingers slip in easily because of how wet I am, so he adds a third after only a few thrusts.

"That sound of your pussy gripping my fingers? Oh, *fuck*, that's it. That's the tool I needed, Luce."

His pace quickens and I can hear it too, just like I had that night that he'd followed me home and eaten me against my front door.

"I don't think I've been this relaxed since the last time I was in this heaven. You're gripping me like you want my cock, sweetheart."

Where has dirty-mouthed Aaron been hiding?

Or, the better question: How do I get him to stay?

"Aaron," I whine, my ponytail now hanging over his shoulder because my head is tipped back so far. It's so good, but I just need...

"What's that, sweetheart? Tell me. Tell me how to make it better."

"My clit. Rub my clit."

Without missing a beat, his other hand joins, the stretch in the front of my leggings wicked as one hand works inside me and the other rubs in tight, quick circles. I'm blinded by pleasure. My body is a ball of feeling at Aaron's beck and call.

"Wonder how tight and slick this pussy would feel if it was my cock inside you, because its damn *heaven* on my fingers."

I can't even nod, but the thought of him filling me up again, the sheer thought that we could do things *right* this time, sets off something inside of me.

He's muttering things like *Love when you ask for it*, and *So fucking tight for me*, and *Best part of my day*, when I feel the shaking start. The body of pleasure I've become tunnels to my core, zipping low on my spine before I

loop my arm backwards around him, gripping his ass to hold me somehow tighter against him. He takes the hint and readjusts so that his dick is now snug between my cheeks, and I can feel him thrusting there in time to the devilish work of his hands.

“Sweet Lucy. Falling apart in my hands. Flood for me, sweet girl. I wanna see you in the red.”

I tilt my head, pressing my open-mouthed pants against the side of his neck.

“Lose control for me, Lucy. C’mon, that’s my girl. *Lose it for me, Lucy.*”

That last direction comes on a growl, and I detonate. I’m floating out of my body, into the rafters of this auditorium. His fingers circling in me and on me are electric pulses, lighting me up from within. It’s like a technicolor light show is exploding behind my closed eyes.

Until I realize that the light show playing tricks on the backs of my eyes isn’t actually in my head at all.

“Oh my God, *Aaron.*”

I try to pause my shifting hips, but my body betrays me, tilting toward his touch to get one more hit, one more hit, *one more hit.*

“That’s right, Lucy, give me another—”

“No. Aaron. The IT guys are still here.”

Now *he* freezes with his hands still filling me.

“Oh. Shit.”

Warmth exhales on the back of my neck as we stand there frozen except the heaving of our chests.

“Well...” he starts, his hands flexing on my body. “We put on one hell of a show?”

How is it that I can go from pure existential bliss to utter horror to laughing against this man while he holds me up with his *fingers still circling my clit*? My laugh slides into a short moan, and he rubs my clit twice more before reluctantly pulling his hand from my pants.

“I was going to offer to return the favor but...”

“Remembering that the IT guys are on the other side of that curtain may have deflated me a little.”

I turn in his arms, my gaze not so subtly drifting to the bulge in his pants that still looks thick enough for me to tease back to full attention in no time at all.

“Keep staring at me like that and we’ll have to give them an encore,” he

growls.

“Oh my God!” I squeal. And I collapse against his chest. Into him. The warm security of his arms is a blanket. His hands grip around my back, up to my shoulders, one resting softly but securely at the nape of my neck. I let him rock us there, back and forth, like time caters to us. He hums contentedly against the top of my head.

It’s in that moment that he sighs and relaxes, deflating into me. His lips meet my temple.

“Green.”

He presses that single syllable, that weighs with overwhelming promise, to the top of my head, and the last lingering piece finally clicks into place.

I want to try.

With him.

The real deal.

Let him lift me up and hold me when I’m down. Gone is the notion of keeping him at an arm’s length, or only using him for distractions.

It’s a little too much to handle right now, and the yawn that cracks over the top of my head confirms that I shouldn’t tell him just yet. But the imminent desire I have to follow him home, to have him follow *me* home, finish what we started, and cuddle while we plow through his movie collection, is so overwhelming that I feel it trying to claw its way out of my chest and into reality.

I fall asleep conjuring thoughts of the smile he’ll wear when I tell him, and for the first time in a long time, my dreams don’t haunt me.

forty-one

aaron

I FUCKED UP. Oh, I fucked up bad.

I've been telling her for months that I can't do casual, but apparently, I didn't get the memo myself. I keep letting this happen, but I *can't* keep letting this happen.

In the face of this week from hell, when Lucy was the sunshine in the midst of a hurricane, I couldn't *not* give in. I wasn't lying when I told her she was the one to ground me yesterday. The one to bring me back from the precipice of losing it, and remind me that in the midst of chaos, positivity still exists. For me, it exists in the shape of her.

It's like fate pulled her lesson straight from my heart and delivered it straight to my front door. I listened to that guidance lesson six times over the course of the day, about finding one kernel of goodness in each day, and by the end of it, my bowl of popcorn was ready to topple.

In the end, I couldn't resist. The temptation of Lucy finally filled me to the brim and flooded over.

But I didn't wake with any more clarity than I had when I was holding her in my arms backstage. With a stuffed heart and a pounding head and limbs heavy as lead, I know that today is going to be so much worse than the rest of this mounting week has wrecked me.

I'm going to have to let her down again today, and the rock in the pit of my stomach has grown three sizes on the car ride into work alone. I have to tell Lucy that I crossed a line I shouldn't have, and it is going to *destroy* her.

Bile has been steadily pooled in the back of my throat, lying in wait, since that realization woke me before my alarm this morning. It shoots up as soon as I round the corner and see her waiting outside my office door. Waiting for me with a pretty smile and a ring of joy around her.

“Shit.”

I can't hold back the curse, itching at my throat as the acidity threatens to burn every single *Lucy, I can't do this, I'm so sorry*, that I practiced on the car ride over. The way her eyes light up when she sees me, the megawatt smile that threatens the pop a breaker, twists a knot around my lungs.

“Hey!”

Why? Why does she have to be so excited to see me?

“Uh, hey,” claws its way out like half dry concrete.

“How are you? Did you get some sleep last night?”

“A little.”

It's not entirely a lie. I may have passed out from the weight of everything for a solid twenty minutes before staring at my ceiling until my alarm went off.

“That's good.”

She's nodding and smiling and lighting up the whole damn hallway and I know that I need to cut this off at the knees.

“Listen, Lucy, I—”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

Fuck. Here we go.

“Yeah, but first—”

“Can... Can I actually go first?”

I'm going to let her. My bones don't know how to deny this woman. Especially not in the face of all the progress that she's made in finding courage, finding her voice, and wanting to use it again.

I nod, knowing that if I open my mouth, I'm going to say something stupid or puke or both.

Shyness washes over her in a slow, pink wave, and I pinch my eyes shut, remembering the way it crept a little faster when I had my hands on her those few precious times. She's nervous, and I'm only going to smash that confidence more in a few minutes.

“I... thought this would be harder.” She laughs. This light, flittering bell, like joy personified. And suddenly, I understand why. “Aaron, I think I'm ready. I want to try.”

“Hmm?”

Did I hear her right?

Just in case I'm still in some sort of exhaustion fever dream, I blink a couple of times to make sure she's still there. Tilt my head to shake the water

from my ears. When my vision settles, she's still standing here, right in front of me, hopeful hesitation painting her like a Van Gogh masterpiece.

"You want to..."

"Try. With you. For real. No more pretending like I only want to be friends with benefits."

I can't have this conversation in the hallway. Hastily, I take her hand in one of mine and key into my office with the other, dragging her inside. Once the door is closed and we're hidden from the rest of the world, I grasp onto her biceps, needing the feel of her to solidify this into reality.

"You're serious?"

"Mhm. I'm... I think I'm finally ready. Actually, I *know* I'm ready."

I nod, licking my lips.

"Can you maybe just say all of that again, so I know I'm not having that reoccurring dream that's been taunting me since I met you?"

"You've been..."

She shakes her head now, surprise and adoration whirling into a brand new color on her cheeks. This time, she reaches to *me* for grounding. Her hands feel like a warm campfire blazing where she cups my waist.

"I want to try. Me and you. We might have to go so super slow that it hurts, but this is what I want."

My exhale could power a wind turbine. It deflates me, and my landing place is my forehead anchored to Lucy's. She squeezes me where she holds me, and suddenly, my heart isn't so heavy anymore.

"I'll be the tortoise," I promise on an exhale. "We'll take our sweet time, Lucy. Whatever you need."

We need this moment. This silence of holding each other in this monumental realization that *God, this could finally be it.*

But then doors are slamming, coworkers are shouting at each other down the hallway, and I realize that if I don't get my body moving, I'm going to be late for my first class because I'm hugging my girl outside her locker. Screw it. I'll get a tardy. I'll get detention for her.

We part reluctantly, smiling at each other like two idiots.

"You're telling me I have to go *teach teenagers* after that? I feel like we should both take sick days. You're feeling feverish too, right?"

I press my palm over her forehead, pleased to find her warm and flushed against my fingertips.

"Go teach kids how to play kickball," she giggles, and even though we're

in the middle of a football unit, I consider tossing all of my lesson plans in the trash just to please her. I don a stupid smile and turn to head down the hall to the gym when she calls after me.

“Wait.” I stop immediately and pivot back to her. “What were you going to say?”

I don’t know if it’s the disappearance of a filter that got wiped by the clarity in my head, or the fact that I want to give this the absolute best try, but I tell her the truth.

“I was going to tell you that I shouldn’t have let us go as far as we did last night because I can’t do the friends with benefits thing and maybe suggest we keep our distance for the sake of my own sanity?”

“Oh.” She giggles, smiles this cute little button of a smile, and tilts her head. “Guess we can forget about *that* silly little conversation.”

“Yeah. Silly.”

She has reduced me to bumbling idiot status. And that bumbling idiot has one mission. With a hand on her hip, I edge us the few feet back across the threshold of my office.

“Can I kiss you pl—”

She beats me to it, her lips a sweet, firm foundation.

I feel like the other kisses I gave to Lucy were all cheating at this game. Her smile beneath mine tastes like sunshine and light on the horizon. The warning bell in the hallway rings, signaling the rush of students through the front doors. I lean in for one more quick peck on her lips, cupping her face in both of my hands. When I try to pull back, she leans in, the sweet taste of her enough to nourish me for all of eternity.

forty-two

lucy

“GIRL, I need dirt. Fulfill my first-year teacher fantasies. Just how thick is he?”

I sputter around the straw of my drink at Penelope’s reaction to the fact that Aaron and I are now...something? Something more than friends with benefits. Something dropping grain by grain through the hourglass. But something nonetheless.

“I uh... He’s great.”

“Great? Woman, I am in the dry spell of the century. Can I have a little more than ‘great?’ I will buy the next round.”

“I don’t think I *need* another round,” I chuckle, sipping at the mixed drink that’s too many parts alcohol to too little Coke.

“Okay. Then I’ll buy us cheese fries.”

I roll my eyes and kick her lightly in the shin under the bar.

“Okay. Fine. He has a very talented tongue.”

“Knew it! You lucky bitch.”

There isn’t a hint of jealousy there. I know that my friend is genuinely happy for me.

“Where is he tonight anyway?”

“Helping his dad finish remodeling the den at his parents’ place. He was supposed to do it tomorrow, actually, but he wants to ‘spend the whole day wooing me to make up for lost time,’ so they’re powering through today.”

Penelope gasps with a wide, playful smile, clutching her chest. I hide my grin in my drink as I replay that memory for myself.

“I should probably apologize,” she says.

“For what?”

“For what happened when we ran into him and his sisters.”

“Oh, Penelope, it’s been forgiven. It’s not your fault that I took ‘flirt’ to mean ‘sleeps with anything that walks.’”

“Aaron Russo is the *opposite* of a that,” she chuckles. I raise my brow in question, and her smile softens. “We’re all pretty sure his first words out of the womb were *I do*. Dude’s got it so bad to have a happily ever after that he usually rushes things. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him take things as slowly as he has with you.”

That makes my heart find a beat it’s never known before.

“So, no new prospects for you?” I ask, diverting the attention away from me.

“Ugh. No. Dating nowadays is like fishing for deep sea creatures. The last guy I dated picked out the colors and date for our wedding, named all three of our children, and then ghosted me.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. We were only together for like six weeks though. Pretty sure I saw him out last weekend at the grocery store, and he definitely tried to duck into the next aisle to hide from me.”

She says it so nonchalantly, like this is normal behavior in her dating life, and I feel bad for her.

“Keep your man close. You don’t find them like Aaron Russo anymore.”

I nod.

“How’s the Master’s going?”

“Good. I did a winter semester over break, so I have another class under my belt. I should be able to finish up by spring of next year.”

“Then we’ll have to call you Master Lucy.”

“Oh, no thank you,” I chuckle.

Penny turns to order another drink and that promised plate of cheese fries. I’ve opened up more to her in the past several weeks. It’s nice to have a girlfriend to share the mundane things about life with—to have a real friend again. When she turns back from the bartender, I drop my gaze to the bar top, playing in the ring of condensation my drink left behind, knowing that I can trust her with this.

“I uh... heard from my ex a few weeks ago.”

“No shit?!” She swivels on her stool to face me directly. “Oh my God, what about?”

“I uh... somehow missed a signature on our divorce papers. And he had it sent to school for me.”

“*Lucy.*”

“And then he called the office to see if I got it.”

She eyes me cautiously at first, her gaze knit with concern that once upon a time I would’ve read as pity.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I nod. “Yeah, I... Aaron was there for me.”

I stare down at the bar again, drawing a little heart in the puddle to keep the thoughts about just *how* he was there for me at bay.

“Good. I’m glad he was.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Penelope is thoughtful for a second before she says, “I don’t mean to pry, and you can absolutely shut this down if you want to but... I just...”

She sighs, clearly frustrated at how she’s trying to very politely say the words that are trapped.

“You can ask,” I offer with a small nod.

Her question comes out as a shuddering whisper. “Was he abusive, *Lucy?*”

I’ve always cowered at this word, like the brand itself makes up for all of the blows he never quite gave. It’s a label I’ve never accepted, and I tell her so.

“Scott was... He liked things a certain way. And, he very seriously let me know, especially when I wasn’t doing things the way he liked them.” I take a long sip of my now almost-empty glass. “He isolated me from my family and friends. Took control of my money. He didn’t let me do a lot of the things I wanted to do—hence starting my Master’s at thirty-two. But he didn’t abuse me. I mean, he never hit me, so—”

“Bullshit,” she interrupts. “Abuse is abuse, *Lucy.* That includes beating you down from the inside.”

She is firm on this, my friend’s eyes hard and unrelenting in her defense of me. It’s this that makes my heart clench, the way she is coming to my side and calling out a man she doesn’t know the half of. I swallow, inhaling for five and exhaling for five as I try to let that sink past the barriers that I’ve been slowly trying to break down.

“Not letting you see family and friends? Controlling your money? Not letting you do the things you wanted to do? He took your freedom, *Lucy.* Sounds like abuse to me. And I’m sure the words he used to do it weren’t sunshine and rainbows. He had absolutely no right to treat you as less than.”

It's a truth I've called false since Scott first made me feel like I was somehow not enough—that what he did to me could be considered *abuse*. The word itself makes my stomach roll. I've never wanted to call myself a victim, never wanted to admit that I let myself fall into his trap. Samantha finally had to take a pause on trying to get me to call what he did by its name, but rolling off the tongue of someone I can now call a friend, I'm starting to believe it. That word churns within me, bubbling acidity in my stomach. I don't *want* to admit that I let a man abuse me. But even as that thought crosses my mind, a different truth rings.

I didn't *let him* do anything. He *chose* to make me less than. *He* chose to put me in positions where I was either forced to lie down like a dog and take it, or fear the consequences. Sure, I could have gotten out sooner. But when you're so deep into thinking someone loves you, and then that love morphs into shackles around your freedom before you even know what's happening, breaking out is hard. It's why it took me almost a decade to crawl my way out.

“You okay?”

When Penelope's hand rests gently over mine, I realize I've been lost inside my head.

“Yeah,” I say, shaking my head. “Yeah, I'm okay. It's just a lot when you say it out loud, you know? Actually laying out everything he did to me after convincing me that he was in love with me and would be my supporter until death did us part. I feel stupid sometimes—that I allowed him to make me believe those things about myself. How could I have been so blind?”

“I can't tell you how to feel,” Penelope starts, “but you aren't stupid for letting him get to you. Love can blind us, and can make us believe in crazy things. Sometimes they're terrible and horrible and self-deprecating. But sometimes, they're wonderful.”

This time, I don't shudder when Aaron comes to mind.

“I'm just glad we never had kids.”

She nods, taking a sip of her own drink as more of my story marinates.

“Do you think you'd want a family? You know, with someone else?”

I think back to Christmas with Aaron's family, when an image of *our* kids had flirted with me for a few stolen moments. The fuzzy smile on my face is enough answer for Penelope.

“I guess, in all of my therapy-earned wisdom, there are lights that I'm now just starting to see. I don't have kids with...my *abuser*.” I choke out that

word for the first time, and somehow, it's freeing. "I was able to remove myself from that awful situation. I'm getting to be in a place that I love, and finding myself again. It's not *all* boulders to my castle."

"You're a lot stronger than I am. I don't know how you do it."

"Honestly?" I chuckle. "I don't know either."

It's partially true.

I know now that I have that power inside myself. The next step is actually letting myself use it.

"Okay, enough of the heavy talk," I say, gently tapping the bar as our cheese fries arrive. "I'm guidance counselor-ing you. We need positives."

"I can do positives. But first—I just want you to know that I'm here for you, friend, if you need to vent because the heavy is weighing you down again."

She squeezes my hand, and I feel it around my heart.

"Positives!" she exclaims. "You have a date tomorrow with the school's giant lapdog."

"And *you* aren't wasting any time dating deadbeat men!"

"Cheers to that!"

We cheers our fries, and fall into easy conversation about how she wants to take me shopping for new thongs, to "boost my confidence." But as the night wears on, and I picture the man who has named our Saturday "Lucy Day," I don't think I'll need the boost.

forty-three

aaron

THIS HAS BEEN the best day of my life, by far. And I've done Four-Parks-One-Day at Disney.

I made a "Lucy Day" checklist to show her some Boston hotspots, since she hasn't been to the city since she was a kid. So far, we used our teacher freebie at the aquarium, wandered around Faneuil Hall, and stopped for dinner in the North End for the best chicken parm on the planet. We hit up a bakery for her favorite dessert—cannolis—and then I insisted that she'd have to try my mom's because they're obviously way better. About halfway through our walk through the aquarium, I finally built up the balls to hold her hand, and to say I haven't let go since would be an understatement. I squeeze her hand in excited anticipation as we roll up to our last stop of the evening.

"Improv Asylum?" She tilts her head at the sign affixed above the door, leaning in toward me. I take the cue and lean into her, my lips level with her ear.

"You said you love acting and theater. I couldn't get any good show tickets on such short notice, so I reserved Broadway for a different date. Plus, they encourage audience participation, so if you're feeling inclined to jump back on a stage..."

I waggle my eyebrows and she grins, biting that lower lip. I tug at it with my thumb, and to my surprise, she kisses me there.

"Or, if *you're* feeling so inclined, Mr. Ballerina. You could be quite the comedy performer."

We head inside and take our seats toward the front, each nursing a drink until the performers come on stage. True to her word, when they asked the audience for suggestions, Lucy volunteers *me* to be heckled. After finding out that Lucy and I are on our first date, and after she gave up the little nugget

that I am a Disney Adult, they went to town and wrote an entire medley about how whipped I am. But Lucy smiled. And I'd let anyone make fun of my eclectic interests to see her smiling all night.

"I can't remember the last time I laughed that hard," she says, still reeling as we spill out onto the sidewalk, her hand clutched in mine.

I squeeze her hand, tugging her until she's facing me, and tuck a hair that's escaped her low ponytail behind her ear.

"So you had fun?"

"Mhm." She nods, joy glittering in her eyes and the pink on her cheeks. "Thank you for taking me here."

"If you like it enough, we'll have to add it to our list," I say, sliding my arm to wrap around her waist instead as we walk along the cobblestone brick paths of the North End, slowly making our way back to the garage I parked in earlier, drawing out the time we have. It doesn't quite matter that she's decided to give me a chance; knowing that I have time with her now has only encouraged me to treat every single second like it's precious.

"Our list?"

"Yeah. The things we do more than once. Our hot spots. Favorite restaurants, parks, you know?"

She's quietly thoughtful as we walk, our footsteps echoing in the spaces we don't fill.

"I like that we're making a list."

She peers up at me like I hung the stars in the sky, and I stop myself from telling her that she's the artist of my galaxy. I get the sense that with Lucy, it's all about these little things. With my free hand, I tug the ticket stub from the show out of my pocket and hand it to her.

"Here. Keep yours."

She takes it from me like it's glittering with Wonka's gold.

"I can't even remember when I last went to a show." Her voice comes out quieter, less confident than she has been all day. She shakes her head. "It was probably before college or something. Scott thought theater was *frivolous*. He could never justify spending money on tickets, and when I said I'd go by myself..."

She doesn't finish the thought, and I'm almost glad for it. Part of me wonders what I'll do if and when I find out the extent to which Lucy's ex-husband hurt her. I'm in the middle of giving her shoulder a tight squeeze when her next words stab me in the heart like a sewing needle.

“I’m sorry for bringing him up. You don’t want to hear about him.”

She shakes her head again and I immediately stop us, right in the middle of a busy, Saturday night sidewalk. I grip her shoulders to make sure that she’s looking at me, then shift one of my hands beneath her chin, gently stroking her skin where I hold her.

“You don’t ever, *ever* have to apologize for sharing with me, Lucy. I want to know everything about you, and that includes whatever happened in your past.”

She’s still not buying it, it seems, by the way she swallows a lump as her eyes begin to shine.

“I just... we’ve had such a wonderful day, Aaron. And then, here he is to ruin it. I’m sorry I brought him up.”

She swipes at her eyes with the back of one hand, and I gently brush her hand away to swipe at her tears with my own thumb.

“Hey. He didn’t ruin anything. I’m still having the absolute best day of my life. What about you?”

She bites her bottom lip, not quite looking at me. She nods quickly, then finds my gaze. The hesitancy, the way she’s getting in her head and thinking that she took our picture perfect day and ruined it? That’s got her ex’s name written all over it.

“Come here, beautiful.”

I tug her into my chest, tucking her head beneath my chin, and I rock us side to side. My lips find a home in her hair, just above her ear. I pepper a mix of kisses and reassurances before I feel her exhale against me.

I pull away just enough to see her, still cradling her back with my hand spanned over her puffy coat, and tuck that stray hair back behind her ear again.

“Green?”

“Maybe a little bit blue-green?” she says, leaning into my touch.

“Thank you for being honest with me. Anything I can do to help?”

“Be here. Keep reminding me that he can’t control me anymore.”

I cup her cheek, swiping slow circles there with my thumb.

“Only you can control you, Lucy.”

I seal that with a kiss to her forehead and hope that it’s enough.

We get back to my car, and though our night hasn’t soured by any means, she’s quiet. I give that space to her as I make the familiar drive until we reach the vacant parking lot.

“Where are we?”

Lucy twists in her seat to take in her surroundings, and I unbuckle first myself, then her, before I take her hand and press my lips to her knuckles.

“My secret spot.”

“Is this the part of the date where I find out ‘hopeless romantic’ is actually code for ‘serial killer?’”

I grin, squeezing her hand harder and smiling against it.

“No. This is the part of the date where I take you somewhere no one else has been, since you’ve been doing the same for me.”

She freezes in my palm, her lips parted slightly.

“Growing up as the only boy in a house full of women got very chaotic, very fast. I know I put on this loud, extraverted front, but a lot of the time, whenever I just need a moment to myself to be quiet, I come here.”

“And here is...”

“A lot nicer in the summertime,” I chuckle. “We can’t exactly go sit on the sand like I usually do. My parents’ house is up that hill and three blocks over. It was an easy escape when I needed one growing up.”

She stares out the front window at the pitch dark of the water, where I’m pointing up the hill, the beachfront and lake at the end of my parents’ neighborhood that was always too small for anyone to care about. Which made it all the more significant to me. When everyone else went to the clubhouse pool or over to Crystal Lake, I’d disappear here. I still do from time to time, when the noise gets to be too much.

“What do we do here? In Aaron Russo’s secret spot? Is this where you take—”

“You’re the *only* person I’ve ever brought here.”

I cut her off before any more toxicity can worm its way into her thoughts.

“Okay,” she nods.

“And we do whatever we need to get ourselves... well, I guess now that I’m thinking about it, back to green. I just didn’t know what to call it back then. See? It’s like you’ve been with me all along.”

She tenses in my grip, and I squeeze her for reassurance.

“What do you need to talk about?” I ask, knowing her well enough to see that hesitance still swimming, climbing to the point where she’ll let herself drown alone if she doesn’t get this off her chest.

She starts to pull away, and I hate that he’s made her this way.

“Lucy—”

“I don’t want to ruin our day—”

“Lucy, look at me.” I wait until she does, then cup her cheek and smile. “Nothing, and I mean *nothing*, could ruin the time that I get to spend with you. Aside from having to drop you off at your doorstep, because then that means I don’t get to see you again until the next time. I’m here to fight *with you*. We’re on the same side, even if it’s against the war in your own mind. So, if you need time and space to do things on your own first, just tell me. But if you have something to work out in your head that’s stopping you from enjoying our time, then let’s do that together.”

I stroke her cheek, the back of her hand, in the silence while she thinks. She bites her bottom lip, and then says, “Sometimes, he just sneaks back in, without warning,” and my heart cracks.

She shakes her head. “I shouldn’t even say ‘without warning,’ though. It’s like, as soon as things start to go right, he *knows*, and wants to steal my happiness away again.”

I can see the wheels turning in her eyes.

“I just... I feel like my heart is tumbling downhill for you so fast that I can’t keep up with it. I want to be *here*, with *you*, not in the past with someone who didn’t treat me nearly as carefully and as lovely as you do.”

Her voice trails off so that the last beats of her sentence hang on as whispers.

“If I keep letting him win, then I’m afraid I’m never going to be able to give you all of my heart, because he stole parts of it a long time ago and never gave them back. You deserve *all* of my pieces, and I can’t even give them to you.”

Her words are laced with whispered tears, and I can’t take it. I shoot my seat as far backwards as it will go before climbing into the back of my SUV. As soon as I’m seated, I reach for her. She follows me instantly, and after a few moments of awkward finagling, she’s straddling my lap with her head on my shoulder and her heart beating close to mine, right where it should be.

“I’m so sorry he hurt you, Lucy.”

We sit there, her in my lap, clutching on to me like I’m her life preserver.

“I can’t go back in time and change the way things happened, but I do know this: Those choices, however painful, brought you here to this moment. You and me. Together. Working things through at *our* pace and overcoming the obstacles that were put in our way. I don’t think he still has those pieces. I think he may have taken them in his fists and crumbled them, but you can

build them back up better than ever, and I'll help you every step of the way. We'll do it brick by brick, and we'll dismantle it and start again if we have to, but in the end? That masterpiece is going to be so much greater than you ever could have imagined because *you* built it."

She tilts her chin and leans in, her lips pressing to mine in the sweetest, chaste moment. I don't dare move, because it is hers to control. She lingers, unmoving, like she's still reaffirming that I've seen some of her scars and I'm not going anywhere. I feel the flick of her tongue, and mimic it with my own, letting hers slip into my mouth as she suddenly deepens the kiss. She grips the open zipper of my jacket and tugs me closer, and I tighten the hold I have on her back.

Her short, sweet moan as our tongues dance lazily tastes like the freedom she's trying to give herself, and when I spread my fingers over her back and push us impossibly closer, I give her an encouraging echo to let her know that I'm in this as deeply as she is. I dove into the deep end without a life jacket because I know she's waiting for me at the surface.

"You didn't get a lot of space growing up, did you?" she asks, her words pressed to my chest where she's resting her head.

"No." I rub slow circles over her back.

"That's why you're so good with me." I tilt my head in question, and she lifts her head, understanding shimmering as she meets my gaze. "You always know when to give me space. When I need time to think before I speak. You notice."

My heart has been stuttering to Lucy's rhythm since she walked into that bar. Now, in the back seat of my car, I feel our heartbeats sync.

She rests her head in its home beneath my chin, and I feel that little *click* as she inhales for five, exhales for five, and says, "Green."

forty-four

aaron

“I THOUGHT we were doing mostaccioli this weekend?”

“No, your sister’s due soon, and she wants spaghetti, so spaghetti it is!”

“I don’t see how a third baby trumps the fact that I’m getting married in two months—”

“Daniela Marie, quit your whining!”

Ah. The chaos of my family. The arguing that flatlines and immediately slides right into some inside joke before we’re laughing and planning a vacation over the clanking of cutlery and one inevitably spilled glass of something. It’s been the soundtrack of Sundays for as long as my memory dates back. Now, with the addition of a few brothers-in-law and several napping toddlers upstairs, it has only gotten louder.

“Aaron, I need help a few days this week with a new project,” my dad announces.

Normally, I’d jump at his request, but...

“I’m actually pretty busy this week, Dad.” I snag a slice of bread from the basket that’s being passed around, and note the look of audacity he sends me. In spite of myself, I shrink a little. “We have baseball Monday through Thursday, and musical rehearsals are every night this week until seven—”

“But you aren’t in *charge* of any of that, right? You’re only the assistant coach, and someone else is running the musical?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Then you can help your old man a few days this week. Let them handle it.”

I frown, my brows tugging together in aggravation.

“That’s not how it works. I committed to these two positions. I’m not going to leave people hanging.”

“But you’ll leave your dad hanging? Real nice, Aaron.”

“It’s not like that. I just have a busy work schedule this week.”

“You’ll at least drop by when you’re done then? Not like you have anything waiting for you at home.”

A rock hits the pit of my stomach at that reminder. All I’ve ever wanted, and he’s taunting me with the fact that I don’t have it yet.

“Actually, I had a date yesterday.”

My grin stretches wide, but doesn’t nearly encompass the joy that has been radiating through me like July sunshine since I had Lucy to myself for a full day. But the response around the table is not quite what I’d expected. Or, maybe, I guess, it’s *exactly* what I expected. My sisters dive in for the attack almost immediately.

“Oh yeah? Is she *the one* again, bro?”

“Did you at least let her pick the wedding date this time?”

“What’s our over/under for three weeks? I’m saying eighteen days even.”

My smile falls like wax down a blown out birthday candle, my shoulders hunch, and I remember why I don’t share about my dating life anymore. My family has essentially turned it into a gag, and now, I’m the butt of the inside joke, watching from the outside as they laugh at me.

“Leave your brother alone!” my mom demands, thrusting her spaghetti-twined fork at Dani and Soph, who are both hunched together trying to one-up the jokes. She turns to me. “How was it? Is she a nice girl?”

I debate not sharing at all. So often, when my important moments have been made a mockery by my overpowering sisters like right now, I’ve shrugged it off with a simple, *never mind*, and then taken the taunting of, *God, Aaron, stop being a baby*. This time, I feel the ache in my chest to stand up for Lucy.

“She’s the *best* girl, Momma.” My smile returns. “We spent the whole day together. You met her at Christmas. Her name is—”

“*Lucy*? Oh *hell* no. That girl disrespected your family and you’re *still* keeping her around?”

Daniela’s laughter quickly snarls, her distaste for Lucy shadowing the table in a dark contrast to the light of my joy. And I’m not going to stand for it.

“I thought we were done with this,” I argue. “You were all fine with her when she brought you wine at Christmas, weren’t you?”

Dani shakes her head, looking to Sophia and Maria to back her up. I cut

back in.

“Listen, it’s really hard for her to trust—”

“Well, she needs to figure it out before she steps foot into *this* family again.”

I’m steaming so much that I wonder if the smoke alarms will ring. Pushing back from the table with a force that makes the chair scrape the hard wood, makes my dad jab his finger with a sharp *Hey!*, I stand, all of my fury directed at my sister.

“*You* don’t get to talk, Daniela. How many sleezebag guys have *you* brought around? How many times have you sat us all down, threatening us to be nice because, they were all ‘going through something?’ I don’t think a heroin addiction is ‘just going through something.’” At the mention of her college boyfriend, she flushes in embarrassment, and I dig in. “And when Travis bailed as *soon* as you told him you were pregnant? You made all of *us* out to be the bad guys for calling him out—for trying to protect *you*. Because *you* said that he was ‘just taking his time’, and that he’d *come around*.”

I’ve stunned them all silent at this point. Travis—who, yeah, eventually did come around, after a nice long chat with my father—has all but shrunk into his chair, his face the color of my momma’s gravy.

“Why is it that when it’s *you*, it’s okay, huh?” I continue, the surge of this silence giving me the room to air out my grievances with my family’s hypocrisy and defend Lucy all on the same stage. “You can bring around any shade of bad guy and expect the rest of us to play nice because *you’re* handling it. But when it’s *me*—when *I* want to be excited about someone, and she makes *one judgement call* at a bar that, for all intents and purposes, she had the right to do—you can’t trust in me to handle that like a grown man?”

I can only imagine how I look, when I can feel the fire in my cheeks and the tension tugging my brows into a taught, angry line.

“I am *happy* with Lucy. She makes me so *unbelievably happy*. And you just can’t wait to tear that down, can you?”

I shrug off that sad fact, the way that my sister is trying to chain up my happiness so that she can sit center stage for a little while longer. I’m at peace with it, because I know who I have waiting for me on the other side.

“It’s not my story to tell by any means, but she just got out of a *devastating* relationship, and I am *so proud* of the leaps and bounds she has made in trusting others. In trusting me. *You* don’t get to ruin that because the moment she finally started opening up to me, she saw me dancing up on a

bunch of women in the middle of a bar and reacted.”

And with that, I push my chair in, take my plate from the table, and turn to leave.

“Aaron!”

My mom calls after me, but I’m a blur of movement, dumping my plate and chucking it into the dishwasher and stuffing my feet into my shoes. I’m barely out the front door before I feel her hand on my bicep. The cold air beckons me to soothe my heat as I’m halfway in and halfway out, but the warmth of my momma freezes me in place.

“What?”

It comes out as a harsh exhale, and I instantly feel bad. I don’t turn, still eyeing my car out front, my escape route. If I turn and see the sorrow in her eyes, I’ll crumble, and probably end up back inside with my tail between my legs.

But I can’t do that. Not when my words were not only truth, but needed to be said as testament to just how I’ll go to battle for Lucy.

I hear her long sigh, feel the grip on my arm tighten in reassurance.

“I can’t apologize for your sister. She has her own things to work out, and I think that once she does, you two need to sit down and fix this.”

I exhale a hardened laugh and shake my head. I know she’s right, but that repair sure isn’t going to happen in the near future.

“But you’re absolutely right.”

A small weight lifts from me. At least *someone* is on my side.

“Your sister has a *hefty* double standard. She gets that from your father, which is why he so often sides with her. But my boy, if this girl is special to you, don’t let your siblings’ taunting take that away from you. You chase after her. I love how much you’ve always loved love, and this is no different. When you know you’ve found the one, you wrap your arms around her and you don’t let her go.”

I deflate, the breath leaving my chest in a slow wind.

I turn sideways in the doorway and wrap my mom in a hug.

“Thanks, Momma.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

I leave family dinner before it’s over. It’s unheard of. The expectation in my family is to spend Sunday together. But I can’t fathom returning to that table when half of the people sitting around it are still against me.

As I start the ten minute trek across town to my own home, rage still

steadily bubbling as I replay my fight with Daniela over and over again, my phone rings, startling me.

Lucy.

Suddenly, I feel a hundred pounds lighter, and I haven't even answered yet.

"Hey."

"Hey you." I can hear the smile in those two words and it gives me wings.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I umm..."

I can hear the little bit of hesitancy, like she wants to hold back like she's been trained to do by her ex-husband, but then she says, "I just wanted to hear your voice, I think," on a bright whisper, and suddenly, the entire scene at my parents' house has been wiped away.

"I love hearing that, Luce. I miss you, too."

She's quiet for a moment, and in the ways that I've learned her, it's like I can hear her thinking.

"It's so funny, because we spent all day together yesterday, but when you said you had family plans today, I was kind of disappointed."

"Trust me, it would have been so much better if you were there."

"Oh? What happened?"

I can't tell her. Can't let her know how vile my sisters were to me, *about her*. That would destroy her, and would shred me for a second time.

"Things are always better when you're there, Ms. Lucy. Never doubt that."

I can picture her doubting smile, the one where she bites her lip, and I can't help myself.

"Stop biting your lip."

She gasps. "How'd you... Never mind. You pay attention. I like that you pay attention."

"You make it so easy."

We chat the rest of my short drive. I ask her about her day, and she tells me about the assignments she worked on to get ahead since she has a busy week at school. I can tell that she's proud of herself, enjoying the work that she's doing, and it makes my heart swell.

"I just pulled up to my place, so—"

"Oh, sorry, I'll let you go."

"No," I chuckle. "I wasn't trying to kick you off. Just letting you know

that I have to head inside so I might go rogue for a minute or two. Unless you need to go?”

She’s silent for a moment—*thinking*—and then says, “I think... I should probably let you go, or we’ll be on the phone all night, and I’ll regret it in the morning since we have rehearsal until seven.”

I want to insist that *I won’t regret it one bit*, but I don’t want to pressure her. *Baby steps*.

“Sure. I just... You were honest with me yesterday. Can I do the same?”

“Please.”

“I didn’t have such a great time with my family,” I admit on a pathetic chuckle. “I fought with my sister, and... Just seeing that you called? God, Lucy, that brought me immediately back down from the top of anger mountain.”

“I did?”

I nod, even though she can’t see me, more to myself. “*You did.*”

We sit there—Lucy at home, and me in my garage—the airwaves nothing but static. I am a cloud of content.

“Maybe...” she says, breaking through that static like chimes in a rainstorm. “Do you want to stay on for a little bit longer?”

“Absolutely.”

Neither of us regret it when we’re still on the phone as the sun goes down.

forty-five

lucy

TO SAY that the past three weeks have been absolute bliss would simply not be doing my time with Aaron justice.

I never knew that things could be like this. Scott and I were a secret from the very beginning. There was never public affection or little notes in my lunchbox. He met me in places like we were a covert affair—never met up with me simply to walk me to my car and kiss me senseless before parting ways like Aaron does. Night and day aren't quite opposite enough to juxtapose these two men. I think God and the Devil might be more suitable.

Aaron has been super busy this week, between coaching baseball and being at every musical rehearsal that he can make. In every available space, he makes time for me. And not even just by sneaking down to my classroom to put a “spot of happiness” sticker on the back of my hand, or waiting in the parking lot until I arrive so that we can walk in together.

When he's at a game, he texts me when he gets there, and then lets me know when the game starts so that I'm not wondering if he's suddenly lost interest. He calls me on his drive home, and brings me vending machine snacks during musical rehearsal. One day last week, when I had to miss a staff potluck because I was meeting with a student, he piled up a plate and stuck it in my mailbox.

And, he's been breaking into my office to steal my silly-shaped Post-Its to leave me little messages throughout the day. The jar on my bedside table is slowly starting to overflow with little espressos containing messages like *You're the peanut butter to my jelly!*, little stick figure drawings of us on dates, or pictures of a tortoise and a hare holding hands, and assorted lyrics to Disney songs.

Of course, we've been spending our weekends together too, exploring the

city I wasn't allowed to venture into over the last decade of my life. And at the end of the night, we cuddle on his couch, hands wandering until he gently removes mine when they try to dip below his waistband. His reasoning is always to remind me that we're taking baby steps, but I'm ready to take off my training wheels.

We had a half day this Friday, and Aaron says he has "big plans" for us. He just doesn't know that, after I let Penelope take me on a Victoria's Secret field trip, so do I.

We're back at his place after spending the day at the Bugs Bunny Film Festival, followed by dinner downtown. It was his turn to pick the movie, and my first time watching *Tangled*. I can't help but wonder if the new lavender lace beneath my clothes and the song now stuck in my head is chance or kismet, but I know now that timing works itself out in funny ways.

Especially as I'm staring up at a man that I can call my new dream.

When he turns off the movie, I take the remote from him and set it on the coffee table.

"Hey." I bite my lower lip, and though every intention in my head was to make it sexy, I know it just comes out as the nervous tick I've developed when I'm feeling scared or less than. I don't have to remind myself that Aaron knows me.

His eyes shift as he turns his focus wholly to me, reading me like his favorite novel—chapter by chapter, with parts highlighted and memorized by heart. His thumb tugs at my bottom lip and I kiss him there, this little tag game we've started when he knows I'm overthinking, and I'm thanking him for righting the train back onto the tracks.

"What are you thinkin', sweet girl?"

His touch shifts to tuck a loose strand of my ponytail behind my ear, stroking the shell with his thumb.

"I was thinking that, we've been taking baby steps, and I'd like to take a little bit of a leap. Put my foot on the gas. If you want to."

My eyes flit from his throat—as he swallows thickly, like he knows by my tone of voice just what I'm asking for—to his dark gaze—which confirms that he's absolutely on my wavelength.

"Oh, I want it, Lucy. Trust me when I say that sometimes, it's all I think about."

A raspy concrete blender has taken over his timbre, and I can taste the want as his touch shifts to cup the back of my head, as he touches his

forehead to mine.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

I nod, biting my bottom lip more fully, that anxiousness melting away like a popsicle on July asphalt.

“Yes.”

I stand, pulling from his grip, and take a step back, putting enough distance between us that I can strip my shirt over my head and toe off my pants, revealing the lacy lavender push-up bra and thong that Penelope insisted would *make him nut in his pants before we even got started*. The strangled moan and the way that the crotch of his pants immediately swells tells me she might’ve been right.

“Fuck, sweet girl. You did this for me?” he asks around the fist he’s now biting.

“Mhm.” I nod, and even let my fingertip trace the swell of my breast that’s near strangled against the cushy material. It makes me feel confident, to see his eyes glaze over at the sight of me half dressed with my hands on my own body.

Suddenly, he surges forward, pushing up from the couch to cup my face in both hands as he kisses me. Calling Aaron’s kisses aggressive would be putting it mildly. His grunts and groans tangle with my moans as our hands frantically try to map skin like it’s unclaimed territory. He tilts my head back by tugging lightly on my ponytail and shifts his attention to my neck. As he traces the cup of my bra with a mixture of his tongue and his lips, I remember the last time we were in this position.

I had been demanding. Forceful. The need to do *anything* to get me out of my head had overpowered the need I had for pleasure. And despite the fact that this man is so hungry for me I can taste it on his tongue, I still find myself reeling back. And he catches me right away.

“Hey. We can slow down or stop. We’re going at your pace, Lucy—”

“No,” I stop that train of thought. “No, I don’t want to stop, I just...”

It’s getting easier and easier to say these things, to use my words, to be open and honest with him, especially when I know that in the hands of Aaron, I’ll be more than okay. Still, this one stings.

“That girl who went home with you from the bar? That wasn’t me.”

I shake my head from side to side. He tilts his in question, nodding at me to continue.

“I needed an escape that night, Aaron.” My grip slips down from his

shoulders, holding his forearms to ground myself. “I needed to get out of my head. I slipped into someone else when I went home with you. It’s one of the reasons I ran so fast—I didn’t recognize myself after. And I guess I’m just afraid that you expect *her*, and not what... *I can give you.*”

I can feel him softening beneath my grasp, and I know what he’s going to say before he has to. The fact that he knows I still need to hear it, and is putting sex on hold to make sure that I’m okay, reminds me why I chose him.

“I don’t expect you to give me anything but yourself, exactly where you’re at. If it’s the same girl from that night who told me what she wanted, then I’ll get on my knees at your word. But if you need to be more gentle, or you need me to take the reins, just say the word and it’s done.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me what you need,” he says, shifting his grip, drawing slow circles on the skin behind my ears as he cradles my face so tenderly, I could cry.

“I...”

It hits me then, as he pulls us closer, as his swollen cock presses into my stomach from where it’s trying to break out of his jeans, that I’ve barely touched him.

“Can I taste you? I want to taste you.”

A growl vibrates in his throat, and I swear his length pulses at those words.

“You sure, baby?”

“Yes.” It comes out scratchy and desperate, which is fitting when I realize how desperate I am to have my mouth around Aaron’s cock. “Yes, *please.*”

I press my lips to his cheek, his chin, and start sliding quick, desperate kisses down his neck as I work hastily to lift his shirt over his head. He tugs it off the rest of the way, and I unbuckle his belt and shove his pants and boxer briefs around his ankles, following them to the floor as he kicks them away. I hit my knees, and he stops me.

“Wait.” I peer up at him, his cock jutting out tauntingly, meeting his dark stare over the crown. “You shouldn’t be on your knees for anyone.”

I lick my lips and wrap my fist around him. “What if I want to for you?”

Holding his gaze, I flatten my tongue, and press it to his tip.

Immediately, power and hunger surge within me. This man has been nothing but careful and kind with me since we met. He has given me all of him. I want to give him at least that much in return.

I swirl my tongue over his crown, lap at the pre-cum there, and suck.

“*Fuck.*”

The power that comes from his immediate pleasure sends a shot of intoxication through my core.

I wrap a fist around his base, pulsing lightly on his head while my tongue works over him in lazy strokes. With every ministrations, Aaron releases little sounds—sharp inhales, long exhales, grunts and sighs. I tighten my fist and begin to pump, and he tilts his head back, his mouth parting on a long moan.

“Oh, this mouth is heaven.”

I continue stroking, the hard length of him a severe contrast to the smooth velvet skin. He seems to like it when I stroke harder, judging by the way he cups my head in one of his hands and grips my ponytail. I moan around him when he thrusts just enough to show me his pace, wetness absolutely ruining the new thong I just bought.

And I couldn't care less.

I balance my hand on Aaron's strong thigh, and peer up at him as I steady myself for him to take control of my mouth. I could come just from the look on his face.

From my place on my knees, I can see his forearms tensed to hold me in place, the ripple of his gym-earned abs constricting with the thrust that pushes him almost to the back of my throat, the slack shape of his mouth where shallow breaths twine around sounds of desperations.

This man is both putty in my hands and holding onto the wheel. That thought alone, the way he's holding me up and driving the ship and also near begging me with the look in his eyes, has my hand skating from his thigh to his free hand, guiding it to my breast, and squeezing over the top of it. He bites out, *Shit*, and tugs down the cup, pinching my nipple first before soothing it with quick, tight circles. I moan around him, pressing my thighs together. He sees, and shoves his leg between them, spreading my thighs until I know exactly what he wants me to do.

Pressing his leg to my clit while I have him in my mouth only pushes him deeper. I can't take it. Can't take the press of him against the live wire of my pleasure with one hand holding my head and the other still pinching and pulling and flicking my nipple. I moan around his cock again and feel another spurt of pre-cum, which makes me grind against him, so damn close to ecstasy that I start to lose my grip.

“Oh fuck,” Aaron groans. “Oh fuck, Lucy, that's it, *that's it.*”

We find a rhythm that transports me to another planet. Aaron's dick slides

into my throat in the same pulse of his thigh between mine, the grinding pulling in the same beats that we grunt, moan, and cling onto each other. I think I'm going to pass out, from the intensity of his leg on my clit and his dick in my throat, but I'm too desperate to see the look on his face when he comes.

I tug my pussy away from his leg, cling onto his ass with both hands, and give him permission as I swallow around him.

Aaron transforms into a Greek god above me as he comes down my throat, his hands tangled in my hair, head tilted back, mouth parted as sounds of ecstasy loop on a repeated track. When he slows, still half hard in my mouth, I have half a mind to keep running my tongue over his velvety skin.

He hoists me up under my arms before I can try, and the way he immediately captures my lips, his tongue twirling hungrily around mine despite where my mouth has just been, sets me on fire.

"Unfair," he mutters, my legs wrapped around him as he carries me to his bed, his wet cock rubbing against my still sensitive clit with each step.

"What?" I ask as my tongue battles his.

"That you get to have the taste of me on your tongue when I make you come." My back hits the bed, and the dark gaze in Aaron's eyes almost spurs on my orgasm by itself. "Give me your come, sweet girl."

Did I say I was on fire before? I may have been wrong.

I nod, and he nearly drags me to the foot of the bed, ridding me of that ruined scrap of lace I'd put on for him. Aaron's eyes turn to coal when they land on me, and the man who told me never to get on my knees for anyone is suddenly on the floor before me.

His tongue is on me for all of ten seconds before my back bows off the bed.

I'm halfway to a second orgasm, my fingers knotted in his thick, dark hair, when I tug him up.

"One more," he near begs, my arousal coating his lips. He licks them and I almost shove him back between my legs and give him what he wants, but I shake my head.

"I just need you, Aaron. Later?"

He immediately slides up my body, peppering short kisses in a trail up my skin as he goes. When he reaches my lips, he presses, *Mhm, later, sweet girl* to them before reaching for a condom in the bedside table. I lick my lips as he slides it on, jealous of the hand he wraps around himself, the one that

tugs his now full erection.

“You keep raking your hungry eyes over me like that, and ‘later’ is going to happen as soon as we’re done.”

Aaron settles himself over me, gently pressing my legs flat as he goes. His weight on top of me is like a security blanket that sets me on fire.

He pops into a push up position, his hands on either side of my head, and the world stops. That hungry, fiery gaze that’s been blazing since the beginning has somehow melted into divine adoration with the snap of a finger. He inhales for five and exhales for five, and I know somewhere deep in my soul that this man has been paying attention for longer than I’ve allowed myself to notice.

He presses against my opening with his eyes locked onto mine, and I swear I can see galaxies in that deep blue. It’s not that I don’t remember being with Aaron—quite frankly, I’ve had a few dreams about that night after the bar—but this is different. This is him and me with no one else in between, no hidden agendas, finally giving ourselves to one another, and that makes it so, so much better. We’ve been cultivating this exotic plant together, and now, it’s ready to bloom.

We let out a simultaneous sigh against each other’s parted mouths as soon as he’s all the way in. His lips turn up against mine, and mine rise right along with his. He begins moving, a slow wave of his hips, and I’m somehow already too close to bursting. It’s the combination of the feeling of him inside me, and the gentle stroke of his hand in my hair, and the smile that keeps getting bigger until it tails off into a lightning bolt of ecstasy.

“*God*, Aaron, I can’t take it.”

“You’re too good, sweet girl.”

“You too,” I pant, my hands wrapping up and around his back. “You feel so good.”

He’s going too slow, his pace agonizing. I know he’s trying to drag this out, but my need to come almost outweighs the knowledge that this won’t even be close to our last time. He tilts his hips so that now, each thrust creates delicious friction on my clit, and my cry echoes against the ceiling.

“*Aaron*.” His name is a desperate dollop on my tongue, and I swallow it, my hands sliding down his back until I’m clutching his ass. He groans, and immediately takes the hint.

“You need to come, sweet girl?”

“Yes.”

“Need me to make you come?”

“*Please.*”

I grip him harder, and he grunts, picking up his speed, sliding his hands beneath my ass to lift my hips. The angle is delicious, and I cry out, simultaneously losing my grip and scrambling to keep holding onto him.

“Faster... Harder... Oh, fuck, *Aaron.*”

“That’s my girl,” he damn near growls, lips pressed to my ear, as his hand skates down my stomach. “Let go, Lucy.”

His fingers press in tight, quick circles against my clit, but he’s barely touched me before I’m flying.

Flying. Hurling toward the sun. With Aaron as my anchor.

I cling to him and cry out his name and despite the fact that my eyes are fluttering and fighting to stay open as I bask in sheer pleasure, I see him through the fog.

I feel him swell inside me, hear the groan of my name, a rough *Lucy*, *sweet fucking Lucy*, before he stills, clutching my hip as he spills into the condom.

We’re still. Quiet. Even our panting breaths seem silent, like the sanctity of this place is too much for even breathing.

I’m in the middle of memorizing the soft tickle of Aaron’s thighs resting on top of mine when all of a sudden, he groans into the divot between my neck and my shoulder.

“What?” I giggle, reaching up to brush the sweaty hair off his brow. I like the feel of it, nurturing him as he’s done so often for me, so I do it again. He lifts his head, and I giggle again at his pouty expression.

“I don’t want to leave this position for the next forty-eight hours but I have to chuck this condom.”

“Would it be easier to part from me for the oh so long walk to the bathroom if I timed you?”

His eyes widen as he says, “Maybe...” before pecking my forehead with a quick kiss, springing into a push-up, gently pulling himself out of me, and dashing butt-ass-naked to the bathroom. I laugh out loud when he returns with the garbage can, settling it less-than-gently next to the bed before jumping to land above me on all fours, then crashing with his nose pressed to mine.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” I try my best to match his grin, but it seems to be overtaking his

face, and I'm not sure I can compete.

"How fast was I?" he asks, his heavy breaths warming me.

I tilt my head the fraction of a space that sits between us and nuzzle the tip of my nose against his.

"Not fast enough for me not to miss you." I'm about to squirm away at how awkward that sounded but then Aaron grunts out, *Oh, good, me too*, before swooping in for a soul crushing kiss, and I remember who I'm with.

I'm with a man who *chose* me.

A man who *wants me*, and wants all of the cheesy feelings that come along with this bliss that seems to exist whenever we're together.

He doesn't invalidate the fact that I missed him while he ran to the attached bathroom because he feels the same.

And for the first time, I'm beginning to realize that I was never wrong. I was never supposed to hide my true, cheesy, romantic feelings from my partner. Because as soon as I found the right one, he shared them right along with me.

forty-six

aaron

THAT MAYBE LATER? that Lucy had asked about came as soon as we'd stopped giving each other googly eyes. It didn't take long to convince my sweet girl that I can and will eat her pussy at any time of the day. Which I did. Ten minutes after I'd been inside her. While we waited for the DoorDash guy to bring us a midnight snack. When I woke up in the middle of the night craving the taste of her.

On the kitchen table for breakfast.

Up against the front door when she had the audacity to say we had school in the morning and couldn't have another sleepover.

Lucy might just be the worst-best-thing that's ever happened to me.

The best because she's everything I never knew I needed. She's challenged every idea I've ever had about love, turned it on its head, and made me realize that I didn't even know the definition of the word until I met her.

The worst because I now can't see her in the halls at school without instantly tasting her on my tongue and getting a halfie.

It's like I'm Pavlov's Dog of Pussy.

But it's the week before the musical, so our free time is few and far between. Essentially, Lucy and I have long walks to the car, and our dinner dates look more like vending machine snacks on the floor of the auditorium while we try to keep the kids from knocking down sets with all of their late night slap-happiness. But I love that we're making it work in the middle of the storm. I love that she gets it—the chaos that comes with being a teacher and working extra curriculars and having weird hours and living off of McDonald's fries.

“Stop feeling bad!” she demands, tossing a fry at me as we sit in the tech

booth, far away from the children we're supposed to be supervising, so we can have five minutes to ourselves.

"I can't help it!" I grumble. "I don't want to miss opening night—for the kids *or* for you."

"You're a coach first. You can't help that your team has a game."

"I know. I just want to be here to support you. You've worked *so hard* to make this thing magical and I can't even come to the first show."

She visibly softens, the tension she's been hauling around on her shoulders slipping off like melting butter, her brows rising in hopeful disbelief.

"I'm so proud of you," I say quietly, cupping her chin before stroking a slow circle over her cheek.

"Thank you."

The pyrotechnics in her eyes remind me how little she's heard this before, and I make it a point to tell her more often.

These magical little moments, where it's *my job* to lift her up, drive the wedge further between wanting a marriage and wanting a life with Lucy. A ring on her finger means nothing if we aren't building each other up and making each other better.

By the time all of the kids are picked up, it's nine o'clock. Opening night is a little over a week away, and with the chaos of baseball practice and games, I really do hate to part from my girl. As we walk to our cars, hand in hand, she tugs me until her back is flat to her passenger side door. I bracket my hands on her hips, and her soft fingers brush the disarray of my hair off my forehead.

"Wanna have a sleepover?" she asks, a scandalous whisper in the quiet of the night.

"Ms. *Lucy*. On a *school night*?"

She giggles, and I see it then. The white of her teeth when she isn't trapping her lip down to hide her emotions. Lucy's walls are breaking down more and more, and I'm going to do my damndest to keep them crumbling down for me. She yawns, and I kiss her temple.

"You're tired, sweet girl. Saturday."

"No. Not... Just to sleep."

Before she can even curl that lip in, I swoop down to kiss her with short, sweet reassurance until I press *Okay* to her lips and feel her smile unfurl.

I run home to grab some extra clothes, and am on her doorstep a half hour

later with my overnight bag, feeling like a kid sneaking out in high school, despite the fact that I'm an *adult* spending the night with my *girlfriend*.

Girlfriend.

The word zigzags around my chest like a pinball machine. It seems so insignificant, like calling the Pacific Ocean a kiddie pool. But I damn sure haven't thought about anyone else since the moment I saw her, and now that she's mine? I can't begin to imagine a life without her in it.

A life. Not just a ring on her finger. Not just the titles of husband and wife.

Two coffee mugs in the sink. Making her dinner when she's working late, and folding laundry with her on Saturday afternoon. Holding her when the stresses get to be too much, and letting her do the same for me. Being each other's number one, so that when we're less than one-hundred-percent, we have someone else to pick up our slack.

It's everything that Sam made me think about coming to life the more I give my time to Lucy.

I'm chewing on the thought, of springing this all on her during such a hectic week or sitting on it until we can be alone for more than five minutes, when she opens her front door.

She's wearing her pajamas.

Cute little matching pajamas—shorts dotted in crocodiles, and a shirt that says *Bite Me*. Her hair is down for the first time, wavy from the day's ponytail. I get the immediate urge to run my fingers through it and get lost there. She's wearing a sleepy smile that for some reason perks up when she sees *me*. This lazy, dressed down Lucy, wearing happiness just for me? I know she's my everything.

As I step inside her place and let the door click closed behind me, it hits me that this will be my first time staying at Lucy's place. That night after the bar, I took her back to mine, and every night in between, we've been there too, but it's never been a question. The reality sinks in, slowly, then all at once, that she is trusting me with her safe space. That truth has my heart stampeding.

Her place is quaint. Just her size. It's an open floor plan, with the living room right off the front entrance, a television tucked into the corner with a small sofa facing it. It backs up to a kitchen with an island and a two-seater table, and a hallway branches off to the right. She takes my bag in one hand and my hand in the other and starts leading me down the hall.

“Wait. Don’t I get the grand tour?”

“Oh. Sure. This is my place! Bedtime.”

She swings her arms in a wide *ta-da!* gesture, taking mine along with. I let her go and wander into the living room. It doesn’t take me long to realize that there aren’t many decorations. Sure, there’s a potted plant on the windowsill. Her grad school books are stacked haphazardly on the coffee table, next to a mug and its coaster. But there are no photos. Anywhere.

None of Lucy and her parents. Lucy and friends. Hell, Lucy out exploring by herself. And I realize that, when you want over a decade of your life erased, you really *do* shatter it into oblivion.

Her bedroom is much of the same, only here, there *are* small pops of Lucy.

The bedding is an array of soft pastels, and she has a few cozy throw pillows. One bedside table is adorned with a lamp, a mystery thriller, and a box of tissues. Her school bag is crumpled in the corner, and a few sweatshirts that I long to see her lounging in are thrown across the desk chair. It isn’t until I look a little closer that I realize what she *has* used for decorations.

Tucked into the frame of the mirror over her dresser is the ticket stub from our first date—the one from the comedy club that I’d insisted she take home. Below it is the paper program from the basketball tournament she’d helped with over Christmas break. Scattered around are a few of the Post-Its I’ve hidden in her lunch box—crude, stick-figure drawings I’d done of us. One of a little tortoise and a little hare. I turn slowly, toward this beautiful woman who is so preoccupied with crawling into bed that she doesn’t realize my heart is pounding right out of my chest.

Because on the other bedside table sits a jar stuffed with more colorful papers on the inside that I recognize. My handwriting is pressed up against the glass, like she wanted it there for a quick read right before bed. The closer I look, the more I recognize the little dots of happiness I’ve put on the back of her hand, neon color pops decorating the outside of the jar like ladybug spots.

Words clog my throat like I-90 during rush hour. She has absolutely no idea, as she smiles up at me sleepily, reaching for me like it’s the most natural thing in the world, and isn’t, in fact, splitting my world right open.

We click off both of the lights, and I swipe the jar from the nightstand, suddenly not so exhausted after all. My mind buzzes, electricity zapping the glass of the jar that Lucy finally notices is in my hand. Her cheeks pink, and

she pulls the covers up to her chin. I can't decide whether to stare at her or this jar full of us.

"You don't have any pictures up," I say, feeling the sand in my voice.

"Oh. No, I..." She shifts to lay on her side. "I lost all of my friendships when I chose Scott. And the ones I didn't force out on my own, he forced out for me. You know the story about me and my parents... I guess it just would've hurt more to have constant reminders of the fact that I let them go."

I can feel my heart breaking, and she shatters it fully when she snuffles, laughs, and speaks again.

"I had this running joke with my therapist, Samantha, for a while, that she was my closest friend, since I had no one else."

She says it so nonchalantly, that I wonder if it's because she's over it, or because that idea is now so ingrained that it's become something she believed as fact. I'm about to interrupt, about to wrap her up in me and remind her that she isn't alone when my strong girl does all of the heavy lifting for me.

"But now, I have people. A few, but it's a start. I feel like I belong somewhere again. I have Penelope, and a few others at work. And I have you." She stares up at me with hopeful eyes and a smile that could rival the brightness of the sun. "The person who reminds me every day that I am worthy of love."

I reach for her in the same moment that she plants her hands on my chest and pecks her lips softly to mine, like she knows that *I* need reassurance in this moment. It's a reminder that I don't need to be sad, and confirmation that she is mine and I am hers, all at once.

I tuck her hair behind her ear and play with the long, loose strands, running the softness over my fingertips, and marveling in just how strong this woman really is.

"You don't belong to me, Lucy," I say, emotion ripping up my throat. "No one gets to own you. You are your own person, mind, body, and soul. But *you* own every part of *me*—my heart and soul, and everything in between."

As she settles on my chest for the night, I decide that while that certainly doesn't come close to what I'm feeling, it's a good start.

forty-seven

lucy

“I THOUGHT BASEBALL WAS A WARM SPORT?” I ask, teeth chattering as I tug on my hoodie strings.

The strings of the hoodie I stole from Aaron, when I realized the weather for this after school baseball game was *not* sunny and seventy-five.

“Girl, middle school baseball starts in the cold and ends right as the weather is getting tolerable.”

Juliet—who *is* dressed appropriately—is also wearing her husband’s jacket, one that has *Coach Ford* stitched over her heart. I glance out to the field, where Aaron is coaching first base, tuck my nose into the collar where I can still smell his cologne, and wonder what it would be like to have his last name branded over *my* heart.

“Do you need me to explain any of this? Penelope thought they were supposed to run around all of the bases after every hit.”

“I watch *hockey*. *Sue* me!” Penelope exclaims. “And besides, they’d *better* be hitting home balls all game if we’re going to have to sit through *this* team.”

“Home balls?” I ask.

“Home runs?” Juliet chimes in with a smirk.

“Fuck you both!”

Despite the fact that we are definitely seated in a crowd of parents, she flips us off with both hands and Juliet and I laugh.

“What’s so bad about *this* team?” I ask as the pitcher starts his windup for the first batter of the inning. “Are they our rivals or something?”

“No, Penelope just doesn’t like their coach,” Juliet snickers.

I glance to my boisterous friend, and she has suddenly shrunk in on herself, red cheeks peeking out of her own hoodie where she is now hiding.

“Oh? Is this a story I haven’t heard before?”

She tugs her hoodie strings as far as they’ll go, cinching the fabric into a tight circle around her face so I can’t see her.

“You haven’t told her about your little Christmas scandal?”

“You have dirt from *Christmas* that I don’t know about?!” I stick my finger into her hoodie hole and tug. “Penelope Barker!”

She grunts from within her cave and pokes her face through the hole so that only her eyes, nose, and mouth are showing.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Just know that if their head coach gets a home ball to the nuts, that’s the *least* the universe could give me as a karmic gift.”

Juliet mumbles, *Foul ball*, and I bite my lip to stifle my laughter.

I have to wait until our team has three outs for the base coaches to switch, for this mystery man to come out of the opposing team’s dugout. I have to give it to Penelope—he is good looking. Tall, broad shoulders, muscle definition that isn’t show-offy, and a head of thick, messy, dirty blonde hair.

“I mean, hey, at least if he’s your mistake, he’s a pretty mistake.”

“Don’t remind me.”

The teams switch again after three outs, and Juliet leans over our grumpy friend in the middle.

“If we can’t talk about Penelope’s latest face-palm, can I share some happy news?”

“Of course,” I say, right as Penelope groans, *Please*.

“Sam and I were matched with a family that will be ready for adoption later this summer. We’re getting a baby.”

“That’s so exciting!” I exclaim.

“A little Ford! I don’t know if the world is ready for that.”

Our excitement is kept in secret smiles that we’ll expand on later. At the thought of my friends adopting, I can’t help but let my gaze wander to the dugout.

Aaron has his hand on the shoulder of a boy who just struck out. He points to the pitcher with his other, clearly giving the boy advice, and the boy nods, smiles, and gives Aaron a silly handshake before clinging to the chain link fence to watch his teammates.

My eyes are pinned to Aaron for most of the game, mesmerized as he gets all hyped up in the dugout, high fiving one of our players who has just come across the plate to score. The more I watch him interact with his team, the

more I wonder what it would be like to have tiny humans that are half-him and half-me one day.

Motherhood was a dream I had as a little girl that faded into a nightmare when I thought of bringing kids into a world where their father was Scott Alcott. But as the old me starts to emerge from the pile of rubble and shake hands with the new me, that old dream makes my heart fuzzy.

The Renegades take home a 5-2 victory. Penelope has stalked off somewhere, but while Juliet and I are waiting for our guys to finish up in the dugout so we can congratulate them, her shoulder bumps into mine.

“That man has not stopped making googly eyes at you since he saw you standing over here.”

I nod, slowly, biting my bottom lip. It’s true. While Sam has been giving the team a pep talk, Aaron’s eyes have been skirting over me. Somehow, his big hoodie almost hitting my knees and my hands shoved into the pocket so I don’t freeze to death is doing it for him. At least the blush that washes over me warms me up. As soon as the team is finished, the guys bound over.

“Hey, cheering squad! Thanks for coming.”

Aaron wraps his arm around my shoulder and tucks me into his side as Sam wraps Juliet in a hug and a quick kiss.

“You did good, coach,” I say, grabbing the collar of his pullover, tugging myself up to give him a scrunching smile.

“Coach? Damn, I kinda like that.”

That low huskiness stirs something in my belly. His breath up this close is all blue Gatorade and barbeque seeds, but it doesn’t detract from the way that I want to taste him on my lips all the same.

“What are you guys up to tonight? Wanna grab a bite?” Sam asks.

Aaron looks down to me and squeezes my shoulder.

“What do you think? Are you all caught up on homework, or would you rather we stay in tonight?”

“No, I’m free tonight. As long as we’re going somewhere with *heat*.”

“Are you cold? Here, let me warm you up.”

He moves to stand in front of me before furiously rubbing his hands up and down my arms. I tilt my head back and laugh. I have to. At the absurdity of it all.

Two years ago at this time, I was secretly bringing things from home to my office at school to store them, because the one time I packed a bag to try to sneak out on Scott, he had seen it, laughed, and asked me where I was

going to go after pointing out that I had no one left but him. Last year, I was living off the savings I'd stashed away, looking for schools to apply for since I'd finally gotten the courage to work in one again.

Right now, I'm standing with friends who accept me for me, while my boyfriend tries to warm me up despite the fact that I'm drowning in the warmth of both his hoodie and his affection. He checked with me to make sure I was available for plans instead of insisting that I drop everything to entertain his friends—*our* friends. And I guarantee he had every intention of telling Sam and Juliet no in favor of hanging out on my couch if I told him that I had an assignment to catch up on, simply to be in the same room as me all evening.

It's funny, the way that life's paths can wind through terrorizing forests only to drop you at the foot of salvation for you to never look back.

We're about to head out when Penelope returns, wearing a scowl to go along with her stomping feet that are kicking up dust.

"Damn, who pissed in your Cheerios?" Sam chuckles.

"No one. Drop it. Are we getting hammered tonight or what?"

"It is quite literally a Thursday, my dude. We have to work in the morning," Aaron adds.

"They can play Prodigy all day tomorrow. I don't even care. Where are we going?"

As Penelope storms toward the parking lot, I notice the head coach from the opposing team—her supposed Christmas mistake—pushing his way through the crowd of parents. A mix of regret and anger and sorrow wars his expression, all tailing into a frustrated sigh as he takes off his hat, bends the bill in his hands, and watches her walk away.

forty-eight

lucy

“HOW MANY ALCOHOLS will it take for you to spill the story? Because I can and will supply them,” Aaron asks Penelope as we all gather in a booth in the back corner of a crowded restaurant.

She hasn’t been herself since she saw the head coach from the other school. I debate telling her that he was trying to chase after her before we left, but I’m not sure if that will help or hurt at this point.

“He’s my mom’s best friend’s son, and I don’t want to talk about him. I’m trying to *forget* about him, actually. Can we just order?”

We all nod, taking the awkward silence as our cue to back off. Aaron holds up one menu between us, hiding us from the rest of the table like we’re in our own little playhouse.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I giggle. Tucked up like this behind the menu, my glasses fog up, and his nose presses into mine. I take full advantage and press my lips to his for a quick kiss. Every complaint I had about the earlier cold instantly vanishes.

“Hey, Romeo and Juliet, could you stop making out behind the menus? The waitress is here to take our order.”

“Babe! They both *die* in the end,” Juliet says, scolding her husband. She whacks him in the shoulder with the menu. “Pick a better love story.”

As we place our orders, that four letter word bounces around in my head. Are Aaron and I really writing a love story? I mean sure, he looks at me like I hung the stars, but that doesn’t mean he loves me, right? No. It doesn’t.

But the way he followed me home to make sure I was okay after I heard from Scott? The way he leaves little Post-Its on my desk to tell me he’s thinking about me? The way he proves every single day that he’ll take this

thing at my pace, without question?

Oh, God, he might just be in love with me. And I can't even begin to fathom that someone could ever love me more than I once thought Scott could. From day one, Aaron has been taking my ideas of love and turning them upside down. I smile up at him, slip my hand under the table, and squeeze his thigh. He tugs me more tightly into his shoulder, and I decide that it might be my very favorite place in the world.

"How's the musical going? It's next weekend, right?" Juliet asks.

I nod. "It's going pretty well. I'm nervous for a few of the numbers, but excited. The kids have really impressed me."

"Russo's dance routines aren't dirty, are they? He didn't choreograph *Moana Jr.* to *Magic Mike*?"

Sam puts both hands behind his head and starts rolling and gyrating his hips in his seat. Juliet slaps him in the chest and tells him to knock it off.

"No," I giggle. "No, I don't even think *he* could pull off those moves."

"Excuse me?!" the man in question exclaims, flattening a hand to his chest. I shrug. "Is that a *challenge*?"

Aaron stands, twisting his coach's hat backwards and putting his hands behind his head like Sam, rolling his hips for the entire restaurant to see. It's clunky, and he has his lips pursed like a duck, but I can't deny that my insides are coiling with heat.

"Maybe a challenge for the bedroom!" Penelope barks. "Save it, please! No one needs to see that except Lucy."

He plops back down on the bench seat and kisses my temple before sliding his mouth down to my ear.

"Maybe I *will* give you a private showing of that later tonight."

He's met with shouts of *Gross!* and *Disgusting!* and *This is a family establishment, Russo!* but the butterflies don't vacate my gut. They're swirling at the fact that someone is proud to be seen with me in public, that someone is looking forward to taking me home and being in my presence tonight.

We chat a little more about the musical until our food comes, and the conversation shifts as Sam breaks the news to Aaron that he and Juliet are adopting.

"Hopefully they'll be able to find you guys a sub," Penelope says. "Eighth grade is already scrambling for next year, what, with Theo getting his knee replaced, and Bill's neck surgery."

“Yeah, but they posted those long-term positions already, didn’t they?” Sam asks.

“They did,” Penny nods, “but no one has picked them up yet, and they’ve been posted for maybe a month already.”

“We’ve got time,” Juliet says, trying to reassure the group. “It’ll all work out. I just hope there aren’t any more medical leaves or pregnancies announced before summer.”

“For real,” Penelope echoes. Then, she points to Aaron and me. “You two. Use protection.”

Aaron stares down at me, his eyes as big as saucers, and I match his smile, but shake my head.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Kids are so far down the road for me, I can’t even see the exit.”

We all dig into our meals, but my mind starts to turn. Flashes of a future I once thought was impossible start to take over. Aaron kissing my swollen belly. Aaron holding my hair back while I manage the terrible morning sickness that my mother had with me. Aaron, tears in his eyes, holding the new life we’ve created out of pure love for one another. As I realize that the future I once hoped Scott would never entrap me with plays before my life in a fantasy that burns with need, something strikes me.

I think I’m falling in love with Aaron Russo, too.

It’s a shock and a face-palm all at once. Of course I’m falling for him. He’s been tumbling for me since the moment I walked up to his table in a haze at that bar, and he hasn’t looked back since.

We all go our separate ways after the restaurant, Aaron and I hand in hand as he walks me to my car. With my back to the driver’s side door, I hold his waist while he runs his hands up and down my arms. We’re silent. The waking moon and stars lighten the small circle around us, but we are our own little bubble.

“Everything okay? You were a little quiet at dinner. Have you been getting enough sleep?”

“Yeah. Everything’s perfect.”

I can’t even begin to wonder how long it’s been since I’ve said that word. Maybe I said that my life was in *perfect shambles* during a therapy session. But here, with this man worrying that I’m not sleeping enough? I know I’m cashing it in for the right moment. I push up on my toes and press into him, kissing him sweetly before my body realizes how long it’s been since we’ve

been like this. I see him every day, and yet, I'm greedy for these moments.

Aaron grunts when my tongue presses at the seam of his lips, nudging his leg between mine. The friction stokes a heat in me, and I moan as he deepens the kiss, lazily but hungrily twining his tongue with mine. I grab the collar of his pullover and tug him to me.

A car backfires, and when his lips turn up against mine, a laugh rushing in warm air from his nose before he kisses me tenderly one more time and strokes his thumbs over my cheeks, I begin to wonder if I ever knew what love was in the first place. Because with him, I feel like I could take on the world.

"I can't wait for things to slow down after next weekend," I say, pulling reluctantly away.

Aaron nods. "Then it'll just be work and baseball for a couple of weeks."

His demeanor shifts. His stare turns severe, his touch carefully tender as he tucks a stray hair behind my ear. His lips part, and I can feel the weight of his unsaid words. But they never come. His brows settle into a hard line, and he exhales through his nose as his thumb brushes the shell of my ear in languid strokes.

"Whatever will you *do* with all of your free time?" I grin.

"I was thinking I might *do* the school counselor."

He waggles his eyebrows, like that weird moment never happened, and I giggle, tilting my head back to see the stars above his head that don't come close to the way he's smiling down at me.

"I like when you do that."

"What?" I ask.

"Giggle with your whole self. You were more reserved when I first met you. It has meant the world to me to see you coming out of your shell."

I almost revert back to that girl he's talking about—the one who covered her laughter like she was trying to hide it, because Scott had made me fear joy. But I don't. Because I know that with every passing day, I am more and more free. And this man, telling me that he likes my giggles while he keeps leaning in for *one more kiss* before we part ways for the night, reminds me of that every single day.

forty-nine

lucy

I AM SITTING in the front seat of a roller coaster car, nothing blocking my view of the drop below. Or, more accurately, the packed house for opening night of the musical.

My musical.

I'd almost insisted that my name be removed from the front of the program until *Aaron* had insisted that I had earned every bit of this.

He already stole the first copy off the printer, but as I tuck myself back inside the curtain and stare down at the bold letters proclaiming ***Directed by Ms. Lucy***, my heart swells to triple the size.

I have earned this.

The sweat and tears, and maybe a little bit of blood from that one incident with the spears during our dress rehearsal. I brought this show to life. And you know what? I'm damn proud of me.

The lights in the auditorium dim and brighten three times to signal that the show is about to begin. I take my place at center stage, and realize that this entire room is captivated by me. *Because of me.* It's terrifying and exhilarating, and a window to the potential I have to recreate this feeling with my future spread wide in front of me. I tap the microphone, and let the thud of my finger echo in the speakers.

"Thank you all for coming to tonight's performance. This cast holds a special place in my heart, as my very first time directing a show. They have worked their tails off, and I am immensely proud of the show that they've been rehearsing for you. Please silence your cell phones, and enjoy the performance."

The curtain snicks closed as I sneak behind it, and as the overture starts to churn through the auditorium, I turn toward my cast, who are all circled

before me, and hold out my hands. In the pre-show ritual that we started two weeks ago, we all join hands, inhale for five, and exhale for five together. I make eye contact with each performer. Beneath their heavy stage makeup, their nervous smiles tick up.

“I am so, so proud of each and every one of you,” I start, squeezing the hands of the students to each side. This sets off a chain around the circle of pulsing, squeezing, silent hands. “You’ve worked so hard. All of these late nights have led us here to this moment. *Your* moment.”

I see the wave of squeezing hands make it to the student opposite of me—the lead of the show—and she reverses the circle. With each hand squeeze, I see fires ignite in the eyes of my young performers. A cadence within their chest begins, and I know they’re ready to show the world—well, their families and friends, and the teachers who are scattered throughout the audience—what they’ve been working toward.

“For the next few hours, this stage is yours. Remember: at the end of the day, there is no one better for your part than you. Own it. Give it your all.” The hands on either side of me squeeze mine, and I raise my arms up, watching as the rest of the circle does the same.

“Break a leg, warriors.”



In the end, the show wasn’t perfect. But it *was* ours.

There were missed entrances, a rogue coconut rolled across the stage, and poor Maui’s voice cracked during his big solo.

But they handled everything with a spoonful of grace, and determination to make the next two shows better.

As soon as the final bows are taken and the curtain closes, squeals and shouts erupt. Backstage is a frenzy of chaos, and I am so grateful to be in the center of it. The cast shares hugs and laughs and *Oh my God, did you see when I accidentally speared that raft?!* and I just stand back with my mouth open wide, basking in the thrill of it all.

I did it. *I* did it. Took this crew of kids and turned the words on a page into a pretty damn good stage performance. I’ll be riding this high for *weeks*.

Eventually, I follow the cast out to the cafeteria for post-show refreshments, receiving so many congratulatory messages that my head spins.

Parents of students, coworkers, little kids who ask if they can *Meet Moana*. It's all so overwhelming that I do my best to take mental pictures so I can flip back on them later and share them with Aaron.

Aaron.

I have several texts waiting for me, knowing that the last one, after we got off the phone earlier, is *Break a leg, Rock Star! I'm so proud of you and the theater chickens!* I know how much he hated having a game over an hour away tonight, but his promise to rush back to school and celebrate is what weighs with me. He has been in my corner from the start.

I don't cringe away from the several bouquets of flowers that I receive from parents tonight. Several thank me for what the musical has done for their student. Blake's dad even approaches, sheepishly extending gratitude for helping his son manage *All of the things he loves to do*. My heart is so full that it has flooded over onto the floor. I sneak away, pushing outside to get some fresh air and sneak a text or two to Aaron when the bite of the night air overwhelms me.

Because leaned up against the brick overhang entrance is none other than my ex-husband.

Holding a bouquet of roses that may as well be poison ivy.

The air cinches in my throat, my hand immediately flying there as I stutter my next several breaths. His sly, smarmy grin curls, and I taste poison in the air when he speaks.

"Would you know, they wouldn't let me in without a ticket? I can't believe this thing was sold out. I had to wait until it was over to give these to you."

He extends the flowers, and I take a step back, flinching like his extended hand is a snake with its fangs bared.

"I—"

I can't speak. All of those words that I'd practiced in my head, the ways I once thought I'd tell Scott off if I ever got the chance, evaporate. I am defenseless. Hopeless.

He continues to close the space between us with predatory steps.

"Don't they know that the director is all mine?"

I'm going to puke.

"I... We're..."

My words don't come. Shaky syllables scratch in painful gashes.

"I, 'we.' Speak up, Lucy Goosey. Cat got your tongue? I thought you

knew better than to try talkin' back to me, baby doll."

My words are imprisoned, and I'm able to pull back to the front door, to safety, when he extends his hand, reaching out to cup my cheek.

To grip my chin in his fist and make sure I look him in the eyes when he tells me exactly what's going to happen next.

When I flinch out of his way, his gaze narrows to that threatening stare he only ever gave me behind closed doors, the one that I'm almost certain is about to be accompanied by the demanding stomp of his boot, when a family of five pushes through the front door, laughing and reminiscing over the show.

My show.

The one he's taking from me as we speak.

"Bye, Ms. Lucy! See you tomorrow!"

I don't even know who I'm waving to. My whole world right now is the penetrating stare Scott carves into me as *Ms. Lucy?* whispers icily from his lips.

"Ain't no way for these damn kids to be disrespecting my name, Lucy Alcott."

Bile fills my mouth. I take another step back.

All of the ways that Aaron has told me I'm strong and capable? I'm struggling to believe him.

But then, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I know it's him. Calling because he's on his way back from the game. Calling because he's *on his way to see me.*

That gives me enough courage to swallow down the sick feeling.

"I'm..." I shake my head and stare at my shoes, trying to gain back some sense of control. Just like he always does, Scott ties a lasso around it and yanks it free of my grasp. He takes another step toward me, but now, families are exiting the building in droves, and I know just as well as he does that he won't do this in public. Not with an audience. No, Scott Alcott has an image to uphold, and *verbally berating the guidance counselor on school property* breaks his rules.

He smiles tensely, irritation tapping his finger and his toe in sporadic time, like he might just tell all of these people to get lost. But a line forms, parents wanting to have their students' photo taken with the director. I hope that my smile in these photos isn't too tense, as much as I hope that Scott will realize that waiting for me is a lost cause. I can see the telltale signs of his

frustration bubbling as the vein in his neck throbs.

“I’m going to be a while,” I say, finding courage in this group of students and parents. *Safety in numbers.*

“I can wait.”

I wholeheartedly believe him, and my gut sinks.

It isn’t until one of my students asks, “Is Coach Russo coming tonight? I want a photo with him!” that my words battle their way through. I lock eyes with my ex-husband as I answer.

“The baseball team is on their way back, if you’d like to wait for Coach Russo and the other two coaches. I’m sure Mr. Ford and Mr. Lawler would love to see you in your stage makeup. I’m waiting for them, too.”

He takes that as a threat—I’m waiting for heavy male backup, and I won’t be leaving here without it. I’m not at all weakened by my need to lean on Aaron’s impending presence. In fact, I feel strengthened by the knowledge that he will defend me without question, and that I have him, as well as others, to lean on.

As that student exclaims that he’s going to *Wait outside on the curb for Coach Russo*, Scott scowls in defeat. But he gets his last word like he always does as he leans in and speaks to me in a tone I once hoped I’d never have to feel scratching against my bones again.

“You’re mine, Lucy. Don’t you forget your place. You can hide here, but you can’t run from me forever. I’ll see you again soon.”

He tries to press the flowers into my hand, but I steal my lone victory for the evening and let them fall at the last second. My saving grace is the student whose timing could not be more perfect. He bends to pick up the bouquet and offer them to me, and I somehow manage, “You take them. I have a whole garden inside.”

I fall back inside, to the safety of my school building, watching as my ex-husband’s eyes track me the whole way in.

fifty

aaron

I CAN'T STOP SHAKING, but I have to. For her. I *have* to be strong for her, and that need is stronger than the one my body has to keep breathing.

Stronger than the urge I had to fulfill every promise I've made myself that I would choke the life from that rat bastard if I ever saw him.

The moment I read her panic texts, full of typos and sent over four different messages that eventually spelled out ***Scott was here***, I almost pushed our bus driver out of his seat to break traffic laws myself.

Sam let me off the bus before the team without question, and I ran to her. I eventually get her home—to her place, but more importantly, safely in my arms, where she's finally just stopped shaking. And I *hate* it. Hate that she had to endure that scumbag at all, but the fact that she had to do it alone? I have to steady myself by holding onto her, my thumbs working in soft and rough circles on her cheekbones.

“How can I help, sweet girl?” I ask, licking my lips at the perspiration that has beaded there from trying to hold myself together. “Anything, Lucy. *Anything—*”

“*I need control.*”

That word, *control*, sets a haze over Lucy that I've only seen one other time.

The girl from the bar, the one she'd said *wasn't her*. I've put together enough pieces to understand what that night represented for her. A steadying way to find her center. To grapple for the control that was stolen from her years ago. She's come so far, but in one short encounter with the villain in her story, all of her progress pauses.

I know it isn't gone. It's inside her somewhere, and just like she's done all year, she's going to fight like hell to get it back. I just so happen to be the

lucky guy with a front row seat and my hand to hold on standby.

I lick my lips, planting my feet in front of her, hoping to be the stability that she needs. The anchor in the middle of her chaos while she figures out which way to steer us.

“Whatever you need, sweet girl.” Glass rattles in my throat, around my words. “Take whatever you need from me.”

She blinks, once, her gaze hooded and hidden until her hazel eyes connect with mine and her pupils blow wide open.

I can't quite tell if it's the hunger or the fear that takes control in that moment, but Lucy takes the reins like she's directing a fleet of Roman chariots into their final battle. Her hands tangle, one in my hair and the other steeled around my upper back. We trip over her feet together as she pushes me backward, propelled by that hunger and fear and the need to put the wheel back in her hands. I barely register the pillow beneath my head, because she's all consuming, stealing every ounce of my attention so that I have no choice but to be honed to her, as if she is *my* beacon in this darkness. I'll take that challenge to the grave.

Between nips of my lips, her teeth pressing just enough to elicit a pain that makes me groan for more, my pants are pushed to my ankles. Hastily, I kick off my shoes to tangle with them at the foot of the bed. She pushes my hoodie and T-shirt until they're tangled around my throat, pausing her assault of my clothes so that she can drink from my mouth more, both hands cupping my chin, my cheeks, like she needs my kisses to anchor herself. It damn near kills me not to sit up, not to help her and cradle her in my arms, but this is what she needs. I let her take, let her use me as her life source until her hips grind back and forth on my thickening erection. The moan that breaks free from her is desperate and needy and guttural, and I'd be a fool to try to match it, but I do.

Tilting my hips beneath hers, I seek only to give. Give her pleasure, give her stability, give her the sheer reassurance that whatever she needs, I'm donating it freely.

“Aaron.”

My name comes in breathy desperation as her still clothed hips quicken against mine. I've only been getting to know her body, but I know she's right there on the edge, that she needs fast consistency to have her toppling. But she's holding herself back, and I know exactly why before those needy words skip off her tongue.

“Come, sweetheart. You need it.”

“I don’t want this to be over—”

“Won’t be over,” I promise. “Just the beginning.”

I squeeze her ass in one hand, palming the back of her head in the other to hold her to me tightly, giving her the pump of friction that she needs.

“You take as much from me as you need tonight, Lucy. Use me, sweet girl.”

That permission is all she needs. Her open mouth lays against mine, sweet moans and breathy pants accompanying the bass of her grinding hips that rub at a pace I can barely keep up with. I hold onto her hips for the ride, daring to peek at the way her ass pumps, the way it divots when my fingers dig into it. I throw my head back, groaning at the sweet, sweet way her body is owning mine. At the way that, with cotton still separating us, she comes, and comes *hard*, with a loop of my name on her lips, her fingers tangled in my hair.

She barely lets herself come down, the heaving of her chest pressing her breasts up against straining fabric when she uses my chest as leverage to sit up and stare down at me.

Lucy in control is the embodiment of sexy. I’ll never see something more beautiful for as long as I live. Hang the image of her with security in her eyes over the *Mona Lisa*.

“I need you. Now,” she pants.

Our hands work in a blur, fingers tangling in the neckline of shirts I just wore through her first orgasm to tear them off, pants and underwear hastily shoved until our sweaty skin chills on impact with the cool air. I regain my view of Lucy, and my throat becomes drier than the Sahara as I watch her work in slow motion.

Bare from the waist down, she sits perched above me, her shirt coming off slowly, leaving her in nothing but a simple, blue cotton bra. Her arms float gently back down, like a ballerina letting down her pose after a bow. The way that Lucy’s hands flutter to land on her breasts, squeezing, her head tilting back on a euphoric moan that I swear could be the start of another orgasm, has no place on a public stage. No, I’m getting my own private show, and I hesitate to believe I deserve it.

She squeezes, pushing her tits together, her thumbs cascading to press over her nipples that are trying to slice through the fabric. The little grunts and groans coincide with the brush of her bare, slick pussy over my aching

cock, and I will myself to take more of this torture.

She needs this. Hold on just a little longer.

“Can I... Aaron, I...”

I’m about to repeat the mantra of, *Whatever you want, sweet Lucy*, but then she lifts herself on her knees, wraps her hand around my aching cock, and presses the head against her clit. Oh, I swear the stars on the backs of my eyes spell out her name.

“You want me bare, sweetheart?”

I hesitate for the fraction of a second that it takes to picture us ten years from now with a minivan full of miniature versions of us before pressing myself further into her grip.

She nods in furious desperation, tracing her entrance front to back.

“I’m clean,” we breathe at the same time, before Lucy pauses with my cock over her clit.

“And I’m on the pill.”

She starts to rub me against her clit again, those squeaks and the tilt of her head signaling another impending orgasm. Her eyes pop open, and somewhere in the black hole that’s working hard to swallow the shadows of her past, I see a light tunneling toward the cocoon of safety we’ve created in her bed.

I can’t help the bark of curses when I feel Lucy bare for the first time. My body writhes beneath hers like I’m being exorcized, her thighs my anchors as I do my best not to leave bruises. She’s right there with me, the slow slide of her gripping, wet pussy like sliding into home plate to score the game-winning run, hitting a buzzer beater, and entering heaven all at once.

It’s like my body can’t seem to be satisfied today. Seeing Lucy, panting, catching her breath with her fingernails biting into my pecs, with a lusty haze coating her gaze? My eyes won’t ever be the same. And then, she bites her lower lip.

It’s the only hand I’ll give her. The one that reassures her I’m not about to move from this spot, let alone leave her to work through any of this alone. I cup her cheek, sweeping my fingers up into the top knot of hair until I catch in her scrunchie, drawing it out until her long, wild tresses hang untamed around her shoulders. My thumb catches her bottom lip and tugs it free. Fireworks break through the dust over her eyes. She kisses me there, and takes the reins back.

It’s a slow, silent start. Her hips rock back and forth, punctuated by a

stutter of breath, one from her and one from me. Each shift gets quicker, harder, more intense; her hands anchor on my biceps, and mine put little indents in the soft, smooth flesh of her hips. She reaches up and back with one hand to unhook her bra, and when her tits spill free, heavy with hard, pointed nipples, I can't resist the upward thrust I've been holding back. That shift, the friction against her clit, draws a long, high moan.

"Suck," she instructs, leaning over me so that her breasts hang in my face. I oblige with a growl, one hand plastering to her back to hold her close as I wrap my lips around a beady nipple and do exactly what she's asked of me. I smooth my tongue in flat strokes, then switch to fluttering before pressing my teeth into her needy flesh. As I move to pay the same attention to her other breast, she pivots her rocking, grinding motions and lifts.

Oh, that first drop is the sweetest. Her ass lifts and falls, landing on the tops of my thighs, and with the next bounce, I meet her with a hard thrust.

"Just like that," she pants when I bite her other nipple, threading her hand into my hair to keep me there. "Harder, Aaron, *harder*."

I bite with more pressure, then open my lips wide to take in as much of her as I can and suck. She cries out, riding me harder and faster, and *shit*, I am not going to last long at all. But luckily, she squeezes me, the fluttering of her walls telling me she's just as close as I am.

"Talk to me, *please*."

That breathy plead has me damn near putting on the brakes. My sweet girl needs reassurance, and I know I'm going to have to fight like hell not to let that four letter word slip in the process.

I squeeze her ass, rubbing my thumbs in wide circles.

"You're riding me so well," I grunt out, sinking my fingers into her. "You're taking all of me. Look how good you're doing, Lucy."

She nods, whines, bites her bottom lip out of the sheer pleasure she's giving herself as she bounces on my cock.

"You're so fucking pretty, sitting up there like that. You take what you need, Lucy. Take it all."

She whines, her mouth cracked open as her head tilts back and I feel a death grip strangling my cock. The rush of her orgasm is bliss. She rides me hard, fast, going back to that intense grinding to give her clit the pressure she needs. I slip my thumb between us, unmoving, and she instantly rubs against it, presses her hand against mine to hold it there. It takes her ages to come down, but even with her wet seeping down my cock, and the quick breaths

that she can't seem to catch, I know she's not done.

I lay there, as her throne, letting her look down upon me until she's ready to make the next call.

I don't expect the way her eyes shatter. Don't expect the crackle in her exterior. The way her expression grimaces in a way that could be the brink of crying out in ecstasy, or the shattering of her walls.

"Please."

Gluing those fragile pieces back together before they crackle is more important to me than my next breath.

I sit up, my cock still hard inside of her, keeping her straddling my lap. I wrap my arms around her, one banded to her back and the other in her hair as I press my lips to hers in a kiss that begins with bruising pressure to let her know that I'm here, and ends with sweet pecks that tell her that forever between us starts now and has no end. She holds onto me like she's not so sure.

I press, "Ready?" to her lips, and she nods as I lay her gently onto her back, my mouth remaining against hers like a life preserver to keep us both afloat. Settling on top of her with nothing between us, I trace my nose up and down her jawline, burying my lips beneath her ear for a gentle kiss before pressing a promise there.

"You, Lucy, are the strongest person I know. You hold more courage in your little finger than I could even begin to imagine. I am so proud of you. Let me deserve you."

Her hands that were squished between us find my chest, and my heart rattles on the cage door to jump into her waiting palms.

I rest one forearm next to her head and bury my other hand beneath it to crush her lips to mine as I pump my way home. I can't help the grunts that accompany each thrust, the way her name is a desperate plea tattooing her pulse where my lips have found a home. Her hands sneak around my back, clawing there, her nails sure to leave little lines I can trace in the morning as a reminder that this was real.

I don't know how I've held on this long, but my cock protests, leaking into her with each contraction of her pussy, with each squeeze of her knees up against my thighs. But what does me in is the way my name, *my name*, starts to pour from her lips as her walls begin to flutter again.

"Aaron... Aaron..."

"I know, sweet girl, I know."

I quicken my pace, my balls cinching up as they slap against her with each thrust. God, she feels like white lightning and the end of a rainbow and *home* all at once. I want to bottle all of this up and make my own jar to put up on the mantle, until I look into her eyes.

The gold sparkle glitters over a dark green forest, swirling like the dawn of a new galaxy is about to break. Her parted lips tremble from the thrust of my hips, and I settle mine over hers to ground her.

“Let go, sweet Lucy. Come for me. Take it, baby, take back what’s yours.”

It doesn’t slip by me that when I tell her to take what’s hers, her response is the overwhelming cry of my name.

She comes around my cock, and my name pulses with the fluttering of her walls. I take that as my own permission, exploding like a rocket, spilling myself inside her as her name becomes my heartbeat.

Lucy may have given her control over to me in those last moments, but as she blinks back up at me with bright, clear stars shining in her eyes, I am putty in her hands.

fifty-one

lucy

“THANK YOU.”

It comes out gritty, like I swallowed a mouthful of sand. I screamed Aaron’s name so much, so loudly, that those letters scratched my throat raw on the way out.

“For what, baby?”

I hate how composed he sounds. My foundation shattered into infinite particles beneath him, and somehow, he’s still holding it all together.

But then, I know that he’s holding it together for *me*. When he shouldn’t have to. In the face of the last few hours, I should be scrambling out of his arms. Questioning. Shouting at him to drop the other shoe already. But this is Aaron. *Aaron*, who is holding it all together for me, and I know that if I asked him to, he’d become Atlas, with me as the world in his mighty hands.

I snuggle into him, our bare skin popping a wave of goosebumps where his fingertips trail aimlessly from my elbow to my shoulder and back.

“Being here. Holding me.” I kiss the divot of his shoulder. “Knowing what I need and giving it to me unconditionally.”

It’s like I can hear the words rattling around in his throat, the way he wants so badly to tell me that he loves me but isn’t sure if now is the right time. My own confession is stored up in my heart because I want that moment to come from a place of me and Aaron with no one else in between. But tonight was important, too. Tonight was about reminding myself that I have it in me to take back control when it feels like it’s slipping away. That can be my victory.

That, and knowing that when it slips away again, I have a man in my life who can put a hand on the wheel when I can’t do it alone.

He shifts beneath me, putting himself on his side and dragging me with

him. We are nose to nose, but his eyes rest on our stomachs, his gaze wide eyed and open mouthed as it trails our naked skin back up to my naked eyes.

We already talked through what happened, though it wasn't the flip book of tonight that I'd wanted to share. Through snotty tears and a few pauses in the story to catch my breath as it kept trying to steal from my lungs, I told him about my encounter with Scott. And this time, I didn't spare any details. Each individual dagger that Scott threw at me, I replayed for Aaron. And with each letter I let tumble from my lips, my heart tore in two directions. One, back down the road that cowered in fear each time my ex-husband's lips so much as twitched in my direction. The other, taking more confident steps away from the tragedy that I brought myself out of.

Aaron's body is both a soft and pliant safe landing beneath me, and a dark storm cloud so prevalent, I'm worried that a deluge will soon flood my bedroom and take us out to sea. I swallow, knowing that haunting questions wait on the edge of his lips, begging to be answered even when he's too kind to push. In the same sense that I needed comfort, I know that he needs this too. I nod, once, leaning into those hands against my back that grip me tighter, those hands that will layer the ground before I'm even allowed to fall.

"Did he ever touch you?"

The ghost of his voice prickles a new wave of goosebumps over my skin. The way it shudders makes tears climb closer to the edge. But that isn't what makes my heart gasp, what makes my chest crack, flooding over the last remaining bits of myself to this man who laid his heart at my feet on that very first night.

"No."

It's after I let that syllable sink to the bottom, after I put on my armor, expecting him to brush it aside, expecting him to swell in relief and demean my experience like I'd prepared for anyone who got close to do, *because* of the pain that Scott put me through.

I brace for an impact that in this moment, I realize might be more painful than my ex-husband's fists actually striking me like the threat he never carried out.

The expectation that *he never really hit you; why aren't you healed?* very well might tumble out of his mouth, and has me bracing for impact. Bracing for my world to fall apart in ways that Scott's hands could never do.

The impact never comes—the impact that I foolishly feared, because *Aaron is not him.*

Aaron is a needle in a haystack, a diamond in the rough. He's rain in the middle of a drought and the first breath after being underwater without oxygen. He's the man my heart has been waiting for.

After my dismissal absorbs, Aaron's hold tightens around me.

"But he hurt your head and your heart," he chokes, pressing his hand over the organ that he had a part in healing. I worm my way closer, knowing that it's my turn to comfort him. "He made you bleed on the inside. And he had no right to do that, Lucy."

His voice is a strained, shuddering whisper, the rumbling of the storm cloud readying its clap of thunder. He becomes unsteady at the thought of my mind and my heart being trapped. The way his skin begins to vibrate slowly as he holds me, then rocks the bed as he fails to hold himself together, makes me ache. I cling to him, wrapping myself around him tightly so that we are anchors for one another. We have to hold each other up, or we'll drown together.

"I know that now," I choke out, my fingers denting his upper back where I squeeze, reminding him that I'll hold him through the tough times just as often as he has done for me.

Because of you clings to the walls of my chest, waiting for their turn to fall into his hands.

He holds me tighter still, and when my chest cracks open, I wonder briefly if he might just free fall right into the depths of me that I still haven't yet reopened on my own.

fifty-two

aaron

EXHAUSTION ISN'T an elaborate enough way to describe the current state of my body. My organs are filled with concrete, my eyelids refuse to stay at more than half-mast, and I'm mildly worried that my blood has turned to straight-up Dunkin' cold brew at this point. I'm losing weight, too—packing my lunch has turned into a last minute priority after I've snoozed my alarm eight times and rush out the door. Vending machine sugar isn't really helping the matter.

And to top it all off, I have to head straight from the musical to my sister's place to babysit on Sunday after the last showing of *Moana Jr.* instead of helping Lucy strike down the set, going to dinner with the cast, and then spending a cozy night in like we'd planned.

Instead of being there for her and the kids, and being a presence around the school in case her shit bag of an ex-husband decides to show his face again.

She promised me up and down that it was okay, but part of me wonders if Lucy is hurting, if she thinks I'm not prioritizing her like her ex-husband never did.

Part of me wonders if I need to start prioritizing *myself* like I never have before.

I've always used the excuse that I'm single and I have nothing else going on, but in the midst of running on empty, in the midst of regretting not being there for Lucy, I'm beginning to wonder what would happen if I *did* start saying no to people. If I *did* start accepting help, letting others bear the weight every once in a while.

But Dani's wedding is a month away, and with a toddler, a fiancé who works second shift, and a mile-long to-do list that we can't seem to keep up

with, I figured I'd do my part.

Still. I'd rather be at home in Lucy's arms, showering her with pride and snuggles and reassurances that she is safe, than babysitting my niece. I text Lucy throughout the night, after my niece is asleep, until Daniela gets home.

"Everything go okay?"

"Yep. Fed her ice cream for dinner and let her watch R-rated horror movies until she cried herself to sleep."

"Asshole," Dani snorts. She heads to the kitchen, pours herself a glass of wine, and goes to plop back on the couch when she notices me heading for the front door. "You're heading out already?"

"Yeah. I cancelled plans with Lucy to help you last minute, so I'm going to head over there now."

Dani snorts, and I glance over my shoulder when I finish tying my shoe. Her arms are crossed and she's eying me in disgust.

"That's still going on?"

My brows draw in, and I stand to my full height, crossing my arms.

"You mean, am I still dating my girlfriend? Yes. I am."

Heavy sarcasm drips off my tongue, matching my sister's. Her gaze narrows.

"I was actually hoping to bring this up with you today anyway. I know there's a spot open at Mom and Dad's table for the wedding, and I was hoping that—"

"Absolutely not, Aaron. You're not bringing your flavor of the month to my wedding."

I see red.

"Excuse you? You wanna try that again?"

She crosses her arms, planting her feet to prepare herself for battle.

"It's *my* wedding. I don't want your girlfriend of a few days ruining all of my photos after she inevitably dumps you because you've smothered her and scared her off like you have all of the others."

My brows tug as my scowl deepens.

For Lucy, and the way she's being treated like leftovers. For myself, and the way my siblings have apparently taken my quest for a happily ever after and lessened it to no more than a recurring pipe dream.

"Are you serious?" I ask, the ghost of a question barely whispering past my lips.

"Absolutely."

She stands taller, tightening her crossed arms, matching my pose down to the tilt of her head.

“I drop everything—including a night with my girlfriend—so that I can help you out last minute, and the thanks I get is to tell me she can’t come to your wedding because she made *you* feel insecure for five minutes?”

She dons an evil smile, snake eyes no more than slits, and says, “If you’re going to drop plans with her to come help me, she must not be that high on your priority list.”

“Fuck you, Dani.”

I whip open her front door and catch it just before it slams closed. My niece doesn’t deserve to be woken up, even if her terror reigning on my sister would be the best payback.

I’m fuming. Steam pours from my ears, leaking onto the sidewalk behind me in a tangled vine. I have no idea what I did to deserve this kind of treatment, or why Daniela can’t see past Lucy’s past and give her a second chance like Maria and Sophia have. As soon as I’m behind the wheel, my chest straining as it heaves against the seatbelt, I think of Lucy.

Breathe in for five; breathe out for five.

That simple connection brings me from red down to yellow; I’m still agitated, still hot at my sister, but the clench in my fists has dissipated from the white-knuckled strangle hold I had on the steering wheel.

I call Lucy. The sweet sound of her sleepy, *Hey, you*, is enough to wipe away the last twenty minutes of my night.

“How was babysitting?”

“It was okay. I missed you though. I’m sorry I had to cancel our plans.”

“No, it’s okay. I ended up hopping in bed early. I wouldn’t have been good company.”

“Trust me, lying in bed while you doze next to me would have been the best company I’ve had all night.”

“Hey, what happened?”

I hear rustling on her end, like she’s sitting up in bed, disentangling herself from the cozy cocoon of sheets. I’m torn between hating that I disturbed her coziness and selfishly letting myself melt into the picture of Lucy all cuddled up in bed.

I exhale, gears shifting in my head as I debate whether or not I should tell her. My sister doesn’t want her at the wedding. She still disapproves. She doesn’t believe that we’ll make it past the wedding photos. In the end, I

decide against it. If *my* heart can't take that ache, what would it do to Lucy's after all she's done to build herself back up?

"Nothing, sweet girl, I just hate disappointing you. Can I see you for five minutes, or are you already tucked in?"

By the time she tells me she'll meet me on her front porch, I'm already turning out of Dani's neighborhood and headed toward her. The way my body physically starts to feel less and less heavy the closer I get to her makes part of my heart scream that I'm heading toward *home*.

True to her word, she's waiting on her front porch—in donut-covered pajama pants and a shirt that reads "Donut Disturb." Her hair is a messy mane around her face, and she pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose, and I physically feel my chest pound harder, the pressure lifting as soon as I see her. I almost leave my keys in the ignition.

She's in my arms before I can fully register the beaming, mile-wide smile she gives me that I do not deserve. I hold her. Arms wrapped around her, circling her lithe frame, gripping her waist, my nose buried into her hair where I can tell that she must've washed it because it smells like the shampoo I'm just beginning to associate with Lucy. It takes me a few minutes, but holding her in my arms, swaying us back and forth, slowly makes all of those judgements from my sister melt away. The insecurities that I've never been good enough to keep a woman around fade to nothing when I look into Lucy's eyes and she's staring back at me like I'm her morning star.

"Hi," she says, brushing my bangs back in that way she's been doing lately that makes me melt at her touch. My eyes flutter shut, absorbing the feel of her fingerprints on my skin.

"I missed you," I tell her, my throat scratchy with residual anger from my sister and the relief of having Lucy in my arms.

"Me too." Her fingers curve around one of my ears before she cups the side of my neck, her thumb lingering to stroke outside of my ear in a gentle rhythm that makes me feel safe enough to fall asleep standing up on her front porch. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I am now."

Concern lingers in Lucy's eyes. My sweet girl, who went to hell and came out victorious not forty-eight hours ago. She takes one look at me and puts my weight on her shoulders, like I've done all that I can to take care of her, and she's trying to give that back to me.

I don't feel like I've earned that at *all*.

She went toe to toe with a dragon, and I had one fight with my sister. Yet here I stand, ready to fall into her, hoping that she's strong enough now to catch me.

"Do you want to come in?"

I barely get out, "You're tired—" before she amends herself.

"Wait. No. I'm not asking. I'm telling. Come in. Lay with me."

I am too weak for Lucy to tell her no.

After running some cold water over my face and up into my hair and stripping down to my boxer briefs and T-shirt, I find Lucy waiting for me, her index finger stuck up with something on the end. I tilt my head and approach her, the thought of her vanilla-scented pillows already lulling me to sleep, when she presses up onto her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. I feel the stick of something to the back of my hand, and every last bit of resignation fades as soon as I recognize what she's done.

"Even after I cancelled our plans?" I ask, my voice scraping through emotion, as I stare at the green dot sticker she's placed on the back of my hand.

"No. Not after you cancelled our plans." She shakes her head from side to side, smoothing her thumb over the spot of happiness she's claimed over me. "Because you *asked*. You made sure it was okay that we rescheduled. Texted me all throughout the night, and came here with the intention to *only* kiss me goodnight and be on your way."

She isn't staring down at her feet, or my hands. She's looking me in the eye, because my brave girl has come so far. It's hard not to well up with pride.

"You're my happy for the day because you've listened to everything, and despite all of my flaws, you've learned to take care of me exactly how I need to be cared for, and stuck by me when I was in the eye of a hurricane. And you haven't *once* complained. You haven't *once* taken anything for yourself. So, this is me saying thank you, but also asking you to let me take care of you."

The spot on the back of my hand is Lucy's brand on my skin. I feel the tingle all the way up to my heart.

We lay in the quiet, facing each other under her covers, our legs tangled together and enough room so that I can breathe and see her pretty face while we talk.

"I'm so proud of you, you know. Finishing this musical while working on

finals, and building yourself back up. I haven't gotten to tell you enough."

"Thank you. It wasn't all me, though—"

"Take the compliment, Lucy. You deserve it. That show wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for you."

I watch the dials in her head turn slowly around the concept of *taking a compliment*, her cheeks pinking with soft blush as she whispers a quiet, *Thank you*.

"And I'm so, so proud of you for what you've overcome with Scott."

His name deserves no room in this sacred place between us. But somehow, saying it feels like taking the power from him. Giving control back to her. To *us*.

She starts to shake her head, and I give her the moment she needs to say, "I still feel like I failed."

I hold her closer, pressing our noses together so that she has no choice but to look me in the eye.

"You stood on your own two feet after," I remind her, threading my hand through her hair. "Take that as your victory."

She exhales, her eyes fluttering closed before she shifts down my chest, her head resting on my heart.

"Next weekend is ours," I promise, without giving her those two words. I don't want to let her down, but it's about time I start evaluating my priorities, and I want her sitting at the top.

"What kind of wild plans do you have for me, Coach?"

I grunt, pressing my nose back into hers, effectively shattering the space between us.

"Well, after we figure out what it does to me when I've got you beneath me calling me that?" She worms her leg farther between mine, and I have to *will* my dick to pipe down. "Anything you want, sweet girl."

I pull back, tuck her wild hair behind her ear, and kiss her temple. She immediately sinks into me, her head on my chest, her smile right above my heart where it belongs.

fifty-three

lucy

"CAN I COME OUT YET?"

"No!" I shout, my body seizing up. "I'm almost ready! Just stay in your room."

I hear Aaron murmur some semblance of affirmation before I put the finishing touches on my surprise.

He does everything for me—*everything*. He gives me his time and his heart and everything in between. I just want him to know that sometimes, *he* gets to be on the receiving end.

I brush over the finishing touches one last time, deciding that it's as close to perfect as it will ever be. Regardless of my perception, I know Aaron will love it. I've already pictured about a dozen different smiles, because I've allowed myself to.

Putting together a special date night for Scott always came with backlash. So, the second I had this idea for Aaron, *he* was there in the back of my mind, telling me I wasn't good enough, swiping the decorations from the table, cursing me out for the mess he had made.

Knowing that Aaron is probably going to wear one of those smiles that rivals the shine of the sun pushed the storm cloud of Scott past the horizon.

"Okay," I say, then clear the apprehension in my throat to speak a little louder so that he can hear me behind his closed bedroom door. "Okay. You can come out now."

Even knowing that *this is Aaron*, I'm still a little nervous. I want him to know how appreciative I am of him, that the way he cares for me doesn't ever go unnoticed. Those nerves flee at the sight of him as he emerges from his bedroom—with one hand covering his eyes, and the other sweeping in front of him from side to side, banging into the wall as he walks blindly down

the hallway.

I giggle.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to be surprised!”

I shake my head, butterflies making my heart glimmer, and walk to him, taking him by the shoulder to lead him into the living room. I take a deep breath, and peel his hand away from his eyes, holding it in mine for support.

His head is on a swivel, his grin huge and expectant, until his eyes find my surprise. I can tell the exact instant that he registers what I’ve done, because his grin drops, his brows tent, and his shoulders deflate.

His gaze roams over the tiny living room transformation. I laid a High School Musical tablecloth that I scored at the party store over his coffee table, and topped it with all sorts of basketball-themed treats: clear plastic cups with a rectangular “backboard” taped to the back like makeshift hoops are filled with cheeseballs; mini bottles of Gatorade serve as our beverage; and I transformed a homemade pizza into a basketball with particularly placed pepperonis. The movie is queued up on his TV in the background, all ready for us to watch.

I bite my lip, and as I’m about to pull away, he tugs on the hand I’m holding and swivels me to face him. The look on his face has fallen from elation, but I see nothing but revered gratitude in his shining eyes.

He grips my shoulders, then runs his hands up and down over my biceps before settling on my shoulders again.

“You did this for me?”

I shrug, and he shakes his head, tugging on my lip until I kiss him.

“Luce...”

“It’s...”

Not much, I think. But I hold it back. Because I know that, to this man, holding onto me like his anchor, the one who gives away every part of him before he ever thinks about doing for himself, it *is*.

“I just wanted to show you that I...” I swallow around those foreign four letters that have started to take shape inside me again, and replace them. “I appreciate everything that you do for me. I *care* about you, and wanted to do this for you. You get to be pampered sometimes too.”

I shrug again, and move to bite my bottom lip, but he swoops in before I can so much as part my lips. The quick way that he moves in for the kiss is juxtaposed by the soft taste of reverence as his lips claim mine, and linger

there like sweet surrender. His quiet moan is incredulous and filled with gratitude. He doesn't even hide the snuffle when he pulls away.

His nose wrinkles, and tears prick his eyes as he runs both hands up my back, squeezing me there.

The way that *love* clings to his shaky, "*Thank you,*" makes the ground rise up beneath me.



"So you just...never get to see what the actual musical is about?"

"No. It's both the novelty and the mystery that is *High School Musical.*"

I scoot back deeper into the big spoon of Aaron and his arms tighten over my chest.

"You're telling me that they practice the *entire movie* for a nonexistent musical, and then I never get to see it?! That's a crime. That's a Disney *injustice.*"

"*Injustice?!*" Aaron shifts, flattening me to my back, while he stays with his back to the couch, hovering over me with a jesting smile and look of exasperation sparkling in his eyes. "The *real* injustice is that this was your first time seeing a cult classic!"

I scrunch my nose, hiding in the collar of Aaron's huge River Valley basketball tee. The one he insisted I put on after he scattered the clothes I'd been wearing all over his living room and "thanked me properly."

"Oh no, you don't."

I stuff my nose beneath the collar to taunt him, and he follows, propping himself over me to lean in closer. I'm cornered, surrounded by him, and a delicious warmth envelops me into a bubble that is the size of Aaron and me.

"Would you hate me if I said I'd only seen, like, three total Disney movies since before college?"

His eyes and mouth make three identical O's, and suddenly, he's sitting and pulling me up with him.

"*Lucy. Lu. Cy.*" He shakes me by the shoulders and sits me up, pulling me into his lap. "How. *How* am I just hearing about this now?"

I shrug, feigning innocence. "You never asked."

"You're right," he nods. "This one's on me. I'm embarrassed."

"As you should be. Isn't 'what's your favorite Disney movie?' a typical

first date question for you?”

“I am *beside* myself. We’ll have to start tonight to make up for lost time.” He shifts, grabbing the remote with one hand while his other slides to my butt to position me so that I’m more comfortably straddling his lap. “We may be here for a while. Days. Weeks even.”

“Months, perhaps?”

“Mhm. We’ll have to have our meals delivered. We’ll nap in shifts.”

“You’re going to have to keep me around then.”

A softness washes over that silliness, and one reverent hand shifts up to cup my cheek.

“I don’t see a problem with that at all.”

I turn into his touch and place a kiss to his palm before he resituates us so that we’re both facing the TV. He curls his arm around my middle and clicks over to his streaming service. I’m ready to pick a second movie and settle in for that month-long movie marathon.

Snuggling into Aaron’s embrace once seemed so foreign. The more I do it, and the more it becomes a comfortable second nature, the more I begin to wonder if things were ever like this with Scott. In the beginning, when he was my boss, we weren’t even allowed to touch. Even after I graduated, every single interaction felt illicit; he made it seem like we had to hide absolutely everything. I learned to associate romantic touch with impending danger. Here in Aaron’s arms, I feel an incomparable safety that I never knew existed inside of a relationship.

We scroll over our choices when I decide to bring up the elephant in the room.

“Your sister’s wedding is soon.”

His body stiffening beneath me is all the answer I need.

“Mhm. It is.”

“I already talked to Penelope and Juliet. We’re going to have a girls’ day.” He presses his lips to the back of my neck. “I didn’t expect to be invited. This was planned months before me, and I’m sure she couldn’t fit an extra guest on the list. So, don’t worry about it. I already have plans.”

It was meant to reassure him, but Aaron hugs me tighter, and I still feel the tension surrounding me.

It also doesn’t detract from the fact that I kind of *want* to go. Despite crashing his sister’s bachelorette party, and the fact that we didn’t really part on the best terms, the thought of being Aaron’s wedding date—of getting all

dressed up for him, spending the night dancing in his arms? I've definitely daydreamed about it more than once.

"I did ask," he presses to the back of my neck. "She, uh..."

I know what he's holding back. *Why* he's holding it back. He has clearly been storing up the words, *My sister doesn't want you at her wedding*, and I don't blame him. He's only protecting me.

"It's okay."

His head burrows further against my neck.

"No, it's not."

"It is." I release that truth that we both need, and turn in his lap, straddling him. He's wearing a frown of frustration and sympathy. I smooth the divot between his eyes with my thumb. "I remember what it was like—to have no control over my own wedding."

The shift in him zaps like an electrical current.

"Scott and I got married in a courthouse. His parents were our witnesses. Mine didn't show. All of my plans for this grand wedding, the ones I'd had since I was a little girl, were gone. I didn't get a say in any of it. So, if she doesn't want me there—after I berated her brother at her bachelorette party—then let her have this."

He starts to protest, but I put a finger to his lips.

"I'll be okay. Let your sister have her wedding. I'll be waiting for my dance in the kitchen as soon as you get back."

He sighs, frowning against my fingertip before kissing me there.

I snag the remote and scroll over the options until I find the second *High School Musical* movie to queue up.

"I can't believe you haven't taught your team to do warm-ups to a *High School Musical* dance routine," I say, trying to bring back the easiness of the night. "Troy Bolton really got in some good dribbling practice during that one song."

"Hey now. 'Get Ya Head in the Game' is a classic. And we *do* listen to it while we warm-up. Don't doubt me, woman."

I snicker. "I'm just saying, Zac Efron *might* be able to take you."

"And after he handed me my ass in one-on-one, I'd *thank* him."

"So, what you're telling me is that River Valley's basketball coach sucks at one-on-one?"

"Do I need to take you outside and prove just how wrong you are?"

I slide off his lap onto the middle couch cushion.

“Oh, I could definitely take you in one-on-one.” I smirk, crossing my arms over his T-shirt. One side shrugs down my shoulder, and he leans in to press his lips to that newly exposed skin.

“Oh really? My girl’s got game?”

“She absolutely does.”

“Winner picks the next movie?”

“I hope you’re ready to watch something PG-13-rated.”

Ten minutes later, I’m wearing Aaron’s T-shirt, a pair of his basketball shorts cinched comically at my waist, and my Uggs, facing off against Aaron’s wide arms and menacing grin.

“We’ve known each other since August, and I’m just *now* finding out about this mad skill?” he asks as I dribble back and forth between my legs in his driveway.

“You never asked if I played,” I taunt him, keeping up my dribble while I tilt my head playfully.

“Did you?”

“No,” I snort. “But, remember those hockey boys from my cul de sac?”

“Let me guess. They played basketball, too?”

“I might have been the neighborhood HORSE champion.”

With that, I pump the ball through my legs, pull it behind me, drop step, and dart around Aaron to sink a layup. When the ball swishes through the net and lands beneath the basket, I throw my arms up into a victory-V and toss him a “bring it on” look. He gapes, first in surprise, then in friendly competition, biting his grin before snagging the rebound. His mile wide grin beams against the backdrop of the stars like he’s a brand new constellation as he dribbles the ball casually between his hands.

“How did I not know that this Lucy was hiding in there?”

I pulse back and forth on the balls of my feet, my hands wide in a ready position that clearly has the gears in his brain shifting.

“She’s been hiding for a while. I guess it just took the right people to bring her out again.”

The surprise on his face gives me the split second that I need to power forward and spike the ball behind him. I catch it, planning on rounding behind him, when I feel his arms wrap around my middle from behind. I catch the ball mid-bounce, wrapping it against my chest as he huffs, *Oh, no, you don’t!*

“Illegal contact!” I laugh as he spins me around. “This is traveling!”

My feet are off the ground as he spins us in a circle. A moment later, we fall backwards together. But I don't fear the fall. When I land safely in Aaron's lap, the cushion of him and our incessant, middle-of-the-night, adding-stars-to-the-sky laughter, I am the safest I've ever been.

We lay there, beneath the stars, my back to his front, his arms still clutched around me, for moments that stretch beyond time's capacity. I wonder if just the sustenance of his arms around me could keep me going. Eventually, he sits up, keeping me in his lap. I let the ball fall into mine, and he rests his chin on my shoulder, nuzzling the divot between my ear and shoulder with his stubbly chin in slow waves. His voice is as sandpapery as his cheeks when he speaks.

"Just so you know, I like *every* version of Lucy. The one I met at the bar. The one who kept me at an arm's length and covered up her giggles to keep herself safe until she was ready. The one who lets me in and schools me at my own game."

My heart stops. Or it pitter patters irregularly. Or it leaps out of my chest through my back, barreling through his too-big T-shirt to get to its rightful owner.

"All of those versions of you? They're the tile pieces that make up the mosaic. Each of those colors shines through you exactly the way it was always meant to. And I love every single tile that makes up the masterpiece of you, Lucy."

I am in love with Aaron Russo. The version of him here and now, but the one who saw me at the bar and brought me home and offered me his T-shirt and to sleep on the couch. My own little human spot of happiness, when a year ago, I was about to walk off the end of the earth. How quickly he has turned into the center of my universe.

fifty-four

lucy

“I HOPE you know that the last time I moved like this was approximately three days ago on a basketball court, and I am still recovering from those strained muscles. The time before that was in sophomore year gym class before I convinced them to give me a gym exemption so I could take AP classes.”

“Lies,” Penelope says, standing from a full body, touch-your-toes stretch in the middle of the Zumba studio that I’ve been dragged to. “I *know* Aaron Russo has been getting in your cardio like a good coach-boyfriend should.”

My face reddens, but not because she’s wrong. More like, the school’s coach extraordinaire *did* help me get my cardio in. This morning. When he stopped by my place at the crack of dawn with breakfast for me and an appetite that apparently only *the taste of my lady’s pussy* could appease for him. Let’s just say, I had to take said breakfast to-go because my boyfriend took his sweet damn time eating his.

“Oh, she’s blushing,” Juliet purrs. “Good for you!”

She extends her hand for a high five and I lift mine limply. Thank *God* the Zumba instructor claps us to attention to start the class. It’s supposed to distract me from the fact that Aaron has baseball practice on Tuesday nights. Me, Penelope, and Juliet doing some physical activity during the hours that two of our men are otherwise occupied. But, of course, the class is Disney themed. I can barely make it through the *Mulan* number without wanting to text Aaron and ask if he likes the original or the live-action remake better, and ask if we should watch both soon to compare notes.

Penelope has to bump my hip three times to jog me from different paths that I wander down each time the songs switch over. I cannot believe how far into the deep end I’ve gone for this man. It’s like I’ve been dropped into an

excursion in the Bermuda Triangle without supplies.

“Girl, you weren’t kidding,” Penelope chuckles as class ends. She takes a huge swig from her water, then lifts the edge of her tank top to wipe her sweaty forehead.

“About the fact that I am *severely* out of shape?” I huff, uncapping my own water.

“No,” she snorts. “About having it bad for Aaron.”

Juliet pumps her brows at me, and I realize for the second time this evening that I’ve been caught.

“Was it that obvious?”

“You were hardcore karaoke-walking instead of following choreography for all of ‘I Just Can’t Wait to be King’ because you were so zoned out,” Juliet says.

That’s because when Aaron and I watched The Lion King this weekend, I made a joke about Nala’s bedroom eyes during ‘Can You Feel the Love Tonight?’ and then he tackled me to the ground and took his sweet damn time inside of me until my own eyes were rolling into the back of my head.

“Okay. Fuck you both. Whatever magic-coach-dick-vooodoo you’re both on is unfair,” Penelope says.

“Hey, *you* could have your own coach to ride too,” I supply. “He just works at another school.”

Penelope’s joking tone vanishes, replaced by the cold that has been steadily leaving Massachusetts as spring has started to trickle its way in.

“I was close. Once. If I get that close again, I’m not going to be able to pull myself back out.”

I start to fold in on myself. *I did this to our fun day.* But as I begin to follow her toward the exit, Juliet’s hand on my shoulder stops me.

“Let her be.”

“But I—”

“It’s not you.”

Not your fault, Lucy. Not your fault.

“Penelope paints herself in war colors. But she’ll come around. And when she’s ready to talk about him, we’ll be ready with the wine and the Oreos.”

I give her a tight smile and nod before we find our friend waiting for us on the sidewalk, her arms crossed, staring at her phone. The way she asks, *So where are we meeting your two magic-dicks for food after this?* is like watching that coat of war paint slap over every insecurity she’d just shown

us.

I follow Juliet's lead as she links her elbow through Penelope's, taking the other side. We make it to the restaurant, just down the street from Zumba, and I see the guys rounding the corner, laughter lighting them up as they share a joke that I know Aaron will tell me later. Juliet rushes up the sidewalk and into Sam's waiting arms, but before I can get to my happy place, I tug Penelope back.

"Hey." She lifts her brows and crosses her arms, but the softness of her eyes tells me to carry on. "I know how it feels. To not want to talk about it. To bottle him up and screw the lid on so tightly, to let the pressure build every time you let him shake something inside of you."

Pain begins to manifest in her eyes, and I squeeze her elbow, giving her the same thing that she'd once given me.

"I don't mean to pry, and you can shut this down for as long as you need to. Just know that I'm here for whatever you need. To listen while you vent. To give advice. To hold the darts so you can throw them at a really ugly photo of his face."

At that, she snorts. The edges of her lips curve up. She leans her head on my shoulder.

"Thanks, chica. I'll let you know when I'm ready to take you up on that."

She heads inside, and Aaron is there on the sidewalk, waiting for me with open arms.

fifty-five

aaron

THINGS AREN'T SLOWING down for me in the slightest, but at least for tonight, I have my girl.

She's tucked up under my arm, laughing with her whole body at something one of our friends said. It feels selfish to want to take this away from her. But I know she'd follow me in a heartbeat if I asked her to have a quiet night in with just the two of us, takeout, and her head in my lap. Actually, if I'm being honest, I'd probably be even *more* selfish and make it my head in hers. I'm craving alone time with her like a jewel thief in a diamond mine.

My life is a series of work, practice, and wedding prep on repeat. In between, my dad seems to have an endless list of projects he needs help with. I barely see Lucy during the school day anymore, since my lunch period is now during her scheduled one-on-one time with students on her case load. But the way her body is vibrating with laughter, the way that sunlight is finally streaming from her endlessly because she no longer feels the need to pay penance for finding joy in life? I'd be a bastard to take that from her.

We already agreed that she's coming over to my place after dinner tonight, since my brother-in-law to-be's bachelor extravaganza takes up this entire upcoming weekend. If sleeping next to her tonight is all I get, I plan to make the most of it. When the dessert menu is brought to our table, I press my lips to her ear and send up a prayer that she doesn't see me as a selfish bastard for pulling her away when our friends are already placing orders for cake.

"Would you mind if we skip out, baby? I'll make it up to you."

She leans into the chaste kiss I press behind her ear. I don't deserve the sweetness of her hand on my thigh. The way she tilts her head back and

smiles sleepily.

“Nothing to make up for. Of course we can go,” she says, cupping my face in the sweetest gesture, like she can see the tired wringing the color from my eyes.

We say our goodbyes, fending off catcalls from our friends about leaving early. With Lucy’s fingers threaded through mine, I let her pull me through the restaurant, dozing as I’m already picturing my bed and her wrapped around me, when I collide with her back. She’s stopped. Frozen. Her grip on me pierces the back of my hand like icicles. The shock of how cold she has turned startles me awake, but it’s the grating sound of her name coming from *his* mouth that awakens every synapse within me.

“Lucy Goosey. I knew I’d find you again in this town one way or another.”

Satan appears before us in the flesh. There’s a little bit of gray at his temples and in his five o’clock shadow, but no matter how hard I try to manifest the sliminess I know to be on his insides, I can see why Lucy may have fallen for him in the first place. A head of thick, blonde hair, with a scruffy goatee to match; tall and broad shouldered; well-dressed down to a leather jacket that’s probably a deathtrap to women.

Anger boils through me for several reasons, one of them being the fact that on the outside, no one would know that a monster has entered the building.

As the nickname rolls off his tongue, I feel it. She tries to pull away. Tries to sever the connection. I’m not going anywhere. I refuse to let her do this alone.

I squeeze her hand tightly and stand beside her, one foot pressed in front.

So many parts of me are willing my fist to cock back and land on his perfect, white smile. What stops me from following through on every promise to beat this bastard’s face in is the way her growth has skyrocketed in the past few months. Since the moment I’ve met her, Lucy has been steadily climbing out of her shell. In this moment, she doesn’t need me to fight for her. *I* have nothing to prove but the fact that my feet are planted wherever she needs them to be. And she needs me to stand beside her.

She lifts her chin, against what looks to be the hundred pound weight of her head, and looks him straight into the ice blue of his eyes. The corner of his lip tips up into a snarl that sets me on edge. She is poised. Almost too calm in the face of her predator. My heart breaks as I realize that it’s probably

because she's desensitized to him after all he did to beat her down.

Her gaze steels, and she pulls my arm tighter to her.

"You have nothing to find," she says around the broken glass in her throat. "We're leaving."

Despite her victorious words, I have to tug her away, wrap my arm around her waist, as if Scott's stare alone filled her shoes with concrete.

He clocks it, and I feel grimy as a smirk crawls up his cheek.

"Just like you left the other night? Lucy Goosey, you know I'll always find you and bring you back where you belong."

Now, I step forward. *Now*, I have to intervene. Words are poised to fire, my free hand forming a defensive fist because *this motherfucker just threatened Lucy*. I get no farther than a lunge forward when she finally reacts, squeezing my hand.

Like she doesn't want me to intervene. Doesn't want me to hurt him.

My head throbs from holding back, from the way my eyes are practically bulging from my skull. I expend some of that energy as my menacing snarl of protection meets the eyes of a predator.

"*She* gets to decide where she belongs. And it isn't with you, you piece of shit."

We're on the threshold of the exit when he calls out after her.

"Lucy, wait—"

"No."

I feel the rest of her energy expend on that lone syllable. But then, beneath my grip, her entire body melts, a low vibration of victory pulsing through her. I know that his gaze follows us out the door. But my brave girl doesn't grant him her eyes.

I have a death grip on her hand the whole ride to her place. She needs the comfort of familiarity, to process in her own home. We pull into her driveway, and she remains silent, though the noise of turning wheels inside her brain is deafening. I guide her inside, and tug her into the master bathroom, where I fill her bathtub and dump in a generous amount of bubble bath. She lets me strip her down to nothing, lets me guide her into the warm, inviting tub.

Lets me slide in behind her and hold her like she's precious China—made from the finest materials, meant to be handled with care.

I lather her loofah with body wash and massage it into her skin. We're pruny, the lukewarm water popping goosebumps along her exposed skin,

when she speaks.

“I think I want to look into filing a police report. For harassment, at the very least. He never hit me, so I don’t know what more can be done, but I want to stop this before he goes too far.”

I stiffen against her back as she swallows thickly, those words raspy but heavy from years of being carried in the recesses of her plans. My arms, wrapped around her front, cinch tighter.

“I’ll help in any way that I can.”

It isn’t a question. I will do whatever I can to help her feel more safe, to help her realize that she is in control.

“What do you need, sweet girl?” I ask, my lips pressed to the back of her head, inhaling the sweet smell of her. She leans back against me, and I hold on to my world.

“Right now? Just you.”

fifty-six

aaron

THIS MORNING FEELS DIFFERENT.

I've been waking up with Lucy on and off for a few weeks now, and every single time, I think that it can't get better than her sleepy smile pressing into my chest asking for five more minutes. It can't get better than her soft skin beneath my fingertips, tracing goosebumps while she steals extra sleep. It *can't* get better than when she presses her lips, vibrating with those morning bell giggles, into the crook of my shoulder, pulls me closer, then pushes away to stare up into my eyes with that sleep drunk smile shining because she's waking up next to me.

I wonder when I'm going to stop telling myself that lie.

Because the sleepy smiles and giggles somehow don't compare right now to waking up in her bed, with my T-shirt over her shoulders, holding onto me like I'm her anchor, even in sleep. There's no comparison between the two. Feeling the flutter of her eyes against my bicep, watching them peel open, and finding the security there, because she *knows* I'm here beneath her, makes my heart dive down to a depth that I didn't know existed before.

She trusted me wholeheartedly. With her secrets. With her heart. To protect her while she slept, knowing that her demon wasn't far. And when she gazes up at me, her eyes wells of trust, no hesitation to know that this is her safe place? There's a noose around my heart.

"Hey," I say, my vocal cords still strangled with raspy sleep. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning." The clarity in her smile and the raspy hum of her morning voice are a sweet juxtaposition that makes me crave this breakfast smoothie for the rest of my days.

"How'd you sleep?"

It's a much easier question than, *Is he still chained around your thoughts?* Luckily, after a few seconds of her lips lingering on my bicep, she says, "Okay. No bad dreams."

I nod, relief slipping off me like a water slide.

"Are we going to work today?"

She nods. "Yeah. Yeah, I could use the distraction. I'm fine. Promise."

"But if you're not fine..."

"I'll tell you. Promise."

And I believe her wholeheartedly on both accounts.

We're up early enough for a quick shower together before we swing by my place to pick up fresh clothes. I throw some things into an overnight bag too, the plan to stay with Lucy in her safe place unquestionable. It isn't until I'm double checking my bag that I register my almost dead phone buzzing in my shorts pocket. I haven't checked it since before we got to the restaurant, and didn't charge it last night. The endless clog of messages on my screen gives me momentary panic.

A Skittles bag of calls and texts from every member of my family colors my phone, and from the gist of things, it appears that the bakery my sister is using for her cake, dessert table, and cookie favors, accidentally double booked, and can't fulfill the delivery the day of her wedding. It sucks. Royally. But as I push on my front door and see Lucy waiting for me in the front seat, I fail to see how this is my problem, like most of the messages are making it out to be. I don't work for the bakery. I can sympathize, but this is one that I can't fix.

I shake my head, doing my best to blow out a breath before I get into the car so that Lucy doesn't sense my tension, but she's too keen on me.

"What's wrong?"

I don't even attempt to slip a *nothing* by her, not wanting to keep things in. Not with her.

"Something with the wedding," I say, checking over my shoulder before reversing down the driveway. "The bakery can still make all of the desserts, but they can't deliver because they accidentally double booked their delivery truck."

"That's horrible."

I nod, because it is. But there's nothing I can do about it.

"Can someone pick the desserts up?"

I exhale harshly. "Yeah. They're trying to pin it on me, and I don't mean

to be rude or ruin her day, Luce, I swear I don't, but—”

“I can help.”

I can't even make it down the list I had, the things that my family has asked of me that I have done without question because it's my sister and it's her wedding and *of course* I want to help.

Lucy gives me pause. Sends the complaints that have been building up in my system down the drain. I swallow the lump in my throat.

“You'd do that?”

I snag her hand, tuck her knuckles against my lips and rest them there.

I catch her nod from my peripheral, before her quiet, *Yeah*.

I don't want to say what comes next, and she somehow gets to it first.

“I know I'm not invited, but that doesn't mean I can't help if your family needs it.”

Oh. The lump is back in my throat.

“You already do so much. You pick up their slack when it's almost never on you, and you do it with a smile, Aaron. Let me take this off your plate. You deserve to enjoy the wedding with them without having to play cake-pickup-man.”

I try to swallow but can't. Because in the wake of staring her own trauma in the face, this girl is sitting next to me, summing up all of the feelings I've ever had in a few sentences.

I shouldn't be a blubbering mess. I should be helping her through her *own* stuff, but the moment she shifts her hand in my palm, turns it over, and brings my knuckles to her lips, I have to bite my lip to keep it all from pouring out.

“Let me talk to them,” I manage, squeezing her hand as she rests them in her lap. “I'm sure they'll appreciate the help.”

We ride in silence until we reach the block that River Valley Middle/High School sits upon. Through all of the feelings we near drowned in over the past twelve hours, neither of us have brought it up. We pull into my parking spot near the gym entrance, and I turn to face her, stealing both her hands.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, pressing kisses to her knuckles. “Scale of red to green?”

“Blue. But I'm okay being blue for the day.”

It tears my heart into two pieces—one, the fixer in me, needing to repair all of the parts of her that have been turned to blue; the other, swelling with pride at just how far she's come.

“Anything I can do to make it better?”

“Keep being here for me. Let me be alone when I need it. Hold me when I ask you to.”

She smiles with this casual lift of her lips, like she’s trying, but she’s also exhausted. I get it. I also know that no amount of begging would have convinced her to stay home sick today.

“Lunch?” I ask, as we unbuckle our seatbelts and start grabbing our bags from the backseat of my car.

“I think I have Jaycen B. during your lunch today, but I’ll take a rain check.”

Already, her spirits are brightening. I nod, reaching for her hand so I can lace our fingers together and squeeze, and press a kiss to the crown of her head as we cross the pavement to the sidewalk.

fifty-seven

lucy

PENELOPE AND JULIET have a prep at the same time that I have a fifteen minute break before I have to grab a student, and we use up each and every one of those minutes so that I can give them the lowdown. And they want every detail.

It didn't take me long to go through the short interaction with Scott last night, and connect it to what happened the night of the musical. I tell them about how my insides had seized up like I'd been shackled that first time, but how those rusty chains have been slowly snapping away.

They still don't know the full story, the extent to how he imprisoned me during our marriage, but sprinkling in little nuggets, especially about the first words he'd said to me after all this time—intentionally chosen like the sharp points to his claws—gave them enough to picture how deep his abuse and manipulation runs. But in the end, after repeatedly making sure there was nothing they could do to help aside from being my support system, the conversation shifts to how Aaron had wielded the key to set me free.

“Okay, but before we move on to Aaron Russo, and his magic-dick, are you *sure* you're okay with your ex showing up in town?” Penelope asks, sitting on top of one of the desks in Juliet's classroom.

“I'm not,” I admit. “Honestly, I'm incredibly anxious that he'll show up again. He's found me twice now, and when Scott wants something, he finds a way to get it. I know my head will probably be on a swivel every time I walk out my front door. But I...” I shake my head, lofting off the desktop I'd been sitting on in favor of pacing. “Yesterday, when I told him no? *God*, that felt good.”

That same power that had surged through my veins, the shot of serotonin I had at denying the man who held me captive all those years, has been

steadily flowing, a new pulse along with my heartbeat.

“It’s like... like that one word has been trying to claw its way out for *years*, and when I finally said it? I realized I could probably do it again if I have to.”

I tack on a *probably* just in case, but my new friends call me on my bullshit right away.

“*Can*, you queen. You *can* and you *will* say it again,” Penelope says.

“You know that you have it in you now,” Juliet nods. “Now that you know it’s there, you *know* you can do it again.”

“Not that we *want* you to have to say it again, because that means...”

Penelope cuts that line of thinking short, and we give a moment of silence for what it means.

“What do you think he wants?”

At Penelope’s question, I stop my power-pacing and settle into the chair of the nearest desk. My, “I don’t know,” seems to evaporate all of that confidence from a deep well to a puddle in ninety degree heat.

“Didn’t he have to mail you paperwork?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, but I corrected that mistake as soon as possible. It’s not like he has any other excuses to use.”

“Which means, he probably just...” Juliet pauses, shaking her head like she doesn’t want to finish the sentence. “...wants to see you?”

“Yeah, but why?” Penelope asks, hopping off her desk. “What more could that piece of shit have to say to you? Does he honestly think he can win you back?”

The reality of that has already weighed on me. Is he here to coerce me back into his iron fist? I haven’t had time to play the what-if game, not with Aaron’s arms wrapped around me since we pulled up to school, and my students somehow knowing I’ve needed extra care and going easy on me today. I simply haven’t had the time yet to psychoanalyze the hundreds of different reasons that Scott is in Massachusetts.

“I don’t think so. I mean, he... he *cheated* on me, and then when I tried to file for divorce, he gaslit me into thinking it was his idea, and that he was trading up for a *newer model*.”

Penelope scoffs.

“He was *cheating* on you too?!” Juliet shakes her head, aggravation settling over her usually calm demeanor. “God, what kind of man...”

I nod.

“In those last years, when I finally started to realize how ignorant I’d become, how isolated he’d made us, I tried speaking up. And it’s almost like he thought he would coerce me back into submission by letting me catch him trading up.”

“God, what a fucking psychopath,” Penelope says.

Sarcastic laughter jets from me.

“Do you want to know the funniest part? She was around the age I was when we got married.”

“Well, you know what Queen Taylor says...” Penelope supplies with a smirk and side-eye. “*You get older but your lovers stay my age...*”

That gives us all a good giggle, breaking up the tension just as the alarm on my watch buzzes. I have a student to see, and honestly, it’s probably for the better. I don’t need to go down the what-if rabbit hole right now, *especially* with two friends who can probably fuel this fire better than I can. Something tells me that Penelope will spend the rest of their prep period finding Scott’s new—whatever she is—on social media and letting her know that her lover has taken a field trip to the state next door.

The gratitude I have for these two women—who have stuck by my side despite all of the baggage I bring to the table—simmers close to the surface as I walk down the empty halls toward my office. The student I’m meeting with isn’t yet at my office when I arrive, so I take a quick second to check my phone. As expected, there’s a message waiting from Aaron, and I allow the butterflies in my heart to take the dopamine shot and soar.

Aaron

You doing okay, Ms. Lucy? Color check-in??

Lucy

Green/blue. Just had a nice chat with the girls :)

Aaron

Glad to hear it.

Let me know what I can do to help take the blue away.

I find my dwindling sheet of spot stickers tucked into my clipboard, write his name on a green one, place it on the back of my hand, and send him a photo.

Aaron
Me?

Lucy
You.

Aaron
Aw, shucks. I didn't even do anything today except drive you here.

Lucy
You held me up when I thought the world was falling down around me.

Amaya knocks on the door, so I don't get to see the response that three incoming buzzes signals. I casually slip the sticker from the back of my hand to the back of my phone case so that she doesn't see it and start asking questions. I've come to learn that, beneath her hard exterior, this girl loves to play matchmaker, and I do not intend on being her next victim.

"Sup?"

She swings her backpack to the floor and flops casually into her favorite fluffy camping chair. I'd say she's grown a little more comfortable with coming to see me since December.

"Color check-in?" I ask. It's a standard when a student enters my office. If anything, I can at least help them find an emotion as a starting point.

"Purple."

She smirks, and I shake my head and smile.

"Actually, uh... Kinda the nervous one?"

Her face creeps into a blush shade that I can now see, after she started tucking her hair behind her ears more.

"Tell me more."

She sits up straight in the chair, clasps her hands tightly between her legs, bounces her knee, and looks around my office before settling her gaze on mine.

"She called my dad this weekend. Said she wants to talk to us. And I think I'm maybe ready to tell her how I feel."

She swallows, and for the first time, I don't see anger in this girl. I see a

technicolor painting of hurt and betrayal, but also confidence beneath the worry. She's letting her emotions evolve, letting herself *feel* all of the things that she put into a cage the day that someone who was supposed to love her broke her heart. And now?

Now, I get to help her set them free.

fifty-eight

aaron

ONE WEEKEND with Lucy in my arms is simply not enough. The fact that our Friday night through Sunday evening went by in the blink of an eye makes want to stop time before it swindles me out of any more moments with my sweet girl.

On Friday morning, before the bell rang for students to come to class, I sent a text to my family group chat and told them I would be unreachable for the weekend—no bachelor party, no babysitting, no home improvement projects—and that they'd just have to deal with it. Well, maybe not in those exact terms, but they *did* leave me alone for the most part—not without my father “needing my help with a project” on Monday, but you win some, you lose some.

Lucy and I spent the first part of the weekend in our pajamas with a box of tissues and a bottle of wine on standby. I let her pick what takeout we ordered and what movies we watched, and combed my fingers through her hair while she sat in my lap. She didn't talk about Scott much—she seemed more content to let me hold and distract her for a little while. Saturday, after a lazy morning spent in bed speaking with our bodies, her emotions finally caught up with her.

I held her as she cried. Held her as she went through every single what-if scenario that plagued her. Held her as she realized her worth, went tumbling back down the well of self-deprecation, and came out again each and every time.

And in the in between, we *lived*. Brushed our teeth at the sink next to one another. Tossed in a load of laundry of our combined clothes. Ran to the store for a few grocery staples. I watched her attempt to make baked ziti, and then took over while she sat on the countertop and served as my official taste

tester instead.

All the while, images of little Lucys floated in the background. Setting the table, playing with their toys, watching a Disney movie in our comfy living room while mom and dad made out in the kitchen while “making dinner.” I can’t help it. The things my friends and family have warned me about projecting too soon are playing a live-action show right here in the space that Lucy and I have created. That four-letter-word tap dances on the tip of my tongue all weekend long.

And now, in the wake of her ex showing up, something inside of me shifts.

We’ve been going slow, but on Sunday night my foot slips onto the accelerator.

She’s on my lap, wearing my shirt, tracing the veins on the back of my hand while we watch *Pirates of the Caribbean* when I bring it up.

“I’m going to talk to Dani again.” My throat is raspy with apprehension.

“I thought we were all good on the cake situation.”

Her head tilts slightly, her index finger simply continuing its path up and down the blue lines on the back of my hand.

“I’m getting it from the bakery as soon as you text me that the ceremony is over.”

“We are. It’s not the cake. I want you there, Lucy.”

“Where?”

“Her wedding.”

She stiffens for only a moment before her ministrations resume.

“We talked about this, baby. I’m okay with—”

“Yeah, and I’m *not*.”

I snag her hand, the back of mine suddenly cold from where she’s stopped painting my skin, and turn her on my lap so she’s facing me. My other hand goes to her cheek, cupping her face as I bring her hand to my lips and press short pecks to her knuckles.

“There’s absolutely no reason that she can’t make room for *one extra person*. Especially when that person is my forever.”

The words are heavy but raspy. Strong. So why do I feel our foundation shake?

Lucy’s face remains impassive. She doesn’t tilt into my touch, or tear up at that word *forever*. Instead, I see her inhale for five, exhale for five, and know somewhere deep down that I’m not going to like what I hear next. I

don't even get the chance to tug at the lip that worries between her teeth.

"Aaron, we... Your sister said no. And I want to honor that."

My brows furrow, her jaw tilting out of my grasp as she holds my hand rather than letting me hold her.

"We've only been together for a few months. If she—"

"If she would just pull her head out of her ass, and see that I'm not letting you go—"

"Aaron."

Her tone is harsh, cutting me off at the knees. I straighten my back on instinct.

"Where is all of this coming from?"

I can't tell her that I'm afraid of her ex, can I? That I'm afraid of his presence in this town, on edge that he's going to send her back to that place she was in when I met her in that bar.

I can't tell her that, that day we found about Sam and Juliet's adoption, when she'd said that kids are so far down the road for her that she can't even *see the exit*, my heart had bruised.

I can't tell her that I'm so scared that she's going to wake up one day and leave, that I'm desperately trying to hold on to her. *The truth*. So I just say stupid things instead.

"I just want to marry you."

It comes out whispery and breathy and desperate, and I know the moment her eyes widen in panic that I said the wrong thing.

Even if, to my heart, it sounded exactly right.

"Aaron—"

"No no no, listen," I beg. I am begging now. "I know, I *know* it sounds crazy, Lucy, but the moment I saw you in that bar—"

"Please don't do this—"

"...I knew you were going to be my wife one day."

Nervous, breathy laughter fills the space between us that now exists because Lucy has slipped off my lap. Our hands are still grasped together, and I cinch mine there tighter because I can't let her disappear on me any more than she already has. She stares down at our hands, lifting them and letting them sink back to her lap a few times before she lifts her eyes to mine.

And I recognize the look that I've seen more times than I can count.

It's mostly pity, with a dash of apprehension and a pinch of fear.

And it looks so, so much more devastating on Lucy than it has on any

other woman I've ever tied to the word *wife* when all I ever wanted in life was *Lucy*.

"I did it again, didn't I?"

I shake my head, my voice watery as I squeeze her hands and let my grip fall limp, running my fingers through my thick hair until it's a tousled, tangled jungle.

"That depends. How many other times have you proposed marriage to someone you haven't even said 'I love you to' yet?"

She's still here. On the couch. There's a touch of jest in those tense words, but I still can't push past the pain in my gut.

"Oh, Lucy, I—"

"Please don't." She puts a hand up as her eyes pinch shut, and I swallow rocks. "Let's uh... rewind?"

I exhale for what feels like a hundred five-counts.

"Aaron, what is going on?"

"I just don't want to lose you."

"And keeping me looks like this?"

I shrug. Because her question is valid. It hasn't ever worked out for me before. I'm working through what to say next when she continues.

"You aren't in danger of losing me, though." She takes my hand again, flipping it over in between both of hers. "I just need to go slower than this, Aaron. The speed we've been going at is perfect—and I'm *okay* with not going to your sister's wedding. I don't know if I'm ready for—"

"But what if you never are? What if... what if you're content staying on the country roads and I'm ready to merge onto the highway? What happens then?"

My fears manifest into words that I shouldn't have said aloud. Because suddenly, the room is a hundred degrees colder, Lucy is standing, and I see my life flash before my eyes in the image of her leaving me behind for good.

"I think maybe you should go, Aaron."

I stand, chest heaving and huffing, my head so heavy, I fear I'll tip over. I reach for her, but she takes a step back.

"No. No, I'm sorry, Lucy, I—"

"Hey. Stop for a second."

I can't. Because my chest is on fire, and I can't breathe, and the love of my life just asked me to walk out her front door.

"I know that I have some things to work out, but... Don't say that you're

sorry. Don't take them back. You're allowed to feel these feelings, too. If I'm not moving fast enough for you, then, maybe we..."

She's breaking up with me.

"No. *God* no, of course I'm not."

Apparently, I said that out loud. My face is in her hands, like paddles that shock me back to consciousness. I grab onto her wrists for dear life.

"I just feel like right now, in the middle of this conversation, we're on different pages, and we both need a little time and space to sort out what we want to say before we say more impulsive things we'll regret later on."

I was the only one who said regrettable things, and they're sitting in my gut like I swallowed concrete. I swallow again, grunt around the deadness in my throat, and lean my forehead against hers.

"I can stay. I'll stop talking. We can go back to the movie and pretend I didn't open my mouth."

She shakes her head against mine and a sad exhale leaves me.

"I don't want you to lie to yourself. Don't take the things you want and hide them away because they don't fit with my pieces."

I'll make them fit, I want to scream, but I know that her mind is made up.

It was made up the moment her ex-husband told her that her thoughts and feelings weren't valued unless they matched his letter for letter.

"How long do we have to break up for?" I ask with a snotty snuffle, gripping her arms in the fear that this is the last time I'll have my hands on her for a while.

"Sweetie, we aren't breaking up." She shakes her head, her smile pained, tears in her eyes that haven't fallen quite yet. "You're just doing what I asked you to do. Be here for me when I need you. Let me be alone when I ask."

She leaves off the last part of that deal, the *hold me when I need it*. I swallow the pain that comes with knowing that right now, it isn't my arms that she seeks, but the space without them.

I exhale, counting to five, then counting to five again before I remember to let the air back in. I haven't even left yet, and life is all wrong without her.

I stoop to grab the hoodie that I'd discarded before wandering slowly through her home, picking up my duffel in her bedroom and packing it haphazardly. Images that had filled my heart with helium pop all the same, as I take our domestic bliss and pack it all up. My toothbrush next to hers on the counter. My jeans, folded over her desk chair. My shoes next to hers at the front door that feel three sizes too tight when I slip them on.

She wraps herself around me, cinching so tightly that I hope there will be an imprint of her on my chest for when I go to sleep tonight. Her glasses press into my chest, and my arms wind around her, one up through her hair and the other around her back, gripping. I press a million kisses to the top of her head, and a million more when those don't feel like they're enough. We sway back and forth in her entryway until eventually, she peels herself away from me. Her hands clasp at the small of my back, her chin tilting so she can look up at me in a mix of sad peace.

“Get some sleep, okay? I'll see you in the morning?”

I hate that it's even a question.

“I'll stop by your office when I get in.”

“Please do.”

She nods, then presses up on her toes for a kiss that's so chaste and sweet, it almost burns.

I sit in her driveway for five minutes, watching as the love of my life closes the door and puts on the deadbolt.

fifty-nine

aaron

I EXHALE HARSHLY and flip my phone over on my desk. It makes a clattering sound that rattles around in my head, jostling the thoughts I've been trying to keep dormant all day.

“What’s eating you?”

Sam is leaning against my doorjamb. I thought I'd locked my door during lunch today.

“Nothing. Got a lot to do, which is why I'm eating alone.”

I hope it's enough of a hint to make him leave, but unfortunately, my buddy sees that as an invitation. He sidles his way in, snicking the door shut behind him, his lunch in his hand.

“Good. I'm hiding from a student who has done zero work all semester and all of a sudden wants extra credit to bring her grade up from a D- so that she, and I quote, ‘doesn't get her Nintendo Switch taken away again.’ Like that's my fault.”

He scoffs, unwraps his sub, and takes a hearty bite before continuing, speaking as he chews.

“I emailed her mom like twelve times, and got no reply. I even called twice and left voicemails. None were returned. How much you wanna bet I get a scathing email when report cards come out?”

“Yeah. Probably,” I say, failing at feigning interest when my eyes fall back to my phone. To the text that Lucy sent, that should have my heart stampeding. Instead, the photo of the Post-It note I'd snuck into her lunch this morning and the heart emojis have the stupid organ inside of my chest feeling swollen, piercing against my ribcage.

We still haven't talked. Really, we've been skating Olympics-sized circles around each other all week, and it's scraping me raw.

“You okay?” Sam asks around a mouthful of sandwich.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

I stand, throw open one of my file cabinets, and pull out the folder containing a new project I need to start working on. I forgot that I volunteered to help coach an intro summer basketball clinic, and paperwork should realistically start going out to families soon, as the email in my inbox from the head of the program has oh so casually reminded me. As I survey the forms that went out last year, the silence hangs heavily in my office.

“Seriously, buddy, what’s going on? I say this lovingly, but you *never* shut up, and all of a sudden... Oh, God, did you guys break up?”

I freeze. Ice infiltrates my veins, clogs my pores, straps itself to my heart in a chokehold like the ice queen herself is taking out all of her anger issues on me. The thought of losing Lucy vaporizes the air from my lungs, barely letting the, “No,” sneak through. Saying it, affirming that she is still mine, only lessens the pain a little.

“Okay...” Sam stands, taking cautious steps toward where I’m busying myself behind my desk, aimlessly shuffling papers to make myself look busy enough so he’ll leave.

“What’s this?”

He steals a copy from the stack of forms that I’m currently annotating for changes and scans it over.

“Buddy. Do you ever take a break?”

What should have come as a joke with an accompanying chuckle or jab in the ribs is void of all its jest. Glancing up at Sam, I see his brows knit in concern, his head slowly tilting as he looks from me to the form and back. I cannot sit beneath a patronizing stare right now.

I rip the form from his hands.

“Yes. I do. During my lunch. Which is why I had my door shut in the first place.”

If the unconventional bite of my words doesn’t have him backing away, the glare that I shoot him does. His concern softens, and I get a flash of how he is with his wife—the way that his eyes trace over me, down to the desk and the strain in my fists and back before he blinks and takes a step back. He nods thoughtfully.

“Okay. I’m sorry I interrupted. You’re right. The door was shut when I got here.”

I hate that I’m being handled like I’m fragile. Sam gathers his lunch, but

pauses with his hand on the door to my office.

“You know where to find me when you’re ready to talk.”

I nod. Every instinct that I have to please everyone in my life fights to apologize, but in the end, I let him go, hanging my head over the text on my phone and the mound of paperwork in my future.



“I was told that I’m the only person who can break through to you?”

I wouldn’t open up to Sam, so he sent Penelope. *Oh, joy.* Our students are gone for the day. I was planning to hole up in my office and get ahead on some of this paperwork until Lucy came knocking, but now I get to deal with my nosy friends.

“Pen, I don’t have time to play heart-to-heart with you today—”

“You dropped the M-bomb, didn’t you?” My anger, that was in a pot over a burner set to high, is suddenly thrust onto the backburner.

This woman knows me *too* well.

Or maybe, Lucy opened up to her friend.

The friend that she has made on her own healing journey that you’re trying to speed up.

My, “Yeah,” comes out jagged and acid burned. My shoulders, heavy with tension, finally collapse.

“I’m proud of you.”

I tilt my head, lips quirking in confusion.

“I quite honestly didn’t think it would take you this long.”

I huff in annoyed frustration. Penelope plops into the chair opposite my desk and tilts her head from side to side, eyeing me thoughtfully.

“You love her.”

I sigh, running my hands through my hair for what must be the millionth time today.

“Yes. And apparently, that’s the problem.”

“If you love her, then I don’t see a problem.”

“I just want forever to start right now—”

“It *is* happening right now, you dumbass.”

I lift my eyebrow for her to continue.

“Russo, she’s in this with you. Regardless of if she has a ring on her

finger. Just because you aren't making wedding plans, that doesn't mean that you aren't on the path to your happily ever after."

"But what if she's so jaded after her divorce that—"

"You aren't that piece of shit," she interrupts. "*She* knows that. *You* know that. But if you force her into something she isn't ready for? You'll be doing the same thing that sent her running."

That shreds at the already hollow edges of my insides.

You'll be doing the same thing.

The exact *opposite* of everything I've ever wanted to be for Lucy.

I can't be *him*.

But what can I do now?

"If she is your forever, then waiting shouldn't be a hard game to play."

"I know that." I huff, staring at my hands. *Hands that feel empty without her in them.* "I know that. But I just..."

"You've never done this before?"

I shake my head.

"Well, buckle up, buttercup. This is the part of the relationship we like to call *compromise*."

"How do I do that?"

"You talk to her."

She says it with an implied *Duh* tacked to the end, one I don't miss in the deadpan stare she tosses me from the other side of her desk. I sigh in *permanently-exhausted-pigeon*.

"I can't do it now. School is hectic. She has finals that she's prepping for, we have a game tomorrow after school. My sister's wedding is this weekend. How the hell do I get through all of it without imploding?"

Penelope sighs, and I do right along with her.

"I don't know. But I *do* know that if you keep this bottled up inside, if you miss your opportunity to tell her what's truly on your heart, you might not get the chance again."

Her words are no longer making sense, but then I realize that she isn't talking to me. She's staring over my shoulder, and I almost miss the fall of her gaze. It's subtle, fleeting, and disappears with rapid blinks, like she tried to catch it herself before it hit the ground.

"Are you ok—"

"I have tests to grade. You know where to find me."

She pushes up so hastily that by the time she's out of my office, the legs

of the chair are still wobbling in front of my desk.

I sigh, staring down at my desktop where that word *betrayal* seems to have carved itself into the wood.

Having a family has been my dream since I watched *101 Dalmatians* at the age of three and decided I wanted as many kids as Pongo and Perdita. Since I watched Danny Tanner raise his three girls in a big house, and always gave them the world.

Since I watched my parents give us all of the love that they had—despite the ways we still fight sometimes.

And when I close my eyes now, in an attempt to fight my emotions that are trying to bowl me over, I see Lucy.

Holding my hand as we walk through the farmer's market on a Saturday morning. Posing for my camera in front of the Grand Canyon on a spring break road trip. Sitting on the kitchen counter, watching me make us dinner, while she steals cheese out of my prep bowls. Sprawled across my chest in her punny pajamas. Drawing little hearts on my bare skin after we've spent all night making love.

Try as I may, I still see little versions of us.

Pushing a stroller at the farmer's market. Our son on her shoulders at the Grand Canyon. Our daughter wearing a matching apron while I teach her how to make the spaghetti sauce. Having to whisper our moans in bed so that we don't wake the kids.

Those two pictures sit on opposing sides to a canyon, and I can't figure out how to stretch myself far enough to reach both.

sixty

lucy

“YOU KNOW, this is kind of bullshit.”

Penelope snags the straw of her tequila sunrise between her lips, bending over the table we’ve secured in the middle of the restaurant, and takes a drink.

“Why? I mean, it’s *her* wedding—”

“Yes. Yes it is. But she’s almost doing it to be spiteful at this point.”

“She *is* doing it to be spiteful,” Juliet chimes in, swirling her straw around in her own beverage. “You and Aaron are serious. He said there was room at his parents’ table. She could have figured out a way for you to be there.”

“She did!” Penelope laughs, eyes widening. “You’re her cake delivery bitch!”

“Pen!”

“Sorry.”

“No,” I say, “You’re...”

Right.

I don’t want to admit it, but she is. Despite all of my attempted rationalizing, Aaron’s sister has been rubbing me the wrong way since I’ve tried to make amends for...

What, exactly?

“You should cut a chunk out of the middle of the cake,” Penelope suggests. “Since she’s definitely not going to tip you for your troubles.”

Juliet’s eyes widen as she chokes on her drink.

I shake my head and hold back my own laugh.

“Oh, God, you’re right though.” I cup my head in my hands, elbows propped on the table, and rub my temples. “I’m going to drop off her wedding cake, and she’s probably not even going to say thank you.”

“In-laws, am I right?” Penelope chuckles, lifting her glass in a salute.

“It’s kind of nice that Sam and I are both only children,” Juliet agrees.

The thought of Aaron’s family one day becoming my own floats into my mind. That image has been taking up residency in my brain way too much, ever since this weekend when I asked him to leave.

I had been overwhelmed by his sudden acceleration. Marriage before an I love you, the fear in his eyes at losing me, had all jumbled together. I needed ten minutes to breathe and screw my head on straight. But I’d be lying to myself if I said I wasn’t coming around to the idea.

I just wish this week wasn’t so full of *stuff*, because Aaron and I haven’t had a spare minute alone to talk about everything. I’m picturing the aisle at his sister’s wedding transforming into my own when Penelope’s exclamation interrupts me.

“*Claire?! Claire Benson! Get your ass over here!*”

One of the servers turns on a dime and makes her way to our table.

“Oh my God, why are you a whole grown up?! You have a job at a bar?”

“Penny, your brother is the same age as me,” Claire says.

“Yes, but his job is *lives in mom’s basement and plays video games*. You are both still twelve in my eyes.”

“Twenty-four, actually, but I’ll give Connor thirteen on a good day.”

Claire rolls her eyes but smiles.

“Oh! Ladies, my bad. This is Claire Benson. She’s friends with my little brother Connor. Claire, this is Lucy and Juliet. We work together.”

We exchange hellos before Claire turns to our server and whispers an exchange.

“Okay. You ladies are my table now. Let me know if you need complimentary shots. The manager on duty owes me for scheduling me on my day off anyway.”

“No alcohol for me. The hubby and I have plans tonight. Just keep the sodas coming,” Juliet says.

“I’m fine, too,” I wave off. “As soon as these two leave, I need to finish this term paper.”

“Which is why you need *extra* alcohol,” Penelope insists before turning back to Claire. “So, I know my deadbeat brother isn’t doing anything productive with *his* life, but what about you?”

“Just graduated college. Have no idea what I want to do with my very expensive piece of paper, but I *am* looking to get out of my parents’ house

and for a job that isn't serving drunk forty-somethings stale beer and cheese fries, and then going home to babysit the endless supply of children that my parents can't seem to keep popping out."

"Want to long-term sub for my class in the fall?" Juliet laughs sarcastically and takes a swig of her drink. "We will literally hire anyone as a sub—not to say you aren't qualified!"

She waves her hands to cover, and Claire tilts her head in interest.

"Actually, I'm kind of desperate to hang up this apron. I might hit you up on that later."

Claire heads off toward another table.

"Is Sam going to take off after the baby is born?" I ask.

"For the first week, yes. We already put our time in, and since his isn't as long, he already has a sub. I'm hoping someone takes my leave sooner rather than later."

"The need for subs is ridiculous," Penelope says.

"I've covered so many classes this year," I nod. "Bless you guys for being able to teach actual content to teenagers. I had to do sixth grade math for a day, and let me tell you, the number of things I had to Google..."

Penelope—an actual math teacher—laughs.

"You should have called me!"

Our laughter is interrupted by a basket of cheese fries from Claire—*on the house!*—and we spend the next hour on Etsy and Pinterest looking at nursery ideas and baby names before Penelope and Juliet head out.

Juliet and Sam are taking their son, Mason, to the Bruins game.

Penelope is getting dinner with her mom and her mom's friend.

I have a hot date with my laptop and this final. In reality, I could very well leave with the girls and head back to Aaron's place, where I promised I'd meet him after the wedding, and work there, all cozied up on his couch with a Disney movie on in the background. But this little neutral zone of writing in a bar, surrounded by other people, is my defense mechanism against being alone with my thoughts. It's harder to let them eat away at me when I'm in public, and if I was alone at home, I'd be swimming in the deep end.

On top of the sludge of Scott that crept its way back in, Aaron has been distant this week—which makes total sense. Baseball season is in full swing, his sister's wedding has been hectic, teaching middle school, and balancing our relationship, to top it all off? It's a lot of food groups together on his

plate.

But he has been quiet. Reserved, almost. Treating me too carefully. Of course, the demons in my head are still whispering that he's phasing me out, that I did something wrong, and I know they'd be screaming if I gave them the chance to. We had a disagreement, but I know his heart. I *know* that we'll be able to talk things through. I just wish this week would get itself over with so we could get to the bottom of things and get back to being us.

So, buckling down at a restaurant, with other people as my buffer, is how this final will get done. I'm down to the last section when the sound of my name cuts through my zone of focus.

What I don't expect to see is a very angry looking Italian woman in a full face of makeup, holding up the train to her wedding dress so that it doesn't stick to the floor of the bar.

"Oh, oh God, I thought I set an alarm." I begin to panic as Daniela Russo storms her way to my table. I snap my laptop shut and tap my phone to life at the same time.

I still have two hours before I need to be at the hall.

When I glance up from my phone, I realize that it's not anger she's wearing, but panic.

"Aaron's missing."

Aaron's missing.

"What do you mean..."

The worst-case scenarios take over.

He crashed his car. Wound up at the bottom of a lake. Oh God, what if Scott found him...

"We lined up all of the groomsmen and he wasn't there. I tried texting, calling... it's all going straight to voicemail."

Sure enough, I have no messages from him aside from the last text we sent, hours ago, when I told him that the girls and I had made it to the restaurant. My call goes straight to voicemail too.

"We've checked everywhere. He isn't at his house, my parents' house. We even checked school. He mentioned in passing that you would be hanging here all day, and I just figured if anyone would know where he was..."

Her bottom lip wobbles at the same moment that her brows draw in, like she's warring between being upset about her brother's AWOL status, and being angry that she had to resort to asking me for help.

But Aaron isn't here. There isn't room to sort out his sister's feelings towards me when he's *missing*.

It takes me a count of five in and a count of five out to hear his voice in my head.

My secret spot.

"How do I get to your parents' house from here?"

sixty-one

lucy

“I’VE NEVER HEARD of a runaway groomsman before.”

He’s sitting in the exact spot that we’d looked at from the front seat of his car. His feet flirt with the stilled surface, sand sprinkled on the edges of his tuxedo jacket.

I’m so glad it’s a warm evening. I couldn’t bear to see him shivering as the cherry on top of this horrific sundae.

But as soon as I creep closer, my chest cinches anyway.

This is not the Aaron I know. Not the man I’ve been in a steady landslide for over these past several months. He is hunched over, his shoulders heaving like he’s just run a marathon; the back of his neck is tight and the tips of his ears are red. He winces at my joke—*winces*, and *that* is the moment that I realize this is so much worse than Daniela or I imagined. The man that turns around to face me sends a serrated dagger through my heart that tears in jagged cuts.

His grimace is a contortion of angry reds and purples, his mouth indecisive between anger or fear or pain or straight agony. His breath struggles to come, something I hadn’t picked up in the short rise and fall of his back.

I run to him. My heart and soul give me no other choice.

My knees hit the sand and his face is in my hands before he can so much as turn fully to face me.

“Hey. Aaron. Baby, what’s wrong? What happened? Where are you hurt?”

My words rush together like a landslide. I keep one hand on his face while I assess him with the other, wondering how he got hurt and where and what I can do to make it better.

I thought seeing him like this was painful, but the way he tenses in my touch? It's a cheese grater along the innermost parts of me.

"Aaron?" I breathe quieter this time. He relaxes only fractionally, not quite pulling away, but not quite relaxing into me either.

"Everything hurts."

His words are shards of glass scraping against his esophagus.

"Everything hurts and I can't make it *stop*, *Lucy make it stop*."

This time, his words escape like a strangled breath through a coffee straw, and when he grabs my forearms and collapses his forehead into my chest, I snap into work mode. He's having an anxiety attack, and after that thought crosses my mind—the obvious hidden beneath the initial relief I'd felt when I saw him sitting on the beach—I wonder just how long he's been trapped in his own body like this.

"Hey, Aaron, focus on me. I'm right here. Look at me, Aaron. Everything is going to be okay. Can you look at me?"

He grunts, this forced, agonizing sound that rips at the shreds of my heart. His nod is mechanical, the whine of metal almost audible.

"We're going to breathe in for five, and out for five, okay? Can you do that with me?"

His nod is less heavy, but the dull blue in his eyes constricts like a kaleidoscope trying to focus on one pattern. I inhale, counting slowly, trying to help him get his breathing under control, stroking my thumbs over his cheeks in time to my counting. He struggles to get to five, his chest stuttering as we make it to the top, but once we turn around and start exhaling, he gets a better handle on things. We go through it four more times before his breaths are less choppy and his grip isn't shaky where he holds onto me.

"Color?" I ask.

He swallows around a grapefruit-sized lump, and chokes out, "Yellow? Red? Can I be the whole rainbow at once?"

My heart cannot possibly shred any further, and yet somehow, it does.

I nod. "You can." I swallow my own lump, running one hand up through his sweaty hair, caressing down the back of his head. "What will help?"

His, *I don't know*, is a choked whisper. "I thought coming here would. Turns out, it only made everything worse. It was like as soon as I sat down in the sand, everything came tumbling down like an avalanche, and I..."

His breaths start to pick up again, and I force myself into his space, force him to focus on me to get it under control again.

“That’s not a bad thing,” I try to reassure him. “That just means that your body sees this as a safe space. You must’ve had so much bottled up inside, and as soon as you were in a place that you felt comfortable, your body let it all go. It can be overwhelming and exhausting.”

He nods slowly, glancing out over the place he calls his refuge. I give myself only a flicker in time to wonder why that refuge couldn’t be me.

I shake that away, focusing on the man in front of me, scratching lightly through his hair to ground both of us.

“Aaron, baby, what happened?”

His head falls, and seeing him defeated is a blow to my chest.

“I went to find my sisters before the wedding. I wanted to tell Dani ‘I love you’ one more time before she walked down the aisle. I made it all the way to the door when I heard someone say, ‘We can just get Aaron to do it.’ I don’t even know what they were going to ask me to do, Lucy, but I just *couldn’t* anymore.”

His shoulders tense again, and he lets it all spill out.

The obligations he’s taken on. His to-do list that’s *actually* a mile long and extends into dates unknown, chaining him down as its prisoner. And by holding him and giving him this release, I do my best to set him free.

“...and my dad, he won’t take no for an answer. It’s like I’m still ten years old, and he has the authority to ground me if I tell him no.”

He’s been talking for the last ten minutes. I shifted to sit beside him, and have been rubbing at the tension in his shoulders this entire time, feeling it slowly start to soften.

“It’s like I’ll never be good enough for him. Like I’ll never be able to earn a place in my own family, because there’s always *something next* that I can fail at.”

He shakes his head, and for a brief moment, I remember the conversation I had with Penelope. The one where she explained how Aaron usually races through relationships, desperate for his own happily ever after. I wonder how much of it stems from his relationship with his father.

“He thinks that since I don’t have a family, I’m at his every beck and call *after school and practice are done.*”

He inhales, like this breath is meant to power the sails of his next confession, but before he can, I feel all of the progress he’s made build itself back up tenfold beneath my fingers.

He pauses. His neck rotates on rusty gears as his pinched, pointed gaze

flicks from my chin, to my nose, to my eyes. I brace myself for death.

“Lucy, I... I want to marry you.”

It comes out as a choked laugh, like he finds the want comical now.

Like he’s laughing at me.

His distance this week registers. I know that we still haven’t talked about what happened this weekend, but I had no idea that it was eating at him this much.

“I’ve wanted to be married, to have a family, my whole life. But I had no idea what that meant until you walked into that bar. I can’t even *begin* to imagine the alternative. Even the thought of losing you puts a hole in my chest that leaks like a slow bleed.”

I know *exactly* how he feels. Both of us are bleeding out onto this beach, turning untouched sand crimson with our wounds.

I can’t lose him. I *cannot* lose him. If finally escaping my abuser turned me into a shell of a human, losing Aaron will take that shell and obliterate it into unsalvageable dust.

“You told me that you needed to go slow, and I decided in the middle of what we had to put my foot on the gas and weave up onto the shoulder to beat out rush hour traffic.” He runs both hands through his hair. “I finally found the woman I was meant to spend forever with, and I ruined things because I got scared that I’d never be enough for you. I would say that you’re everything I’ve ever wanted in life, but Lucy, I never even knew what I wanted until I met you.”

The ribbons of my heart braid together and cinch.

“You challenge me on every level. You have made me slow down and reexamine the way that the world works, the way that love is supposed to be, and I’ve landed on two feet that know which way to go because of *you*. All I’ve ever wanted in my life was to love someone else, and that’s just because I hadn’t met you yet. And I can’t even give you the time that you need to heal. God, Lucy, you were with him for *ten years*, and I’m trying to rush you down the aisle in ten minutes. This is all my fault. *All* my fault.”

I see Scott, just a flash of a memory, standing in the middle of our kitchen. I had been so excited to direct the middle school musical, and he had told me it was a waste of time.

Aaron’s face lit up like the Fourth of July. Aaron helped me choreograph the whole thing. Aaron bought a DVD copy for every member of his family, and wanted to host a viewing party.

I see Scott, texting my friends to cancel plans; I see Aaron texting me during girls' night with Penelope and Juliet, making sure we're safe, and asking if we need a ride home.

I see Scott putting my *Die Hard* DVD in a box when I moved in, and Aaron watching movies over text when I was still too scared to let myself sit on his couch.

Scott had broken me, and I had believed him without hesitation when he told me I'd never get those pieces back. But I have. And Aaron Russo's hands have calloused and scarred from holding them for me while I decide where I want to put them. But he has done it all with a smile on his face.

It's his sad laughter that finally turns my heart to dust. I don't even get the chance to save any of the bits before a breeze carries them away with his wistful smile. He shakes his head, licking his lips.

"I've imagined our life together so many times. Our sons have your button nose. Our daughters have your smile and your courage. We have a white picket fence and a pool in the backyard. But I tried to press fast forward, and I have this horrible feeling that I pushed you away like I've always done. I don't want to do that to you, Lucy. I can't force you into my picture like he did. I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

There are simply no more fancy ways to describe how my heart is churning inside of me. Aaron's chest is cracked open before me, and his swirling ocean eyes pull me under.

My chest caves, constricting around a hollowness I've never felt before. Not when I lost my parents. Not when I lost my friends. Not even when I lost myself. Losing Aaron will take my soul right along with it. I can't even swallow down the truth I've feared from the very beginning, the words crafted by my ex-husband into a sharp knife's edge, spelling out my constant final blow.

I am not enough for him.

The broken parts of me are not enough for the picture that Aaron sees when he imagines his future.

But I can be.

Enough for him.

The tears in his eyes and the way that he so desperately wants to fix this prove that to me.

There is joy in my heart when I realize that, not only *can* I be more than enough for him, but I'll build myself back together with my hands and his

working side by side.

sixty-two

aaron

I DON'T DESERVE *her kindness. Not after the things I said to her.*

She sits there with this look of hollow pain, like I've just taken what was left of her and gutted it from the inside.

In a way, I did. In a way, this Sophie's Choice is doing the same thing to me. It's like we're slowly killing each other, but severing the connection would make us bleed all the same.

When she starts to speak, for the first time in almost fifteen minutes, it's like she's swallowed the sand beneath our feet.

"I didn't think I'd ever pull myself out from under him."

I hear the uncoiled gears shift as she forces that sentence out.

"But..."

It's like a switch flips. My brave, strong girl, the light shining in her eyes again with a hint of desperation. She shakes her head, smiling as she kills her demons with the sword of her own determination.

"I want to fight."

I feel that control, the thing she desires the most, as it surges in her veins, lighting up her eyes. She takes the reins in a death grip, like fighting for us will be her final battle.

"I want to fight for us, Aaron."

The weight of those words makes me feel somehow like I'm carrying the weight of the world and a hundred pounds lighter all at once.

"I want those things. The little boys who you teach to be gentlemen. The pool and the dog and the Disney vacations. The house—maybe without a fence around the front. I'm kind of tired of being caged in." She graces me a knowing smile, because she trusts me with the freedom she both wants and deserves. "I want it all. With you. But we have to slow down a little, baby.

I'm still in the slow lane, but I promise I'm getting there."

She doesn't look at me as she makes this plan with herself. Her fists are clenched in her lap, and I know that somewhere inside, she's still climbing the mountain that Scott built. She's telling me, but she's telling *him*. Telling *herself*. Putting up her dukes to the last shreds of him that are still holding her captive.

"And it's because of you."

Finally, her eyes meet mine. Finally, that space that has been between us all week seems to dissipate. Finally, my love is in my arms, her forehead pressed to mine, my face in her hand, the world swelling in the cracks between us.

"If you keep holding my hand in the slow lane, I promise I'll catch up to you soon. Don't give up on me just yet. Don't give up on us."

That syllable, that *us* that she keeps using as my salve, has me disintegrating the space between us. I crush myself to her, stealing that last word as a promise, the one that joins her with me and me with her and leaves no room for fear as long as we face everything head on *together*.



"Lucy stays."

I return to the wedding with one cake, and one condition. Dani nods and bites her lip. A hint of regret washes into the stoicism before she throws herself around me.

"I'm glad you're okay," she says into the side of my neck. I squeeze her back.

"Me too. Let's get you down the aisle, okay?"

She pulls away sniffing, and I take a handkerchief from my pocket and offer it to her.

"Don't ruin your makeup. Knowing you, I'm sure it was expensive."

"Damn straight, it was."

She dabs delicately at the corners of her eyes, hands it back to me, and turns to Lucy. I worry for a split second that the tension in this room will crush us all, but my sweet Lucy always knows what to say.

"I brought cake."

It rolls so sugary sweet off her tongue, followed by a shrug of her

shoulders, and then Hell freezes over, pigs fly, and Walter Elias Disney and his frozen head rise from the dead.

Daniela throws her arms around Lucy.

I can only make out her weighty, tear-stained, *Thank you*, before we're being rushed in all different directions to get this show on the road. I'm wanted by the altar, and I bring my girl with me, finding her a seat with my family in the front couple of pews.

"You sure you'll be okay by yourself?"

"Lucy?!"

My cousin Giulia pops out of a pew, and after Lucy gets over the initial shock, I lose my girl to the people she connected with at Christmas. My heart is surrounded by warm fuzzies that only multiply when she stops following Giulia to turn and kiss me sweetly.

Her saccharine smile locks it all in.

I grab her forearm and tug her back to me because I need her to know.

"Green."



"I look ridiculous."

She's giggling. Full on, white teeth shining, no holds barred giggling.

"You are the most stunning person here."

"Your sister is in a *wedding gown!*" she gapes.

"And I only really watched her while she came down the aisle. I was looking at you the whole time."

Her face flushes a brilliant shade of pink, and she hides her smile in the crook of my neck. We've been slow dancing to the past few songs, and the feel of her arms up and around my neck is quite possibly making me high.

"I am literally wearing a hoodie. Your sister is going to kill you for making me stay."

"Let her," I say, but then catch myself. I find the stray strand of hair that has disentangled itself from her ponytail and tuck it behind her ear, cupping her cheek as punctuation to that move. She leans into my touch as I stroke her cheek with my thumb. "No. Actually, I'm not going to let her."

She tilts her head, and I hold my grip, tilting her chin toward me.

"She's my sister, but you're my future, Lucy. However long it takes us to

get there.”

The weight of that statement settles heavily in my throat, like every answer to the questions I’ve been having about a future with Lucy and what that might look like have just been flattened by a boulder. Clarity washes over her eyes, shining back at me in a mixture of hope and disbelief.

“Whatever comes our way, we’ll battle it together.”

It’s a blanket to everything that’s circling around us, trying to break us down. She doesn’t quite have the words, and that’s okay. Because the cinching grip of her arms winding around my middle, the heaviness and headiness of the *Thank you* that she presses between the lapels of my tuxedo jacket right up against my heart, are more than enough.

sixty-three

aaron

“HOW’S THAT LEFT FINGER FEELING?”

“Heavy.”

I find Daniela outside of her own party, leaning over the patio railing, overlooking the grassy knoll below. Some of our younger cousins are playing tag, the party-wear their parents buttoned them into carelessly discarded. The booming playlist that she meticulously put together is muffled by the closed French doors of the hall. I left Lucy inside, boogying with my ninety-seven-year-old great-grandma.

Sliding my hands into the pockets of my tux pants, I bump my hip against the railing and stare down at my beautiful bride of a sister. Her makeup has faded, her elaborate up-do hangs a little heavy with the weight of the day. She looks happy, tired, and a little wistful.

At my question, she fans out her left hand between us, letting the diamond and the gold of her new wedding band shimmer in the moonlight.

“Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess,” she says, still staring at her ring. “I mean, it was everything I’d hoped it would be after I got pregnant and had to change all of my plans, but...”

“He’s a good guy.” She flicks me a wary gaze, and a puff of laughter escapes me. “I know I said some things about him that day, but—”

“No. No ‘buts.’ What you said was true.”

The silence between us, as she meets my gaze, serves as the reflection we’ve needed for a while now.

“Did you ever think that, maybe, I was jealous of you?” she laughs, sarcasm biting her confession, and stares out over the courtyard.

It shocks me. My expression pinches, and she continues.

“You’ve always had such a fairytale outlook on life, poured your heart and soul into every relationship you’ve ever had and... I never had that, Aaron. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love Travis. I love our baby girl and our life together. But we kind of just fell into things. You seem to roll out the red carpet from day one.”

I can taste the bitterness, the jealousy that slowly seeps from my sister. I think of all the times she’s led the charge in making fun of me for being a hopeless romantic, remember the bitterness of her words that Sunday as she’d attacked my love of love.

“You stepped between her and I at the bar, and I knew that day that if it came down to it, you’d choose her. I saw that look in your eye even back then, and it made me realize that I’ve never had that before.”

“That doesn’t give you the right to take it out on me.”

She turns back to look me in the eye. “I know.”

“And it doesn’t give you the right to take it out on *her*.”

My gaze steels as I speak about Lucy. It’s a warning to Daniela that though I have a pretty thick skin when it comes to myself, I won’t tolerate any slander against Lucy.

Her tight smile is filled with the apology I’m not sure she’ll deliver in words.

“I’ve been a shit sister lately.”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “Just a little.”

I don’t dismiss her. Don’t tell her that it’s “okay,” because damnit, the way she’s been treating me *isn’t* okay. But that doesn’t mean she doesn’t deserve a little grace.

“So, is Lucy the *actual one* this time?”

She changes the subject, flips the somberness of our moment. Her eyes widen as she tosses her hands up—we’re Italian; we can’t *not* emote with our entire body.

It’s my turn to gaze out over the horizon. I smile at the endless starry sky.

“Yes.”

I don’t know when. I don’t know what the future looks like for us. All I know for certain is that some way, somehow, Lucy and I are written in those constellations. All of the other women before her, the ones I thought could give me the love I saw in the movies, don’t at all compare to the truth of love that Lucy has shown me.

Love doesn’t have to involve a white picket fence.

It looks like spreading out the map, and choosing the path together. It might not get you to your destination the fastest, and there might be road blocks along the way. But as long as she is in the front seat with me, sharing the drive, I'll be right there with the snacks, holding her hand for the journey ahead.

sixty-four

lucy

I WANT to tell him so badly.

I find it hard to believe that it hasn't snuck out yet.

I love the man that spent all weekend helping me pick up our pieces and fitting them together into a picture we can both agree on.

I love the man that made sure his sister's photographer snapped a photo of us at her wedding, him in a tuxedo and me in a River Valley hoodie.

I love the man who can't roller skate to save his life, the one who takes me on dates that reflect everything I missed while married to an abusive man, the one who has a note typed up in his phone of all of my favorite snacks and my orders at fast food restaurants.

The man who has a different list, one of "our spots," and another he doesn't know I've seen of all the new places he still wants to take me.

But I am so in love with *this* Aaron that it hurts.

Lying in bed the morning after his sister's wedding, I asked him to tell me.

All of the times that he pictured our family.

What we look like. The names he picked out. The vision that he's had in his head since he was a boy. It scares me a little, the way that all of a sudden, the accelerator is churning, but I love Aaron enough to value the family he wants—and wants with *me*.

"...and of *course*, their first park will need to be Magic Kingdom. I just can't decide what ride to take them on first. It will probably be different for each of them—we have to factor in their personalities, you know?"

He has so far told me that he wants five kids—three girls and two boys, if he has a say; some of the names he likes, and what kind of home we'll have—he has it narrowed down to three different neighborhoods. He has been on

a tangent of what our family Disney vacations will look like for the past several minutes, and I have been doing nothing but laying on his chest while I let this cinematic masterpiece play out in my mind.

I want it all.

The ranch home with the finished basement, the bunk beds for the boys, the big backyard with the treehouse he said we could *Sneak off to so we can make out after they go to bed*. The Disney trips with the matching T-shirts.

Most of all, I want the domestic picture he's painting. Picking out the colors for the nursery. Folding laundry together. Wearing matching pajamas on Christmas because it's his family tradition. Starting new ones of our own.

"Okay. Your turn."

He is miles away from the man I found on the beach, huddled in a cave of his own darkness with the secrets he thought he had to keep from me. My golden retriever boy has returned. I smile up at him warmly, brushing his floppy bangs off his forehead only for them to fall back down again.

"My turn for what?"

"Tell me about us," he says, and my insides take flight. "What does our future look like to you?"

I pause, tapping my fingers against his chest.

"It looks like you and me."

That's as far as I've allowed myself to get. Idling down the road, not quite yet turning out of the neighborhood.

"I like it. Tell me more."

Use your words, Lucy.

I inhale for five and exhale for five. And press my toe on the accelerator. Knowing that this man will be my seatbelt if I crash and burn along the way.

"I think I'd want our girls to dance..."

Speaking it out loud opens up a door inside me I hadn't realized was locked.

"Mhm. What else?"

"And our boys would take after you—baseball, basketball... I want the minivan full of sports gear."

He runs his hand through my hair. My scrunchie is wrapped around his wrist after he took it out.

"I..."

I shake my head. I'm done thinking that my past can poison us. That bringing it up will ruin the moment.

“I never let myself picture it. My picket fence of the past always had barbed wire at the top; I’d climb toward the top and get so close to the pretty picture only to be tricked back into a false reality where I was still trapped.” I fidget with my scrunchie that’s wrapped around his wrist, just another reminder that I’m in my safe place. “I realized that I didn’t want to bring a family into that prison. I haven’t really gotten past that yet.”

He smiles. Because he is Aaron and I am in love with him and I know that he will work through my past while holding my hand and being on standby to take the wheel as soon as I need him to.

“That’s okay. We can fill in the blanks as we go.”

A part of me is still tethered. Still anchored to the *but...* that I pray won’t come. Thoughts of my speed not synching with his anymore, or the fallout of not being what Aaron needs. I chew on my bottom lip, and just like I know he will, he tugs on it with his thumb, and I kiss him there.

“We’ll use whatever colors we can to paint this picture, sweet girl. And we’ll do it in our own time.”

As I lean down to capture his lips with mine, straddle his waist, let him hold me as I move on top, let him anchor me as the power to keep my control flows through my veins, I see that rainbow shining on the horizon, the signal that hope comes after the storm.

sixty-five

aaron

“WORKING HARD, COACH?”

I smile at my paperwork before lifting my head to the sunlight streaming in through my office door.

“To what do I owe *this* pleasure?”

“Just wanted to say hi before the girls and I head out.”

Lucy, Penelope, and Juliet have started going out together after school once a week, and I love that so much for her. She lost her old support system, and to see her building a new one all on her own is empowering.

She rounds my desk after closing my office door, takes a seat on my lap, and wraps her arms around my neck before kissing me softly. Her lips linger, unmoving, and I smile against her.

“Good day?” I ask, nuzzling her forehead with mine.

“Mhm. Amaya had a big breakthrough today.”

“That’s amazing.”

I know that she can’t give me details about what goes on in her one-on-one meetings with students—unless it involves me, or that student gives her permission. Simply hearing that another student trusts her with their trauma makes me so proud to be hers.

“What about you?”

I sigh, tapping the paperwork on my desk.

“Long day,” I share. “Longer night, by the looks of it.”

“What is this?” she asks, twisting on my lap to lift the paperwork for the basketball camp that is spread out on my desk.

“Last year, I volunteered to help coach an intro basketball camp that takes place here every summer. Somehow, that also came with all of the administrative responsibilities. I’m sorting through the paperwork so I can

make packets to send over to the elementary school.”

She blows out a breath, inspecting each of the documents quickly.

“That seems like a lot.”

“It is.”

I nod. She stands from my lap, and I let my hands linger on her hips before she pulls completely from my arms.

“You have a lot on your plate.”

I nod again. That’s putting it lightly. What lingers in her eyes though makes me reevaluate. I broke down just how heavy that plate is on the beach last weekend, and though airing it all to Lucy was helpful and took away some of the weight, it has been slowly returning all week.

“What do you think will happen if you say no to someone?”

“That they will hate me and resent me and never speak to me again.”

I say it with wide eyes and a curt nod. I’m pretty transparently confident about the people pleaser in me. Lucy’s eyes widen, and she eyes me cautiously before looking at my desk.

“Maybe…”

She chews her bottom lip, but I’m too far away to stop her.

“Maybe you should let something go.” She pauses, gauges my reaction, and when I don’t immediately interrupt, she says, “You can’t always be everything for everyone else. Sooner or later, you’re not going to have enough pieces left for yourself.”

It’s the wake-up call that I need. The piece of me that wants to laugh, to tell her that I made commitments, that I have the time to help, fades away.

I need to start prioritizing myself. It has been a nagging thought in the back of my mind that only made its appearance more known when Lucy started coming around.

Prioritizing myself means thinking about my future, my future with *her*, before being a yes-man. It means taking a look at all of the pieces that I’m giving to others, and deciding which ones I need to keep for us instead. But…

“I don’t know where to start.”

Her sweet smile reminds me that I don’t have to do that alone.

“I can help.”

She drags a chair behind my desk, and opens her clipboard to a fresh sheet of paper. Once we finish making the list of all the things I do for other people, the length makes me a little sick. Exhaustion pings like I lined up the winning numbers on a slot machine. And the sad fact is, I knew it all along.

Knew on the nights that I dedicated to others that I was sacrificing my own time in order to prevent people from resenting my rejection.

This goes so much deeper than I'm willing to admit, but Lucy takes it all with a smile and an offered hand for me to hold.

"Why don't you rank them? Prioritize the list."

"Easier said than done," I chuckle sardonically. "That's like putting people in an order that matters most."

"That's exactly what it is."

When she puts it that way, my heart stutters.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"We'll start easy. If your dad and Sam called you on the same day and asked for help with the same project, who would you help?"

"My dad. And then Sam after we finished."

"It's the same project. It gets done in the same amount of time."

I grimace. Letting down my boy even in an imaginary situation hurts. Calling his classroom extension to apologize right now would be overkill, right?

"Okay. My dad."

"And Sam would completely understand."

She says it gently, understanding my demons and handling them with the utmost care.

She puts a number one next to where *Helping family* sits on the list, and we continue from there. Eventually, she hands me the pencil. Putting this list in order by my own hand is empowering. It gives me the control of dictating who gets my attention first. As I'm rounding out the list, I make a realization, and run the eraser down the left-hand side of the paper where I'd marked the numbers. I snag a pen and ink her name at the top, with a one beside it. Her quiet gasp is the only response I hear as I amend the rest of the list. When I'm finished, I see a smile on Lucy that she hasn't worn yet for me.

It's warm contentedness. Like she's finally allowed herself to breathe, finally allowed herself to believe what I've inked onto this paper, what she's stitched over my heart.

I make it my new mission to see this smile as often as possible.

She helps me decide that, while I can help out with the camp this summer, I need to give up the organizing aspect—which was something that I never agreed to in the first place.

"It sounds like he knew that you liked to say *yes*, and assumed instead of

asking.”

It’s her kind way of saying that I’m being taken advantage of. I’ll admit that when I’m ready. For now, I nod.

“Okay. I think I’m going to email him and then call it a day.”

I lace my hands together and crack my knuckles before popping open my laptop.

“I can help.”

“What, you don’t trust me to say no?” I jest, wiggling my eyebrows.

“I just want to make sure you don’t add something like, ‘but if you really need my help and can’t find anyone else to do it...’ to the bottom.”

“You know me too well.”

And boy, do I love that she does.

sixty-six

lucy

CLINKING my giant sundae over the table with Aaron's equally monstrous ice cream makes my heart swell.

I finished my last final for my first year of graduate classes this afternoon, and he decided that we were celebrating *immediately*. Having him sitting across from me, waxing poetic about how proud he is, has the full circle almost closing. It's worlds different than the way things ever were with Scott.

Obtaining my undergrad to him meant that the threshold of him being fired for being involved with a student was one step further away. We didn't celebrate *me*, but what *he* gained by having me. Things have never been that way with Aaron. We celebrate big and little milestones together.

"What's next?" he asks, digging his spoon into chocolate ice cream riddled with cookie pieces.

"I think I'm going to take the summer off," I say. "I was going to push through and knock off another class, but..."

I tilt my head, smiling at him. He knows exactly what I mean, but I want him to hear it.

"I like the idea of spending all summer just getting to know us."

"Me too." His sober gaze clicks with mine. "Actually, I've been giving it some thought. I'm going to say no to this basketball camp."

"The whole thing?"

He nods. "The whole thing. There are plenty of coaches and parents who can help out. Let someone else shoulder the weight."

I reach across the booth and squeeze his hand. Suddenly, a grin explodes across his face in technicolor, unmatched by any fireworks show I've seen.

"We should take a trip!"

Excitement has his head perking up like a puppy's and I giggle at the

image of his ears flopping with the motion.

“You know, I haven’t been to Disney World since I was a little girl...”

My spot of happiness for today is one-thousand-percent the look on this man’s face when I ask him to take me on a Disney trip. You’d think I had just proposed. We are deep into planning—well, *Aaron* is deep into planning. I’m finishing my sundae while his melts—when I sense the storm cloud overhead.

The ding of the diner bell. The chill of the air like the AC just kicked on. The reaction of my heart, like that pitter-patter is tied to the bloodstream of another. And I know that Scott is here before I turn to look over my shoulder. Mostly because I see joy drain from Aaron’s face like I just dumped a bucket of water over a freshly painted canvas, leaving only the red stains in its wake.

I reach across the table and cover his hand in the same moment that he pushes against the table to stand up.

“Don’t.” It comes out as a whisper, because even after all of the progress I’ve made, my body still reacts. It will likely take me years to flush out all of the remaining toxins. But I know that, even with my energy level suddenly depleting, I have more strength than I once did.

I sense every footstep, my focus trained on watching the red in Aaron’s face tint to purple. I don’t give him the time of day until he actually speaks.

“My, my, look what we have here.”

The gears in my head turn slowly, but it’s a battle of my wills. Parts of me still tether to that sound, the warning that if I don’t respond to him right away, there will be hell to pay. I tug against them, making sure he has to stew there in his own filth for a while before I’ll acknowledge him.

“What do you want?”

I clench my fists, willing the residual shake of my voice to disappear.

“Is that any way to greet the love of your life?”

I swallow around the golf ball that appears in my throat and squeeze onto that man.

“You aren’t him, Scott.”

He scoffs, but as he turns to give us his profile and rolls his eyes, I see it. The age and wariness I never did before. He’s older, more jaded. There are prominent creases around his eyes, his lips, spanning his forehead. He has let go of the polished façade he put on every day. Or, maybe, I’m just able to see past the goggles that accompanied my marriage certificate.

“I called my lawyer, and all of the paperwork was filed. We have nothing

left to discuss.”

His gaze narrows, his lips forming a snarl as he shifts his focus over to Aaron. I have the fleeting thought that I will throw myself in front of him to protect him, but I know that I don't have to. Aaron squeezes my hand, and when Scott clocks the gesture, I see his castle begin to crumble.

I never saw a vulnerable bone in his body. Part of what attracted me to him in the first place was the pillar he offered me to lean on. I never felt like I could provide anything *for* him aside from obeying his every command. It shatters, briefly, and it's because I forced myself to memorize all of his tells that I catch it in the first place.

He isn't budging. Something flips in my soul. Not pity, not even in the slightest. But I suddenly know why that full circle hasn't had the chance to close. The universe has gifted me the closure that I need, and I have to take it.

“You have five minutes,” I say. It isn't a concession, because I sit up straighter as I make the decision that I know Aaron will argue with. He eyes me with anxiety radiating from his wide eyes, but I squeeze his hand tighter, offering him a soft smile as I whisper, “I'll be okay.”

“You sure?”

I nod, swipe my thumb over his knuckles, and feel the anger radiating from his skin. He nods, gruffly. I know that he trusts me, but he absolutely hates this, almost as much as I do.

He heads to the counter, and perches on a red stool far enough away that I know he won't be able to hear our conversation, but is on standby all the same. Taking his seat, and not quite fitting there at all, is my own demon from hell.

“Lucy Goosey. You—”

“Don't call me that.”

I pinch my eyes at that stupid nickname, and peel them open once I've released all of the memories that came along with it. The way I'd once thought that nickname was something special, because no one else on staff had a nickname. The way it linked us as other, *together*, like our own little secret. But then, it was the way he'd beat me down, disciplined me like a child instead of someone he had once claimed to love. His gaze narrows, but his hands that are folded on the table—pushing Aaron's melted ice cream aside—inch closer to me.

“Look at you. You're still as pretty as I remember.”

He reaches up, like he has the audacity to touch me, and I flinch away so

fast that the twitch of his head and the pinch of his eyes rings a little more hurt than it does anger at first. I flatten my back to the booth.

“The last time I saw you before I moved, you told me that I had *let myself go*, and that *I* had forced *you* into replacing me with a younger model. Which is it?”

His eyes widen in shock, and he sits there for a good minute, sucking on his teeth, before he lets the snarl and snake eyes drop into place.

“You always did have a fuckin’ mouth on you, you little brat.”

“No. I didn’t. And that was the problem.”

I laugh in exasperation, feeling the wings around my heart flap at how freeing this feels. I think of all those words I practiced with Samantha, all of the times that Imaginary-Lucy told off Imaginary-Scott.

“Where is the woman you cheated on your ex-wife with anyway? Did she follow you on your little field trip?”

He avoids my penetrating gaze, his shoulders hunching.

“...left her.”

“What was that?”

“I left her,” he barks, not mumbled into his shoulder this time.

“Did you now?”

Suddenly, that charming, knight in shining armor suit falls over him like a blanket. His blue eyes sparkle deceptively, a softness washing over him that I know will come clean in the blink of an eye. His smile curls, like the man at my first day of RA training who had “taken me under his wing.” The way he can snap between his different personas is chilling.

“I miss you, Lucy.” His chest heaves, a breathless chuckle floating there like he can’t quite believe it himself. “I was so wrong to think that she could ever replace you.”

He says it with a soft reverence, that a younger, more naïve me would have taken as an apology. Would have immediately succumbed to. But I no longer miss the signs I did when we were together.

“She was never as good to me as you were. She doesn’t treat me the way you did.”

There is no apology. No, *I was wrong*—he doesn’t admit to ever being the problem. He places the blame on *her*, because...

“You mean, it took her longer than a decade to see you for the manipulative abuser that you are, and she didn’t lay down and take it like I did?”

Anger boils, the scrunch of his face contorting into the menace that I came to fear whenever I thought about disobeying him. He never hit me. Never laid a wound on anything but my heart or my dignity, which I now know is no better. Abuse is abuse whether or not it leaves a visible bruise. He never laid a hand on me, but in this moment where I'm calling him out, I wonder if he still thinks he has the option.

"Tell me, did you actually leave her, or did she leave *you*, Scott?"

"You stupid slut." His lip curls into that snarl that, I'll freely admit, still makes me cower. "You never knew when to shut the hell up and be grateful for what I fuckin' gave you."

He shoves up from the table, knocking over Aaron's sundae soup. It starts to slime its way over the table, landing in my lap. He places his hands flat on the table, leaning in just casually enough so that he doesn't cause a scene.

"I know where you live now, Lucy. Don't think I won't make your life a living hell for embarrassing me by thinking you could just walk away."

Scott stomps his way out the front door of the diner. His threat lingers as I watch the chocolate swirls stain the hoodie—Aaron's basketball hoodie, the one that says *Coach* over the heart.

My head snaps as I realize that Aaron hasn't come to the table. Oh no, the stool that my man was just occupying is still spinning as he storms toward the door.

I'm up and out of that booth faster than the stain can set.

"Aaron—"

I rush to him, snagging the sleeve of his hoodie and tugging. He barely stumbles, his hand flat to the door to push it open.

"I'll kill that motherfuc—"

"Please just—"

I step in front of him. Between Aaron and the door. Rage paints his face in angry reds and tense veins. I have never seen this man angry. He won't even kill spiders—he insists on setting them free.

I put both hands on his face and force him to look at me. When I widen my eyes and inhale, he follows along with me.

In for five. Out for five.

"Let me handle this."

"I'm going with you."

It isn't a question, but it also isn't a demand. It's Aaron by my side, fighting with me every step of the way.

“Scott.”

He’s halfway out the door, onto the sidewalk, when we catch up.

“What?” he spits.

I breathe in, filling my lungs to capacity. Aaron squeezes my hand. My words are scratchy, clawing their way out from the depths of my soul where I’d caged them for late night wishes.

“I’ll file a prevention order if I have to.”

I swallow and set my feet.

“I’ll call the university, and tell them what happened.”

“You consented to *everything*, you little—”

“I didn’t consent to the manipulation. The things you stole from me. The people you cut me off from.”

His eyes narrow, and Aaron steps closer to me.

“I didn’t consent to the way you took my soul, broke it, and turned me into a shell.”

Scott’s lip flips with the beginning of a snarl.

“I didn’t consent to the *abuse*, Scott.”

My voice breaks on those last two words, his name, and what he did to me. But when he tilts his head with a predatory grin, a rattlesnake closing in for the kill, something inside of me turns.

“You want a happily ever after with this pussy, who won’t even fight for you? You’re *broken*, Lucy. You always will be.”

“I may have been in your hands, but *this* man? He helped me pick up the pieces you tried to shatter, and he spends every day holding onto them until I’m ready to put them back together. You held me down. He lifts me up.”

He spits on the ground at my feet. And as he turns on his toe and stalks away, I feel it in the air again.

The shift around me. The electricity pulsing, a warmth washing in. My heart regaining its regular beat right before two strong arms wrap around me.

“Are you—”

“I’m okay.”

I turn in Aaron’s embrace, watching the dark storm turn to calm waters in his eyes. Wrapping my arms around him, I feel the tension in him melt onto the sidewalk, like his sundae all over the diner floor.

I nuzzle into his chest, let him run his hands all over my body in the middle of the sidewalk because *he* needs it. Needs to know that I am safe, that when I say I’m okay, he can feel it with his own two hands.

“I can still—”

“He’s not worth it,” I say, shaking my head against his fast-beating heart.
“You are. *We* are.”

“My brave, strong girl.”

He presses those words to my temple before cupping my face, tilting my head to put his eyes on mine. I know that there’s some lingering fear there. With Scott, I wonder if there always will be. But I hope that he can see the flickers of strength and courage and hope that are there because of *him*.

I rest my forehead on his chin, letting us both breathe in the security of one another for a moment, before I see the giant stain of chocolate ice cream on his hoodie that hangs down by my knees.

“I got ice cream on your hoodie.”

His head tilts, and the warmth of his smile lingers between us.

“Guess I’ll have to get it off you then, huh?”

When I lift my gaze to his, this time, nothing but my want for Aaron is visible.

sixty-seven

aaron

MY ENGINE HUMS QUIETLY. Springtime birds greet one another in between building their new homes in the trees overhead. Cars zip past on the road behind us. And Lucy's thoughts are so loud, they overpower it all.

We spoke about it at length, and in the end, she asked me to come. At the end of the school day, I drove her to the police station. Knowing that she wants me on the other side of this makes my love for this girl swell over.

Her knee is bouncing so fast, I wonder if Lucy is getting ready to take off and book it out of my car before we can even enter the precinct.

"Yellow or red?" I ask, resting my hand over her knee to settle the bouncing.

"Yellow."

"Do you want to breathe with me?"

She inhales deeply and lets it go. It's not quite her five count, and she shakes her head with a nervous smile.

"I want to say it so badly, Aaron."

I don't have to steal her gaze to know what's written there. The anguish that washes over her at holding back from telling me that she loves me? Oh, my sweet girl.

I cup her cheek. As soon as she worries that lip between her teeth, I rest my thumb there. It takes her a count of ten to kiss me.

"I want to tell you, but not like this." She shakes her head, but I don't let her go as it all spills out. "I've wanted to tell you so many times. At your sister's wedding. After we ran into Scott that first time. Lying in your arms while you picked out our future minivan based on the safety ratings."

She laughs around this one, and fresh tears begin to pool. I let these ones fall, knowing that they aren't sad tears anymore.

“I wanted our own moment. Not on the heels of something big. Not because of anything other than me loving you, and you loving me.” She tilts her head in my palm, leaning into my touch so I can hold her there.

“My sweet Lucy.”

I hold her chin in both hands, pressing my forehead against hers, against the center of my everything.

“I don’t need your love just in case. I need your love for every moment. Our highs and our lows. Our victories and our failures. Whatever happens today, and what happens every day after. I need your love *because* life doesn’t always go our way. We’ll use it to fight every battle from here on out.”

Her tears flow freely, and I kiss her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, ready to tell her that she can say the words that my heart has been holding onto for a long time, whenever she takes the reins that I’ve been dying for her to hold.

“I love you, Aaron.”

Her teary, smiley laugh turns those words into my own.

“I love you so much, sweet girl.”

I pull her to me, over the center console, our kiss sealing the words that I’ve said so many times *just in case*, but never felt the weight of until now. Never understood that *love* meant *Lucy* until she walked into that bar.

We giggle, kiss one more time, and head inside. I hold her hand while she waits to speak with an officer, squeezing her not for good luck, but in reassurance that whatever happens next, we will face every moment forward together, before she walks through those doors.

“I’ll love you no matter what comes next, Lucy. This future is you and me and whatever else comes our way.”

sixty-eight

lucy

A STRANGE SORT of alphabet soup is turning within me. It's a mixture of Aaron's, *I love you*, and the shadows on the wall in the shape of Scott and his vile, *you're broken*, and the thousands of what-ifs swirling around that make it hard to pinpoint any one single emotion. I am in every color zone and all the ones in between, and it's making me nauseous.

An officer is ready to take my statement, but I haven't said a word in six minutes. I'm getting my timeline straight, lining up the events to lay out for the records.

Part of me is afraid of unearthing all of these truths out loud, one right after the other. Another part is washed in embarrassment, as the memories come back to the surface, that this went on for so long.

I have to keep reminding myself that I didn't *let* any of that happen. And right beside me, with his thumb working soothing circles over my bouncing knee, is Aaron. The words from the front seat of his car manifest themselves in his presence, in the soothing feel of his touch, and the knowledge that, no matter what I say in this room, he will still love me the same. Love without what-ifs, without *just in case*. Love that conquers every bit of my past, and protects every bit of my future.

"Okay. I think I'm ready."

"Okay. And remember, we can take as long as you need." The officer smiles before clicking her pen. "Please state your name for the record."

"Lucy Greene."

A sob forms around the name I haven't really said out loud since I moved back.

My parents' last name. The one I put back on all of my paperwork, but felt like a thief in doing so.

Aaron squeezes my hand, and I transport myself back to my sophomore year of college.

To falling for the resident hall director. The one with the charming smile who made me believe I was the center of his world. I wish I'd been able to tell that naïve girl that he thought he was the sun.

I am drained by the time all of those words are out in the open. My throat is raw and my hand is numb from how hard Aaron is holding on to me. It isn't until I come out of my own haze that I notice the twin streaks of tears still cutting down his cheeks.

At one time, I would have deflected that pity with a tennis racket. Now, I let someone feel sorrow for the girl who once believed all of those words. I cry for her too sometimes.

The officer, though a picture of professionalism, was biting back her own emotions the entire time in the constant exhales and shaking of her head. She explains what the next steps in the process look like, and as soon as we're wrapped up, I let Aaron guide me out into the sunshine.

We don't make it far before he has me in a bruising hug.

I let him. Let him hold me, run his hands over my body like he's checking for invisible wounds, when he knows that they're all on the inside. It takes him ages to finally speak.

"He..."

I peel myself from his embrace, and it reminds me so much of those few weeks ago, when I was telling him that we needed space. The fear and heartache in his eyes radiate both anger and overwhelming tenderness.

"Can't get to me. My body *or* my heart."

I cup his face, brushing my thumbs over his cheeks. His eyes close, and he exhales sharply.

"And *you*..."

He shakes his head and spreads his hands wide to cover my entire back.

"...are safe. Here. With you. I'm not under his control anymore. I'm free, Aaron."

That word, *free*, rings like the bell in a clock tower. I giggle. *Giggle*, despite the time I'd just spent unearthing the entirety of my trauma. Because it isn't bound to me any longer. Like the words I'd expelled in that precinct floated away on the springtime breeze, the ribbon that had once been wrapped through me like DNA now nothing but a careless piece of litter in the wind.

Still, I let Aaron drive us home with my hand clutched in his. I let him strip us down and possess my body with his, let him hold me close and trace every inch of my skin as he processes on his own. I let him have his time to taste my freedom, and know that from here on out, I'll be spending that time exactly the way I choose to.

With him.

sixty-nine

lucy

I HAVE CRIED on the last day of school twice. Once was my very first year as a school counselor. I grew so attached to each and every student that crossed my path, that watching them walk out those doors for summer vacation really got to me. The second was my last year at my school in Rhode Island, because I knew I wouldn't be coming back.

As we wave off the busses on the last day for River Valley Middle School, I feel a few pesky tears clinging to the corners of my eyes, and I let them fall.

They aren't sad tears, though. I let them fall because I know that I am strong enough to catch them. And when I'm not? Well, the gym teacher beside me who has his hands cupped around his mouth so he can hoot and holler at the waving students will be there, too. Alongside the friends that I've made here, the circle I'm slowly starting to grow.

He catches my eye and grins. I can't find the words to describe how his smile is an amalgam of pride, love, and elation, but I feel that warmth all the same. My own smile cracks wide, my shoulders hunching with a laugh that conveys, *We did it!* and *I love you so damn much*, all at once.

The line of teachers all bunches together, some giving high fives. Aaron wraps his arm around me and ducks to press his lips to my temple.

"You did it."

"No, we did it. How else would all of those kids have learned the rules of pickleball?"

Gripping my waist in one hand, he turns me so that I'm facing him, and tucks a phantom stray hair behind my ear. There's nothing there to fix. He just likes touching me.

"Smartass." He hums, and his smile turns more serious, his thumb

painting hypnotizing strokes beneath my ear. “You did it, Lucy. You conquered your biggest demon, got yourself out, and survived your first year on your own. And I am so *immensely* proud of the woman you have become throughout all of it.”

It isn’t new, this praise. Aaron tells me every day how proud he is of me, how much I inspire him with what I’ve overcome. But in the face of the final bell ringing and the rest of our lives in front of us, this one means a little more.

I slide my hands up his chest and fist his River Valley baseball T-shirt.

“I’m so grateful to have had you here for all of those days.” Pushing up on my tiptoes, I press the tip of my nose to his. “And for all of the days to come.”

I kiss him. On the sidewalk in front of our school, with a few of our coworkers still mingling about. Simply because I can. I am his, and he is mine, and though our love is meant for us, I’m not afraid if the world knows about it too.

“Alright, alright. Break it up. You can make out *after* we get drinks.”

Sam, Juliet, and Penelope find us, and we assume the typical after-school teacher position: standing in a circle. It isn’t until I remove myself from Aaron’s embrace that I feel that piece inside me click, as I make the final piece to the full circle.

My people are here to lift me up, invite me to last-day-of-school drinks, and be my rock when I need one.



“No, you two are boring. You’re going to the *Cape* this summer? *Lame.*”

Penelope has had one too many margs, but hey, we are on summer vacation now. She’s allowed.

“It’s our tradition!” Sam insists.

“And I’m trying to live vicariously through my friends who have interesting love lives. Do better.”

“Oh, come on, Pen. You *do* have an interesting love life!” I offer, snickering with Juliet about Penelope’s latest Hinge date. The guys eye each other in confusion, and Penelope rolls her eyes.

“He cancelled our date because he ‘had to film his weekly YouTube

video.' He sent me the channel. He has like, a thousand subscribers."

Aaron and Sam wince, and Sam flags down the bartender and orders her a shot.

"And, Fords, *you're* getting a baby! You need a babymoon. Go somewhere more tropical."

"The Cape has beaches."

"The Cape is less than two hours from here. I will take Mason for a week. We'll get matching tattoos. Aaron and Lucy can help me babysit, right?"

Sam chuckles. "Mason is a teenager, Penelope. He doesn't need a babysitter. He also doesn't need a *tattoo*."

"Fine. What are *you* two love birds doing this summer?"

Penelope gives up on Sam and Juliet and hones in on Aaron and me. We look at each other, and I catch the glimmer in his eye. The one that knows exactly what he whispered to me on the short drive over here while his hands were in my pants, playing his new favorite game of *Race the GPS*. My face flushes at the memory of his promise to *spend as much of this summer break in your pussy as possible*.

"Ugh. *Blech*. They're going to bone. Okay, we *get it*, you're all in *love*."

Penelope snags her straw, but only gets the rattling of the ice in her empty glass. As if on cue, Claire, her brother's friend, returns to the table with a new one.

"Happy Last Day!" she says, dropping our order of nachos on the table too. "Are you guys excited for summer vacation?"

We all give some sort of affirmation before Penelope asks, "What about you? Any big plans for this summer?"

"This," Claire says with a hint of dejection.

"You could still join our crew!" Juliet offers. "No one has picked up my long-term sub job yet."

"And it looks like we might have enough maternity leaves lined up to keep you for the year," I add. Two other teachers announced their pregnancies before the end of the year, which, while super exciting, puts us all on edge for the upcoming year of absences.

"Come back to River Valley as a teacher!" Aaron agrees.

Claire looks around, her blonde ponytail waving as she scans over the bar wistfully.

"Are you sure I'd be qualified?"

"The only qualifications for a substitute teacher right now are to have a

high school diploma,” Sam deadpans.

“Or a GED,” Juliet shrugs.

“Basically, be a warm body in a classroom,” Aaron nods.

“Which you would be *way more than*, Miss Valedictorian.” Penelope tilts her head, shrugs, and takes a sip of her new margarita.

Claire sighs, but I see the light turn on in her eyes. “Alright. Where do I sign up?”

Claire promises to return once she’s on her break so that we can show her the employee portal. Juliet is already emailing Nathan, who after today is officially our new assistant principal, that she wants Claire covering her room for the first eight weeks of the new school year.

We go back to sharing our summer plans, which include a trip to a family lake house for Penelope, nesting for Sam and Juliet, and a week in Disney World for Aaron and me.

“You guys aren’t going to get matching T-shirts, are you?”

“Already *waaaay* ahead of you, buddy,” Aaron tells Sam, before pulling out his phone and showing Sam his Etsy cart. “I can’t decide which ones I like more: the *Tangled* set, or the ‘Mickey to her Minnie.’”

Sam steals Aaron’s phone and his face scrunches in disgust, scrutinizing it before showing his wife.

“That doesn’t say ‘She’s My New Dream.’ *Please* tell me that doesn’t say ___”

“Oh. Oh, but it *does*,” Penelope laughs, stealing the phone from Aaron. “Wait! I like this one. It says ‘Let’s wear matching shirts! Said no one ever.’”

I let my friends have their fun. Because, to me, having a man who wants to wear a T-shirt that claims me is so far from the cage I was once locked in. I’ll wear the matching shirts forever if it means I get to keep on loving him.

“Any big plans when you guys get back from visiting the mouse?”

“Wait, Aaron, you aren’t going to propose in front of the castle, are you?” Juliet asks. “It’s a little cliché.”

“Hey now!” he says, putting up both hands, feigning offense. “I’ve made it this far without rushing things. I think this is a new record for me.”

Such a far cry from the man who thought he had to sprint down the aisle in order to hold onto love. He’s proud of me for so many things, but I’m proud of him too.

“Actually, we might, uh...” I breathe in for five, out for five, and find Aaron’s warm, soft smile. “We might take a trip to Rhode Island. To see my

parents.”

Our table falls silent, and one by one, I see that warm, soft smile paint over the faces of my friends. The people who know my story, and who will support me in the journey ahead. Penelope’s freckles crinkle as she smiles, and I think back to the woman who forced me out of my shell with her foot in my doorway and her weekly nights out. She covers my hand and squeezes.

“Good for you, Luce.”

I beam back.

Aaron and I walk hand in hand back to his car, after we’ve had a few rounds and a few laughs with our friends. The summer sun isn’t close to setting, but I’m ready to go home.

Home. To wherever Aaron and I end up. His place or mine, or somewhere in between. The poison no longer lingers in my veins. Sure, it tries to attack from time to time, and I know that that girl will always be a part of me—the one who had to find her strength, find her voice, and battle her way out. But in the end, she *did*. And she does each and every day.

I look up to the man beside me, the one who packs a shield and sword for me every day, just in case I can’t fight things on my own. And I smile.

“Anything else you want to add to our summer bucket list?” he asks, squeezing my hand.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “I like that we have some down time in the middle of everything. It gives us time to just relax before the new school year. Time to keep getting to know each other.”

“And to get to know that fine, *fine* body—”

“Aaron Russo!” I shout, smiling through my exasperation as two families pass us by on the sidewalk. He laughs, releasing my hand to wrap his arm around my waist and pull me close.

He does make good on his promise before we’re even through his front door. And as we’re laying on his couch, making our way through the Disney movie list he made for us—the color coded, strategically organized list that I’m not-so-secretly enjoying—he reminds me of every reason I allowed myself to fall for him in the first place.

We’re spooning on his couch when he says, “I’m not going to propose in front of the castle.”

It catches me off guard, and I start to laugh, but then his hands are on my hips, turning me so that we’re facing, and I catch the earnest in his sparkling blues.

“I want this time with you. The getting to know you part. Enjoying our love without the finish line.”

His hands slide up through my ponytail, and my scrunchie slides onto his wrist as he combs his fingers through my hair.

I think about the way that he has crawled at my pace this whole time, taking baby steps and making sure that my heart is cared for. I cup his face, my sweet man, and try to do the same.

“I love you, Aaron. I’m ready to walk into forever with you, no matter the pace.”

And the sweet way that he kisses me is all I need to know that he feels the same.

epilogue

aaron

“CHEERS!”

An assortment of different drinks clink together over the circular table. I cannot believe that summer is over, but it also seemed so endless.

In between mini vacations, and excursions around our city, Lucy and I simply enjoyed one another’s company. We got to know each other better each and every day, at a pace I’ve never had in a relationship. We took things at our speed, knowing that forever is inevitable between us.

I held her through Magic Kingdom fireworks. Held her through seeing her parents for the first time in years. Held her in the quiet moments in between. And now, I’m checking my phone wondering where she is.

Sam, Juliet, Penelope, Drake, and Claire surround our table, but our circle isn’t complete. I slide my phone back into my pocket, and two minutes later, I’m checking my watch.

“Where’s the wife?” Sam says, with an accompanying elbow to my ribs.

We didn’t sneak away and get married over the summer, but Sam knows about the ring I bought after my girl walked past a display case in the mall one day in July and I saw her eyes light up.

It isn’t killing me though, not seeing that ring on her finger. Keeping it hidden in the bottom drawer of my desk at work so she won’t find it. I don’t need to see sparkles on her left hand to breathe, because I know that Lucy is my forever. We’ll get there in our own time, and for now, I’m simply enjoying the ride. One that includes more and more of her stuff at my place every day until she’s comfortable enough to move it all.

“She went back-to-school shopping with her mom. I guess they’re just running late.”

After spending a weekend in Rhode Island back in June, Lucy and her

parents are getting to know each other again. She's taking baby steps, and they've even had a few family sessions together with her therapist, Samantha. When her mother called for their weekly chat and asked if Lucy needed any help getting ready for school, she decided that going shopping for new clothes was a happy medium.

I check my phone again, before deciding to trust in Lucy to get ahold of me if she needs me, and turn my attention back toward the group.

"How long are you two planning on staying out?" I ask the new parents.

"I'm giving him no longer than thirty minutes until he's dragging me out of here," Juliet snickers.

They adopted their daughter, Hope, a month ago, and from the daily photos in our group chat, she already has Sam wrapped around her little finger.

"It's just getting close to bedtime, and—"

"And Mason and my dad have it under control," Juliet interrupts him, a hand flat to his chest. "It's only for two hours, and she was fed, changed, and asleep when we left."

He sighs, looking over to the door of the bar, before shaking his head.

"But I *always* sing to her before bed. What if she wakes up? You know what—I'm gonna call them."

He heads outside, his phone already pressed to his ear. Juliet rolls her eyes and smiles.

"How is he going to manage being gone for an entire school day?" Penny laughs.

"Terribly. He's currently trying to get me to keep the baby monitor on twenty-four-seven so he can stream it on his work computer after his paternity leave is up."

"Okay, but, that'll be Aaron too," Penelope smirks. And you know what? She isn't wrong.

"Hey now, I've gotten better!" I try defending myself.

"Oh? And where exactly *is* the love of your life? I need my gossip time, and I have a feeling Sam is about to drag Juliet home."

"Oh no," Juliet insists. "This momma *earned* her first night out. My husband can do what he wants."

Penelope clinks her margarita with Juliet's glass, and I check my phone.

"She's on her way. You'll get your girl time."

Claire returns from the bar with a new beer, her head tilted and her face

scrunched.

“Hey, doesn’t that guy work at River Valley? I feel like he was in the office when I signed my contract.”

She points toward the bar, and we all see Nathan Hawkins, the assistant principal, seated alone on a bar stool.

“Yeah, he’s our new AP,” Penny says. “What the hell’s he doing?”

“I don’t know.” Claire shakes her head. “I was at the bar for five minutes, and the entire time, he was just staring at that glass of whiskey.”

Which is exactly what he’s doing now. We all watch, wondering if he’s going to do something different, when Penelope says, “Maybe he’s hoping that if he doesn’t finish his drink, in-service doesn’t start tomorrow.”

Her eyes widen comically, and we all laugh, taking swigs from our own beverages as I feel it.

The shift in the air. Warmth that fills the bar. The pull of the open door tugging a thread on my soul that belongs solely to her. A spotlight illuminates a wide circle around her feet, following her with precision as she enters the bar, lets the door snitch closed behind her, and tilts her head on a slow swivel. Only this time, I don’t have to wonder who she’s looking for.

The light brown of her soft, straight ponytail emits a halo that tilts with the simple move of her index finger as it slides up the bridge of her nose to push her wide-framed glasses into place. And then, she sees me. And that light I thought had surrounded her explodes like the day of creation when she smiles and starts walking my way.

And I smile right back.

“Hey, sweet girl,” I say into the top of her head as soon as she has her arms wrapped securely around my waist, her smile pressed to my chest.

“Hi, love.”

She tilts her chin up to look at me, and I swear I could spin the earth on my finger like a basketball when she smiles at me like that.

“I missed you today.”

I sigh. Hearing her say that will never get old.

“I missed you, too. How was shopping with your mom?”

“Good! I got a few new outfits. She and my dad want to do dinner next weekend in the city, if you’re up for it.”

I nod, warmth filling my heart at the strides she has made in reconnecting with her parents over these past few months.

“How was therapy?”

In between vacations and beach excursions and Red Sox games, Lucy's therapist, Samantha, helped me to get connected with my own therapist, to talk about the stresses that have slowly been eating me alive since—as I've recently realized—I was a kid. He has been helping me peel back the layers of the people pleaser in me. It has been a little nerve-wracking and a slow-going process, but it has definitely been rewarding.

I give her a few tidbits about today's session before Lucy greets the rest of our crew, then heads to the bar with the girls to get a drink. The moment they leave, Sam returns, worry bunching his eyebrows like twin caterpillars.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing is wrong. My son is finishing up his summer homework, and my daughter is asleep in her bassinet, and I'm at the bar."

I chuckle and slap him on the back.

"Enjoy it while you can, brotha."

When the girls return, our group kind of parts—the ladies are all listening intently to a story that seems to take Penelope ages to get through about the audacity of *some guy*, and while Sam, Drake, and I try to talk shop and complain about the Sox' severe lack of a pitching staff this summer, I can't help but let my gaze drift. Thankfully, every time it does, Lucy is there to catch it.

She's eyeing me from her side of the table, and I read those glances like I've been learning to do all summer.

I missed you today.

I want to hang out with just you.

Let's go home and cuddle on the couch and just be us.

And I want that more than life itself.

I tilt my head, then shoot my eyes toward my wrist. *Five more minutes?*

She glances toward Penelope, then back to me, rolling her eyes with a smile. *Make it ten?*

I grin, tip my beer back, and place the empty bottle on the table.

It's kismet that Sam loses his resolve right when those ten minutes are up.

"Okay. I need to see my baby—no offense to all of you, but the wife and I are out of here."

"Boo!" Penelope shouts, her hands cupped around her mouth. "Down with domestic bliss! Who wants *shots?!?*"

"I'll stick around," Claire says. "I need you to rewind this story back to

the beginning, anyway. Where did you two meet?”

“In the *womb*, unfortunately.”

Penny and Claire form their own little pod. Lucy sneaks away, and as she gets closer to me, I scrunch my face in question. One of her eyelids flutters.

“Ask me later,” she says about whatever drama Penelope just spun, then presses up on her toes, her lips pressing against my ear. “I’ve been thinking I’d like to spend my last night before school starts on my knees for the gym teacher’s—”

“We’re out too!”

I cut her off, knowing what her words do to me, and not wanting to put on a show for our friends.

“Aaron Russo, are you cutting out *early*?!” Drake exclaims.

My arm winds around Lucy’s waist, and I feel my heart click into place as I pull her into my side.

“Yep,” I nod. Thinking back to last year, when this is all I’d been asking for. *My girl on my arm, begging me to leave early.* “My lady’s ready to go.”

“Use protection!” he shouts after us. “No glove, no love!”

I shake my head, kissing Lucy’s temple, as we walk out of the bar hand in hand.

We get out on the sidewalk, and I can’t stop myself from gripping her hips, turning her in my arms, and kissing her like the world is ending. When we finally come for air, an escaped tendril of her hair blows in the wind. I tuck it behind her ear as she bites down on her bottom lip.

Lately, it hasn’t been as much about anxiety as it has a tell that she wants more. And just like I always do, I let her tell me. I tug that thumb from her teeth, and let her kiss me there.

“What do you want, Ms. Lucy? Use your words.”

She smiles, soft and sweet, all I’ve ever wanted in this world sitting right in the palm of my hands.

“Take me home.”



also by allie marie

Hey there, lovely reader! If you're looking for more romance, check out my other book babies!

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read sam & juliet's head in
apple of my eye!

Chapter 1 - Sam

“She’s going to *kill you*, Mr. Ford.”

I chuckle silently, pressing my index finger to my lips to silence the twenty-three seventh-graders who have followed me down the hallway to the closed door before us. My lips quirk beneath my fingertip.

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take.”

I wink at Gavin, the student who is standing right behind me carrying the goods—one of maybe three students in this class I trust enough to carry the box of rubber frogs, typically meant to model dissection.

Today, they’ll be put to a different purpose.

Juliet Baldwin’s classroom is silent enough that if a lock of her curly blonde hair fell to the carpeted floor, it would echo. Her students have their noses buried into the deep creases of a book, lined in desks that are organized in neat rows. It’s almost too perfect. *Too* orderly. *Too* much of an opportunity.

But that’s *all* part of my lesson.

Teaching a group of squirrely teens about the hierarchy in an ecosystem by reading out of a textbook?

Boring.

Showing them exactly how those roles play out in nature, and giving them a good memory to pull from when we review?

And the look on their English teacher’s face when we come bombarding into her neat and orderly classroom wielding rubber frogs?

Priceless.

The metal of the door handle is cool in my palm. As I tilt it downward slowly, I peek over my shoulder. I bring the index finger of my free hand to my lips, indicating that my students remain silent. Like dutiful soldiers, they

nod, a few of them miming the zip of their lips. With all voices silenced, I raise that same hand in the air and mouth my countdown from three, two, one...

“FROG ATTACK!”

Gavin and Ben lead the charge, followed by the rest of my class. They spill into Juliet’s classroom like milk from a toppled cup, rubber frogs held high above their heads as mass chaos erupts. I stand back, my shoulder propped up against her door frame with my arms crossed, smiling smugly.

The true icing on the cake happens when Ben runs straight up to Juliet, who is frozen in absolute shock, and places his frog on top of her head with a maniacal smile before running away, flailing his arms like a wacky waving inflatable tube man.

God, I love my job sometimes.

I’m equally invested in watching my own class run around as I am watching the faces of some of my other students who are currently in English. Some are annoyed, and attempt to continue reading, while others stare dumbfounded at my zooming scientists.

A few students from Juliet’s class attempt to join in on my class’s fun, and I do zero to step in and stop them. As soon as her own students are part of the anarchy, Juliet finally puts her foot down.

“THAT IS ENOUGH! EVERYONE. SIT. DOWN.”

I can’t help it. I almost laugh. But I do manage to swallow it down before she notices.

The classroom is quiet enough that you can hear the mice’s commentary. Three of my students are frozen with dummy frogs above their head, one is standing on top of another student’s desk, and two are—for reasons I am *not* going to investigate—laying on the bookshelves.

Before Juliet can utter another peep, I step fully into the room, stroking the close cropped hair on my jaw.

“What observations can we make about this ecosystem, class?” I ask, arms folded over my chest as I don my “teacher voice.”

Several of my student’s hands pop into the air. The squirrely teens are bopping on their toes to answer. I love how eager they get.

“Yes, Riley?”

“She’s very predatory over her territory.”

“And how can you tell?”

“Her teeth are bared and she’s protecting the perimeter.”

“Good, good. Very good. Anyone else? Observations?”

“She used a roar to claim her territory!”

“The relationship seems mostly *commensal*, since the students were neither harmed nor helped by Ms. Baldwin’s territorial outburst.”

“Excellent observations!” I clap my hands together as I approach Juliet, who is radiating steam that has the humidity in the room climbing the walls. “And, scientists—*what* do we say to Ms. Baldwin for assisting us in our learning today?”

Before a chorus of, “Thank you, Ms. Baldwin!” can erupt, I reach down to pluck the dummy frog from her head, smiling at her like the angel that I am as I smooth her hair back into place.

My students are around the corner, heading back to my room with smiles on their faces, when I feel a hand wrap around my elbow. I don’t even turn around.

“Can I help you? I have a class to get back to.”

To say that her face is red would be an understatement. Juliet is a ripe tomato, her hands clenched at her sides as she quietly closes the door to her room before laying into me.

“Sam. Ford.”

“Juliet. Baldwin.”

Her face scrunches in toward the middle, her button nose folding in like wrinkled laundry as her brows pull together, her eyes turning to invisible slits.

“Phil had no problem with me interrupting his class to help out with my lesson.”

I shrug, leaning my shoulder against the wall.

“You two boneheads can have your own fun, then. *Do not* disrupt my class like that again.”

“It was either you or Jenny,” I defend. “And I already *had* the group that’s in her class right now. They would’ve known it was coming. All four classes needed the experience, and you just so happened to fall in the crossfire this period.”

I mean, she didn’t *just so happen*. I definitely planned it this way. She doesn’t need to know that.

“*Do not*. Disrupt my class like that. *Again*.”

She reenters her classroom, slamming the door shut in the process.

I whistle all the way down the hall.

The rest of my lesson goes off without a hitch. My students grasp the vocab, and we have just enough time to relate the words to actual ecosystems that don't have rubber frogs or raging English teachers before the bell rings for lunch. I have end of the day duty instead of lunch duty this week, so I have the next half hour to myself.

That is, until my classroom phone rings. My PB&J is only half-finished, and I frown at the thought of surrendering it to my desk, knowing I won't get to see the end of it. I sigh, because the name on the display is coming from my assistant principal.

Goddamnit.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that, when I enter Mr. McCarthy's office, Juliet is standing there chatting him up with a giggle in her voice.

The two of them are pals. Bring this to Mr. Reynolds, our top dog, and he would've told Juliet that my lesson was imaginative and scolded her for tattling.

"Ah, Mr. Ford. Please, sit. This should only take a few minutes."

I exhale heavily, plopping down into one of two chairs across from Don's desk.

"Are you serious? You *tattled*?"

"You brought a group of screaming thirteen year olds into my classroom and disrupted my entire period to a point where I lost an entire day's worth of teaching, and when I tried to speak with you about it like mature adults, you told me that it was okay because 'Phil had no problem with it.'"

My arms are crossed, my body slumped deeply into the chair to a point where my head is barely peeking over its back. Juliet is sitting up straight as an arrow with her hands neatly folded in her lap; for all intents and purposes, we look like our students.

"Sam, you know what I'm going to say."

I resist rolling my eyes as Don gestures with both hands before clasping them on his desktop.

"Listen, Don, I understand that it was a bit of a disruption, but—"

"*Disruption* is a severe understatement—Ben Simmons *put a rubber frog on my head*."

"As I was saying... I understand that it was a bit of a disruption. But at the end of the day, all four core classes *really* got a lot out of the lesson. They've grasped the vocabulary, and we have a strong foundation for the next lessons."

“And they couldn’t have gotten that out of a textbook?” she asks with a haughty lilt.

Narrowing my gaze, I turn to face Juliet. Don can stay out of this.

“No, Ms. Baldwin. Not to this degree. I’m afraid where we differ is that, I know in my core that not *all* learning comes from a textbook, and I’m not going to change my stance on that.”

We’re at a stalemate.

I know that my kids did great learning today.

But I also know that I didn’t need to disrupt her class to do something hands-on.

I’m still too mad that she tattled on me to apologize or care.

Don wraps up our meeting, asking me to keep my teaching to my own classroom, and after agreeing, I storm out, not paying Juliet any mind at all.

I get back to my classroom with approximately three minutes to finish my PB&J before my next class begins.

acknowledgments

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To my family, who puts up with every single one of my “let me finish this chapters” before we can go anywhere. Thanks for your patience. No mom, you still can’t read this one (even though it’s about Disney).

And of course, thank YOU, dear reader. I write for you. I hope you love these two as much as I do.



about the author

Allie Marie is a romance author who loves putting her characters through the wringer before giving them a happy ending. When she isn't writing or teaching, she enjoys Boston sports, traveling to new places, and cozying up with a good book. She also might have a slight Dunkin' problem.

Follow her Instagram adventures! — @alliewrites_

